SUCCESS IN LEARNING, LITERACY, AND LIFE:
VIEWS OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS AND FEDERAL POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how six Adult Basic Education (ABE) students perceived success in their personal and academic lives. Policy discourses concerning ABE learners offer perspectives on success, and these discourses influence, correspond with, and contradict learners’ discourses on success in various ways. However, the organizational discourse often differs from the ways adult learners described success in their lives. This study centers adult learners’ voices as they discuss success and compares their discourses to prevalent organizational discourses. To understand students’ definitions of success for this study, I drew on a framework of discourses of success in ABE, on scholarship in New Literacy Studies (NLS), and on critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Using narrative inquiry and CDA provided a lens to analyze and interpret the participants’ narratives and program documents. The findings indicate that participants primarily viewed success as relating to the themes of emotional fulfillment, finances, academic accomplishment, recognition, and persistence and hard work. This study also found that participants largely reported deficit literacy identities when considering formal schooling and the accompanying literacy practices but positive literacy identities when discussing their independent literacy practices viewed obtaining their ABE classes as a step to pursuing longer-term goals. CDA of federal policy (the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, WIOA) and related documents found a narrative about success that partially corresponds (e.g., financial aspects) but differs in many ways from the adult learners’ multi-faceted discourses. This study adds to the understanding of success from adult learners’ perspectives and promotes the creation of new narrative that better incorporates learners’ perspectives of success.
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List of Acronyms

ABE  Adult Basic Education
AEFLA  Adult Education and Family Literacy Act
CCRS  College and Career Readiness Standards
CDA  Critical Discourse Analysis
EFL  Educational Functioning Level
GED®  General Educational Development
HSE  High School Equivalency
NI  Narrative Inquiry
NLS  New Literacy Studies
OCTAE  Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education
TABE  Tests of Adult Basic Education
WIA  Workforce Investment Act
WIOA  Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act
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Chapter 1

Introduction

My mother, she’s helped me feel successful a lot. Watching her actually go away to school. She's got a criminal justice degree. I watched my mom walk across the stage. She’s on a billboard for school. That right there was my point of going back. . . My mom's always been my hero. And my cousin been my hero too because she's smart. She graduated school. She went to college but she came back. She got good enough grades to go places. I really think knowledge is power. . . I want to actually go somewhere on the education and I feel like once I get this high school career, GED, I want to, I really want to test high on this thing. I do. And I feel kind of discouraged a little bit because I feel like I can't do it - but I feel like I can, I just have to study hard. And that's just like putting [other] things on hold to study hard. Because now I'm an adult.

My grandma started out scrubbing floors for, it was like maybe a dollar fifty or something. Something really low. That's what she started at, just to keep things going. . . . And not to mention, my grandma is seventy-five and still works. She's retired twice and just can't sit still. Back to work. And she's got enough money to where she ain't gotta work anymore.

She already bought a house. Because we weren't living in the best conditions when I was like eight. And she bought our land. She bought land and she bought a house for us. . . . It was bought strictly for me and my brothers to have somewhere to live. Let us have something, a piece of land. . . . I envy her for that. Because how'd you do that? How'd you put two houses? You keeping your biz up in the city, it costs to live up here. You did that and you bought land and put two houses on it. How do you do that?- KC

As I sat across a conference table from KC and listened to him discuss his perspectives on success, I noticed the number of ways he reflected on success within the span of a few minutes. He related success to his mother’s academic attainments, his grandmother’s hard work and financial stability, and his own educational aspirations. His conversation brought up many nuances of success, and I wondered what relationship his ideas had to the visions of success embedded in adult education programs.

This qualitative study explored how adult basic education (ABE) students understood success in their personal and academic lives. Through their narratives, I feature the voices of six ABE students in two rural programs. Policy discourses for ABE learners offer perspectives on success, and these discourses influence, correspond with, and contradict learners’ discourses on success in various ways. However, the organizational discourse often differs from the ways adult learners described success in their lives.
Problem Statement

The word *success* is used in many contexts with adults in ABE programs, from government evaluations of programs, program advertisements, and conversations between teachers and students, to name a few. In spite of the frequency of its use, limited scholarship exists on defining *success* from students’ perspectives. Much of the literature centered on success examines the concept as defined by organizations (Heckman, 2014; Sandlin, 2006; St. Clair, 2004) or entities other than the students. This lack of scholarship investigating the students’ views on success demonstrates a significant gap in understanding success from a student-centered point of view. Additionally, much of the current research on ABE student success is quantitative and measures success by the number of students achieving certain government- or institution-set goals.

Study Background: Adult Education Policy

Over the past decades, adult education in the United States has evolved as its funding was linked to various crises of the times (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). In the 1950s, the General Educational Development (GED®) diploma was developed as the United States sought ways to offer educational credentials to returning World War II soldiers, some of whom joined the armed forces before completing high school (Quinn, 2003). The GED® diploma became a way to assess soldiers in the military and to offer a pathway to higher education upon their return. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, adult education was viewed as a tool in the War on Poverty to combat race and class crises prevalent in policy conversations. Education as a powerful means to fight poverty and its accompanying problems became part of the common language surrounding adult basic education, and this conversation continued into the 1980s, when the dialogue began to include the perceived workforce crisis, catalyzing much of the discussion around fighting
unemployment (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). The National Literacy Act of 1991 re-focused adult education efforts on basic literacy and numeracy skills. Linking education with workforce development continued with the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998, which officially brought adult education and workforce development under the same legislation. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), passed in 2014, continued aligning and incorporating adult education goals, and consequently funding, under workforce development policy. Each of these legislative acts attempts to address a crisis and generally leads to some sort of transient activity: a national commission is established or an initiative is begun; journalists write about the problem of adult illiteracy; researchers gather a little data; volunteer classes proliferate; and then, in a few years, everything settles down again until the next crisis. (Sticht, 1988, p. 62)

These policies often result in programs being evaluated by how well they address the current crisis, measuring success according to these purposes.

**History of the High School Equivalency Credential**

Against the backdrop of changing policy, high school equivalency (HSE) credentials are the focus of many adult education efforts. HSE credentials, of which the GED® is a popular form, were established based on the premise that education should move from a classical focus to emphasis on skills that were considered universally useful (Quinn, 2003). The early versions of the test were inspired by educational models developed by Franklin Bobbitt at the University of Chicago, who used a Taylorist manufacturing model to prescribe the study of subjects that were deemed useful to everyone, regardless of their future occupation. The expected applicability of these topics to a variety of skills and employment opportunities became regarded as a general
education curriculum. In the late 1920s-early 1930s, standardized tests were introduced to high school students in Iowa and the results were used to normalize those and future exams.

During World War II, precursors to the GED® test were used in the military for academic and general assessment (Quinn, 2003). As the practice became widespread, the tests became popularized as a standard for issuing credit to returning military personnel, along with acceptance as an adequate credential for college admission. The tests that evolved into the GED® gradually expanded to include the non-military population. After the test became established, 12-week courses were created to cover the material included in the exam and assist students in their efforts to pass the test. The GED® test gained popularity in the 1960s as anti-poverty legislation created institutions, such as Job Corps, that emphasized passing the GED® exam as way to escape poverty. The legislation funded adult education institutions and classes, such as a 200-hour course designed specifically to help students pass the GED® test.

In 1978, official GED® practice tests were released, allowing instructors to focus on material that they were confident would be on the exam. By 1984, it was estimated that 20 hours of preparation would be sufficient to pass the test. In 1989, after a new version of the test was released, 30 hours of preparation was considered typical for preparation. Since its inception, the test has had five versions released in 1942, 1978, 1988, 2002, and 2014. In 2001, over one million people took the GED® test, the highest number to date in the history of the test (Tyler, 2005). The popularity of the GED® as a “second chance” diploma has increased over the years, especially as adult education policies and institutions have emphasized the economic benefit of having a GED® credential. However, the evidence supporting this claim is debatable (Tyler, 2002, 2003), and little research has been completed to examine effects of having an HSE
diploma that are not related to economic or post-secondary goals (e.g., health, civic engagement, or effects on families) (Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2005).

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe how ABE students define success as students and in life and to compare students’ ideas with notions of success evident in organizational policy. Specifically, this research describes what ABE learners’ narratives reveal about their perceptions of success and how these perceptions relate to their literacy practices.

In terms of teaching practice and policymaking, this study contributes an understanding of success from the participants’ perspectives. Gaining insight into adult learners’ views could help inform teaching strategies and policy decisions in ways that benefit students. Potentially, knowing more about the learners’ views could affect how classes are taught and programs are funded, for example, by showing how their goals and notions of success align with or diverge from official organizational or policy goals. I explored how adult learners understand and navigate the spoken and unspoken discourses regarding success that permeate their educational experiences. Their perceptions of success provided insight into ABE programs and possible discrepancies between students’ views and policy.

Studying success can inform curricula and program design in ways that incorporate adult learners’ perceptions of success. This study provides empirical research on adult learners’ understandings of success and contributes to practice, scholarship, and policy-making through the participants’ narratives. Specifically, ABE instructors and organizations can benefit through an improved understanding of adult learners’ perceptions of success, which can lead to creating and adapting curricula to engage their student populations better; policy makers can benefit through increased awareness of the population affected by their legislation; and adult learners
can benefit from improvements in the programs they attend. Moreover, an awareness of where their goals may differ from established policy could lead to engagement with organizations to meet their goals together.

**Theoretical Framework**

To understand students’ definitions of success for this study, I drew on research regarding discourses of success in ABE, on scholarship in New Literacy Studies (NLS), and on CDA. Discussions of success range from institutional dialogs (e.g., Pennsylvania Department of Education, ABE program documents) to academic journal articles. Organizational discussions of success typically center on methods of helping students achieve goals set by the organizations (Comings, Reeder, & Sum, 2001; Porter et al., 2005; Quigley, 1997; Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2005). These conversations about success offer suggestions, mostly for instructors and organizations, on ways to help the greatest numbers of adult learners meet program goals. Alternatively, other academic discussion engages in a critical discussion of success, frequently by examining power dynamics, structural inequalities, and ideologies (Sandlin, 2004, 2006; St. Clair, 2004). These ideas helped me to consider how adult learners and ABE organizations frame success and how that affects perceptions of success in educational programs from both perspectives.

NLS offers a sociocultural perspective to examine the educational construct in which the students are defining success (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2018; Street, 1984, 2011). This perspective was valuable in examining how students’ literacy practices are implicated in their ideas of success and how their understandings of success are shaped by their personal and social context. NLS foregrounds identity and how learners are shaped by literacy practices (Bartlett, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 2007). Brandt’s (2009) notion of literacy sponsors was particularly helpful in this study because it gave me framework to consider whose
purposes literacy serves and who “recruits” (p. 25) literacy for what purposes. These ideas help me understand the identity and power dynamics involved in adult learners’ literacy practices and classes at both individual and structural levels.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as both theory and method (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2014) provided a means to explore how power shaped the students’ conversations relating to success and to uncover how power was used in the organizational discourse surrounding success. CDA can be used to understand or “intervene in institutional, social, or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world” (Gee, 2014, p. 9). In this study, CDA helped elucidate the forces at play in adult education and how they influence the students’ learning experiences as well as shape their educational contexts. The ideas in CDA theory were useful to identify and understand ideologies that are evident in both students’ and organizational notions of success.

**Research Questions and Methods**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life?
2. How do literacy learning and literacy practices figure in ABE learners’ perceptions of success, if at all?
3. How do adult learners’ perceptions of success compare to organizational discourse about success?

**Methods of analysis.** Although other forms of qualitative research may collect stories through interviews and conversations, narrative inquirers treat stories as the central element of analysis. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to focus on how people represent their own stories and make meaning from events in their lives (Gee, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). The process of interpreting life events into stories reveals events in the participant’s life while
situating them in a specific context (Bruner, 1990; Riessman, 1993). Clandinin and Murphy (2009) remark that “lives are lived, told, retold, and relived in storied ways on storied landscapes. To study experience narratively, we understand it as a storied phenomenon” (p. 598). Narrative inquiry allows people to construct their experiences and relate them as they choose to a specific audience and creates a space that esteems participants’ voices and lived experiences.

For this study, narrative inquiry allowed me to focus on the participants’ words and personal experiences. Throughout their academic lives, students are often told what it means to be successful, and using narrative inquiry provided an opportunity for me to hear the information from their perspective. As I listened to the participants discuss experiences that lead to their understandings of success, narrative inquiry provided a means to make sense of how the confluence of events they related contributed to their views of success. Narrative inquiry also allows for a glimpse into a broad span of time and not only an immediate, current moment of reference. In this way, narrative inquiry in this study reflected how people framed memories and events into stories that pervade many areas of their lives as they knowingly or unknowingly construct meaning from their experiences (Schram, 2006).

As discussed previously, CDA encompasses both theory and method, examining language “at use in the world” (Gee, 2014, p. 1). CDA provided a lens to explore power dynamics expressed in the participants’ narratives and in the organizational discourse, and it supplied a method to engage with the discourse in the WIOA text. I used a thematic analysis of the participants’ narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008) to identify themes embedded in their stories, and, in conjunction, I applied a critical perspective while analyzing and coding the data (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). CDA also provided a way to engage with policy text, “scrutinizing what is presented in the text, what is unsaid and why, and what discourse types are
brought into the text” to “understand how it legitimizes, perpetuates, and reproduces social
relations” (Shin & Ging, 2019, p. 5; see also Fairclough, 2001). Using CDA allowed me to
uncover power dynamics present within Title II of WIOA.

**Data collection.** I conducted two interviews with each of six participants at two
locations. The interviews were scheduled at least two days, but usually one week, apart. I
followed a semi-structured interview protocol, which loosely followed Seidman’s (2006) outline
for phenomenological interviews. The first interview explored the participants’ backgrounds and
their past experiences with literacy and educational programs. The second interview explored
participants’ views of success in greater depth and focused on how their understanding of
success might influence future plans. I spoke to participants face-to-face for all interviews and
used an audio-recorder during the conversations, which were later transcribed. Participants also
engaged in a supplemental activity of photography, writing, or drawing that I analyzed along
with their narratives. I examined these data to identify prevalent discourses of success among the
participants and to illuminate their understandings of success throughout their lives.

Other data I used included the text of Title II of WIOA, publicly available online, which I
analyzed to determine how success was framed within the policy. I also relied on observational
fieldnotes from my time in the participants’ ABE classes and my researcher journal to
supplement and compare my interpretations of these data. I used the combined data to analyze
and understand ABE students’ perceptions of success and how they align with or differ from the
organizational discourse.

**Dissertation Overview**

The central argument of this study is two-fold: 1) that adult learners engage in ABE
programs with understandings of success and how it is tied to their literacy practices, and 2) that
their understandings differ in key ways from the paradigm of success established in AEFLA. Specifically, AEFLA defines success primarily as relating to economics, and adult learners’ definitions were multi-faceted, encompassing emotional fulfillment, finances, academic accomplishment, recognition, and hard work and persistence. I argue that understanding these differences is vital to helping adults learn as effectively as possible. As such, the findings have implications for ABE policy and practice.

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter One provided background information and outlined the purpose and significance of this study, along with summarizing the theoretical framework and research methods I used in this study. Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant literature, including discussion of success in adult education literature and NLS as a framework for this research. In Chapter Three, I describe the research design for this study, the methods of analysis, and participants’ demographic information.

Chapter Four is the first findings chapter, based on narrative analysis of my interviews with the study participants. This chapter addresses research questions one and two and explores the ways participants viewed success in their personal and academic lives. Specifically, this chapter reports that participants primarily viewed success as relating to emotional fulfillment, finances, academic accomplishment, recognition, and persistence and hard work. This analysis also examines their past and present literacy practices in relation to their ideas of success. Participants largely reported deficit literacy identities when considering formal schooling and the accompanying literacy practices but positive literacy identities when discussing their independent literacy practices. Participants also viewed obtaining their ABE classes as a step to pursuing longer-term goals. Chapter Five follows with the findings from CDA of WIOA Title II: Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) and compares the organizational discourse
around success to the participants narratives. This chapter argues that AEFLA and the corresponding documents create a particular narrative about teaching and learning. In the final chapter, Chapter Six, I discuss the findings and their implications, along with the significance of this work for practice, research, and policy making. I conclude by discussing limitations of this research and identifying future directions for additional research.
Chapter 2

Review of Relevant Literature

Through this study, I sought to understand adult learners’ perceptions of success and how their views agree or conflict with the organizational discourse in ABE. The literature reviewed in this chapter outlines the success scholarship in adult education literature and highlights the prominent success discourses that informed my understanding of participants’ narratives and lives. Within this study, NLS provided a conceptual lens to understand literacy and its function in everyday life. This chapter reviews the literature that contributes to the theoretical framework for this study by presenting a discussion of how success is used throughout adult education literature followed by an overview of NLS, then concludes by relating how the theories contribute to my study.

Success

Success, when discussed in conjunction with ABE students, is primarily presented in adult education literature in two ways: 1) a description of how students can achieve success, often emphasizing the positive economic effects of program participation and completion (Comings & Soricone, 2007; Hamilton, Purcell-Gates et al., 2000; Tighe et al., 2013; Tyler, 2005); and 2) a critical examination of discourses of success in literature and adult education practice (Sandlin, 2004, 2006; St. Clair, 2004). Literature that takes the first approach predominantly recommends specific methods for achieving student success (as defined within the article) and many articles connect student success in adult education programs to economic success (Adkisson, 2005; Barton, 2005; Behrman & Stacey, 1997; Krueger & Heckman, 2005; Ou, 2008; Tyler, 2002, 2003). These articles are mostly written for practitioners and organizations, and they aim to set out pathways to help their students reach success as the
organizations define it. For the second method of examining success, researchers (e.g., Prins & Schafft, 2009; Sandlin, 2004, 2006; St. Clair, 2004) examine underlying societal views that define success for educational programs and the students involved, often problematizing understandings and practices. Although existing literature explores success in these ways, much of this scholarship does not address the topic of success from students’ perspectives. Gaining insight into students’ views could help inform teaching strategies and policy decisions in ways that benefit those participating in the learning. In the following sections, I explore how success is currently discussed in scholarly literature and consider gaps in the literature that this study can address.

**Paths to success.** The most widely noted evaluations of success involve students achieving economic gains, specific academic accomplishments, or displaying and developing specific character traits. Several measures of success are closely tied to increased economic prosperity for participants in ABE programs and people who obtain their GED diploma through a program or individually (Comings et al., 2001; Hamilton, 2002; Tyler, 2005). In this view, successful students are defined as those who improve their economic situation so it is better than before obtaining their HSE. Interestingly, economic gain is not always tied to a specific educational achievement, such as obtaining an HSE credential (Tyler, 2003), but the two are often discussed as closely related, even without direct evidence supporting the claim. For example, students who leave school with “low skills” are considered the most likely to benefit from obtaining their GED credential (Tyler, 2003). Adult learners who leave high school with what are considered “low-skills” or “weak cognitive skills” (both terms undefined) have significantly increased earnings after obtaining their HSE; however, adults who leave high school with higher skills do not have a significant increase in earnings even after acquiring an
HSE, demonstrating the difficulty of generalizing earnings for all adult learners. Moreover, Tyler’s (2003) research showed that economic benefits of obtaining an HSE credential may accumulate over years, so short-term studies may miss the longer-term benefits.

Successful participation in adult education programs (as defined by the program or other source) is also often equated with predicted success in other areas of participants’ lives. The view that success in one area (academic) will translate into success in the workplace and even in personal aspects of life, such as parenting, seems to be the underpinning for much of ABE programming. Comings and Soricone (2007) go as far as to say that

The benefits of successful participation in these [ABE] programs accrue not only to our economy but to other aspects of our national life as well. The skills needed to succeed in the workforce are the same skills needed to succeed as parents and citizens. (p. 1)

The view that academic skills are transferrable is widely expressed, but there is little evidence cited to support these claims.

Another common view of success is the ability of students to meet performance standards, typically measured by standardized assessments. As Bartlett (2008) notes, these assessment “are founded upon the assumption that literacy tasks can be extracted from cultural and social contexts” (p. 740). This perspective is often referenced through documents issued by the government or other funding sources. The performance standards are rarely stated as an end in themselves, but by meeting certain performance criteria, students are expected to have the ability to advance to employment or post-secondary education. The College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS; Pimentel, 2013) are widely used in adult education and adherence to the CCRS is mandated by many funding agencies. In this document, success is equated with attending higher education and training programs after exiting an adult education program.
Throughout the document, the phrases “post-secondary success” and “success in college and careers” (or variations on these phrases) are repeated, emphatically linking success with a following step. This view is not only suggested through standards and literature, but it has recently become law. WIOA, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2014, mandates that participants in federally funded adult education programs meet certain goals which are tied to organization funding. The goals listed for students go beyond academic goals (e.g., obtaining an HSE credential) and are stated in combination with transitioning to training, a career, or further education (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education [OCTAE], 2015). To some extent, students’ abilities to meet performance standards determines organizational funding and the continuation of their services.

Apart from academic measures, exhibition of specific character traits is another commonly claimed predictor of success (Devitis & Rich, 1996; Duckworth et al., 2007; Heckman et al., 2014). Success is often equated with a Puritan work ethic and the ability to pull oneself through difficult circumstances (Devitis & Rich, 1996; Heckman, 2014). The characteristics that are viewed as vital to achieving one’s goals include love of learning, self-control, punctuality, sobriety, industry, and respect for authority, and learners are cautioned against idleness, dishonesty, and selfishness (Devitis & Rich, 1996; Heckman, 2014). Although many adult basic education curricula have evolved beyond moralistic tales, the view of adult learners as having within themselves what they need to succeed remains common throughout the literature.

**The grit narrative.** A recent and popular interpretation of these ideals is Duckworth et al.’s (2007) notion of grit, described as
perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (pp. 1087-1088)

Adult education practitioners and scholars have used the idea of grit to describe students whom they judge will be successful or to recommend methods of encouraging and developing these traits in their students (Deliger, 2015; Pennsylvania Adult Education Newsletter, 2014a, 2014b; Wagner, 2015). This emphasis includes a “focus on grit, resilience, and other ‘noncognitive’ factors … as necessary, precisely what learners need to succeed in and through education and a competitive world” (Golden, 2017, p. 346). These ideas are a modern twist on the Puritan work ethic considered necessary for academic and personal success, and firmly place the onus of achieving success on the students.

In popular culture, the book Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance (2016) skyrocketed to the New York Times bestseller list. This memoir of movement from poverty to financial stability and higher education is a modern-day Appalachian retelling of the Horatio Alger rags to riches story and has been used to explain political support for many conservative ideals. Moreover, the narrative of Hillbilly Elegy ascribes success to hard work and persistence, echoing ideas of grit, and attributes lack of success to poor individual choices and lack of foresight, largely ignoring structural factors. Even while others have claimed that this single voice fails to tell the whole story of Appalachia, many White, upper- and middle-class Americans have embraced the tale as an uncomplicated way to place political and social blame on a particular social group. This
example of grit in popular culture demonstrates the popular narrative of people controlling their own destiny and success.

**Critical Perspectives on Success Discourse**

Within adult education scholarship, a body of literature critically examines the perspectives discussed in the previous section. Scholars with this perspective raise concerns about how success has been defined in ABE. Within this literature, I identified two prevalent themes: countering the myth of success and contesting the emphasis on individualism.

**Countering the Myth of Success**

Within this subset of literature, authors use the word myth to describe a prevailing, guiding narrative within a particular context, in this case, success in ABE (Sandlin, 2006; St. Clair, 2004). These articles examine common discourses of success expressed in ABE literature, empirical research with instructors and learners, and program documents (e.g., ABE curricula). The authors offer accounts of who defines success and for whom and examine structural and individual factors involved.

**The myth of success.** One of the most common myths is the “rags to riches” narrative prevalent throughout ABE discourse. The idea of a lowly member of society rising to economic prosperity and often fame was popularized by Horatio Alger books in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In his stories, a poor, often orphaned boy achieved economic affluence through determination, hard work, and moral uprightness. These ideas have been translated into the notion that anyone can achieve success through honorable character and sufficient effort (Sandlin, 2006). Whether stated directly or indirectly, this myth persists throughout ABE discussions. Sandlin (2006) examines “success stories” published by state and federal agencies, as well as findings from her previous research. Within these narratives, ABE participants
described as successful must overcome significant obstacles, choose to change their lives, establish their independence, and succeed through hard work, all of which include elements of personal resolve, optimism, and high moral character. These themes are a common thread throughout ABE narratives, and they can offer inspiration and hope to students and teachers (Quigley, 1997). However, they also promote “one way of looking at the world, while distracting us from other possible ways of viewing the world” (Sandlin, 2006, 92). Instructors also tend to use particular, often stereotypical, narratives to describe their students (e.g., “Heroic Victim,” “Simple Immigrant,” or “Simple American Worker”) creating a public face of adult education (Quigley, 1997). Whether intentionally or not, instructors use these tropes to appeal to the general public and to funding sources (Quigley, 1997). If people involved with the ABE system, including policy-makers, instructors, and students, acquiesce to these views, structural issues and power dynamics will likely be ignored. In addition, although ideas of effort being rewarded by success are culturally accepted, there is little statistical evidence to support these claims (DeVitis & Rich, 1996).

Not only do instructors construct this myth of success, but learners also participate in its creation and adoption. Several studies explore the narratives underlying these views (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Quigley, 1997; Sandlin, 2004, 2006; St. Clair, 2004). In an empirical study of a trade union training program, St. Clair (2004) describes how learners and instructors co-create an idealized learner identity, describing the appeal of the archetypal characters of myths who transcend the usual limitations of life and attain the associated “freedom and power” (p. 83). Within the “aspirational myth,” knowledge that contributes to specific goals (e.g., employment or improved parenting) is valued and therefore perceived as useful (p. 91). Sandlin (2004) expands on the idea of students and organizations constructing an “ideal learner” that reinforces
societal structures. For example, both instructors and students identified lack of sufficient effort as a primary cause of failing to be successful, but the underlying reasons for a perceived lack of effort were seldom discussed (Sandlin, 2004, p. 94). Qualities such as adherence to rules and conformity to program guidelines were also emphasized as keys to success, although explanations or background for the rules were not often provided to students. Understanding who perpetuates common models of success is important to understanding who benefits from these views. As Sandlin (2004) explains,

the positive correlation between adult education and poverty alleviation is unproblematically accepted in policy and popular rhetoric. Critical adult educators and sociologists who view unemployment as largely a structural problem, however, have argued that promoting education as the answer to the welfare problem supports individualistic thinking and deficit views of welfare recipients and generally fails to examine economic, social, or structural reasons that create and perpetuate unemployment.

The myth of success concentrates on individual deficits that learners must overcome, without attention to the racist, sexist, and ableist views embedded within policy and popular discourse. As researchers counter these myths of success prevalent in adult education literature and practices, they provide a more complex picture of success for adult learners.

**Contesting Individualism**

Within discussions of ABE and success, most of the discourse emphasized individual responsibility for achievement. Critiquing these discourses exposes some of the flaws of placing success on the shoulders of each individual and of failing to examine structural contributions are exposed. The authors of these critical articles examine how individuals are held accountable for
their own success, whether these messages come from themselves, instructors, adult education curricula, or other sources.

A message consistently communicated to adult learners was that their hard work would lead to success and the life they desired. Stories of successful ABE students often emphasize that students’ hard work and effort are directly correlated to obtaining their GED diploma, finding a desired job, or having increased economic stability (Sandlin, 2006). The implied corollary that students’ failure is also their responsibility is not often overtly discussed, but structural and social barriers to success are rarely mentioned, implicitly focusing blame on individuals. In one of the few studies that elicited students’ perspectives of success, Sandlin (2004) discussed the repeated program emphasis on effort and hard work, and although some structural elements were mentioned (e.g., transportation), the message of individual responsibility seemed to be internalized by the students. Many practitioners in adult education programs consistently refer to a lack of motivation and students not valuing educational opportunities, but these comments ignore structural deterrents such as lack of transportation or childcare (Prins & Schafft, 2009). The lack of consideration of factors other than students’ effort is a theme throughout articles that focus on ABE student success, and these studies challenge the widely accepted view that success or failure relies on an individual alone.

Curricula used in ABE also can contribute to the emphasis on individual responsibility for success. Texts used in ABE classes may have “hidden curricula” (Quigley, 1997, p. 155) that promote the idea that each person should work to solve his or her own problems. Individuals who solved their own problems were represented as working toward the solution on their own, rarely as part of a group or collective effort. Another view expressed in some curricula is to blame the person in an unfortunate situation (e.g., unemployed, incarcerated). In a study by
Quigley (1997), a popular ABE publisher included a lesson in a textbook that introduces the main character, an incarcerated criminal, as someone who started by not liking school and continued down a harmful path until he was arrested. The story concluded with the statement, “Only you are responsible for you,” thus blaming the main character for his predicament (p. 154). Although not all educational material communicates the lesson of individualism this overtly, examining the underlying ideologies of ABE curricula can reveal the individualistic views contained in some curricula.

These varying perspectives on success demonstrate how the topic is viewed and discussed throughout adult education literature. Although the two prominent methods of discussing success differ greatly, both lack research involving students’ perspectives. This gap creates an opening to further explore how students view success and add their perceptions to the academic literature. As these studies investigate and critique the underlying, structural factors affecting success, they provide a more complex, robust picture of how individual and structural components work together to inform learners’ and organizations’ views of success.

**New Literacy Studies**

New Literacy Studies (NLS) provides a sociocultural approach to understanding how literacy practices affect students’ lives and how they used literacy to pursue their ideas of success. In this study, NLS illuminates how literacy is not a set of neutral skills but a reflection of the values of society, literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2009), and students themselves. Literacy practices are “socially situated, culturally informed, politically laden and media/technology influenced,” and people use the practices for communication, information sharing, generating texts, as well as establishing and challenging ways of thinking and being in society (Staples, 2011, p. 80). In NLS, literacy is dynamic in ways that are “created, sustained, negotiated,
resisted, and transformed” and varies according to context (Gee, 2000, p. 190). In this study, I examined both the local and the wider-reaching influences on the students and their literacy practices in ABE programs in two rural counties.

Literacy has long been viewed as a critical piece of the solution to numerous social, economic, health, and even emotional problems (Heckman et al., 2014; Morrison et al., 2005; Quigley, 1997). These views contribute to the promotion of success in literacy education as necessary to improving societal problems. The emphasis on success in ABE is closely linked with increasing ABE participants’ literacy. These discourses about success are framed by literacy and literacy discourse; therefore, a sociocultural view of literacy was a useful framework for this study. This framework illuminates how literacy is viewed from many perspectives and how students perceive their literacy experiences in relation to their definitions of success.

NLS began as a reaction to prominent academic views of literacy that correlated literacy with a societal advancement (e.g., democracy, science, civilization, economic development) and illiteracy with a lack of development (Collins & Blot, 2003; Goody & Watt, 1963; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1993). This model, often referred to as “The Great Divide,” claims a cognitive superiority for literate societies and individuals over those that are non-literate (Scribner & Cole, 1981). The Great Divide models purported that the widespread adoption of alphabetic literacy effected cognitive changes that led to more rational, abstract, higher orders of thinking (in comparison to oral societies), and a viewpoint sometimes termed the Literacy Thesis.

In response to the Literacy Thesis, Street (1984) differentiates between the autonomous and ideological models of literacy. The autonomous model claims that literacy skills are acquired independently of social context and result in the same consequences, in contrast with the
ideological model, which places literacy in a sociocultural context. In this work, Street asserts that the autonomous model is political, often reinforcing “the social conventions of a dominant class, rather than universal logic” (p. 27). The autonomous model supports claims that oral societies lack certain aspects of thinking that literate societies exhibit (Lankshear, 1999). In response to these ideas, Street (1984) provides examples of abstract thinking and logic in oral societies. Other scholars have taken up Street’s ideas of the ideological model and engaged in constructing what has become known as the field of New Literacy Studies (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Perry, 2012).

One of the primary features differentiating NLS from other models of literacy is the attention to the influence of sociocultural factors. Far from equating literacy with decoding written symbols, NLS considers literacy to be a culturally embedded process, affected by myriad factors that people face every day as they engage with literacy. In this view, literacy does not possess isolable, decontextualized abilities. Rather, literacy is always embedded within social institutions and, as such, is only knowable as it is defined by social and cultural groups. As such, literacy is best considered an ideological construct as opposed to an autonomous skill. (Purcell-Gates, 2007, p. 3)

Literacy is not something people have; it is something people do and includes individual understandings of literacy as well as its construction within particular contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Perry, 2012).

An autonomous view of literacy suggests a dichotomous interpretation of people as either literate or not literate (Goody & Watt, 1963). Alternatively, literacy can be “viewed along a continuum: a set of skills that may become more complex over time in response to changing social contexts, shifting demands on individuals’ communication
skills, or individuals’ own efforts at advancement” (Graff, 1995, p. 288). From a literacy continuum perspective, people embrace aspects of literacy that they think will be helpful to them in their current and possibly future pursuits (e.g., communication proficiency or particular job skills). Additionally, people’s literacy develops unevenly and may differ in various contexts. Rogers (2003) illustrates this point with her study of family literacy. In this study, June Treader, the mother, shows varying levels of literacy, reading and understanding complex words in bureaucratic letters but testing at an elementary level on the TABE. The view of literacy as multiple prompted a change from referring to literacy in the singular to using literacies.

Literacy and what it means have changed throughout history, as Brandt (2009) describes. She emphasizes the rapidly changing nature of technology and the economy, and the literacy skills required to make the most of the opportunities that come with these changes. Teachers likely grew up with types of technology that are greatly changed or even obsolete by the time they have become experienced teachers. The contexts of teaching and learning are shifting and evolving to include web 2.0 spaces and new technologies with global influence, literacy practices are framed with new issues of location, transference and agency. In addition, these factors pave the way for that which is critical in new literacies, pointing to new literate lives that intersect issues of social (in)justice as they bump up against and traverse “others” (Staples, 2011, p. 92).

As society has changed, new forms of literacy have emerged, and Brandt (2009) remarks that “problems with reading and writing are less about the lack of literacy in society than
about the surplus of it” (p. 89). It seems clear that an abundance of choices could be confusing for teachers and students alike. Moments of confusion created by these conditions could be prime opportunities for literacy sponsors to assert their interests and direct education in a particular direction. Brandt’s statement that “many generations of literacy . . . now occupy the same social space” (p. 71) encapsulates the challenge faced by educators and students as they seek to negotiate what literacy means in a rapidly changing environment. For ABE students, the idea of a literacy continuum is particularly appealing because although they may begin programs at varying levels of literacy, they all aspire to increase their literacy skills.

**Local and global sponsors.** As I examined how students’ perceptions of success compare to organizational discourse, I sought to understand the context of literacy and its surrounding discourses. Although NLS scholars posit that literacy occurs within particular contexts, Brandt and Clinton (2002) challenge what they perceive as an oversimplification of how all literacy is situated in global and local contexts. They emphasize that “groups whose literacy networks are genuinely and primarily localized may have far less power or agency than groups whose reading or writing depend upon greater expanses” (p. 354). Although they agree that literacy is locally situated, they argue that drawing attention only to the local context obscures how global factors influence local literacy and that “local literacy events cannot exhaust the meanings or actions of literacy” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 344). NLS must view literacy as both locally situated within a specific culture, but also affected by global influences (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). Brandt and Clinton (2002) share a helpful illustration of this concept in their story of the Nukulaelae people who often wear clothing with risqué English slogans.
These words have no context in local literacy practices and so are largely ignored; however, their existence in Nukulaelae culture demonstrates their participation in a global economy. In this study, I seek to examine both the local and broader (national) forces that affect adult learners’ perceptions of success, and how literacy serves multiple interests in the participants’ contexts.

The intersection of local and global forces can be seen in Brandt’s (2009) description of literacy sponsors, defined as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 25). People may seek to increase their effectiveness or power with increased literacy skills, but concurrently, they may increase the power of a known or unknown literacy sponsor. A student’s purposes may be served by learning particular types of literacy, yet sponsors “represent the causes into which people’s literacy usually gets recruited” (p. 25), prompting a cautious approach when considering the benefits of a literacy program, for example. For this study, sponsors may be identified or invisible to students and examining the literacy sponsors in the students’ settings illuminated how students interpret success and how their views compare to organizational discourse regarding success.

Part of my process of understanding how students view success included hearing students’ literacy experiences and whose purposes they serve. In this study, I draw on the concept of literacy sponsorship to understand how literacy efforts are structured for ABE students and how that may affect their perceptions of success in educational programs. Brandt’s (2009) statement that the “dynamics of economic competition create the context in which literacy resources can be pursued, expended, enjoyed, and rewarded” (p. 57) is
echoed by Reder and Davila (2005), who stated that “people’s everyday intimate experiences of literacy are in conversation with remote forces at play in the larger sociocultural context” (p. 175). Such an understanding of the dynamics affecting literacy experiences demonstrates the complex nature of literacy situated in local and global contexts. The concept of sponsorship is critical to NLS and provides a contrast to the autonomous model of literacy, supporting the idea that literacy skills are acquired within a local context, but not ignoring the influence of a larger, global context. Understanding both the local and broader context of the participants in this study allowed greater insight into the participants’ experiences and the stories they relate and how the literacy practices involved relate to their views on their success.

**Importance of identity in literacy.** The Literacy Thesis positions literacy learners as passive recipients of a new skill, literacy, which presumably “has a universal impact on the learner’s cognition or a society’s political and economic development” (Bartlett, 2007, p. 52; see also Collins & Blot, 2003; Graff, 1995). In contrast, the NLS model considers how learners’ identities are shaped and changed in some ways by literacy acquisition. In an article on the consequences of literacy, Maddox (2007) stated, “literacy programmes should not only consider skill acquisition, but also how programs can support wider changes in social relations, literacy practices, and identity” (p. 267). As individuals interact with others and learn new literacy skills, their interactions are not simply about “mastering a code” but about gaining a new sense of self (Bartlett, 2007, p. 54). Identity can be changed through literacy practices as people seek to reposition themselves in society or their communities. Although identity changes may not always be accepted by larger groups, literacy development may change how people see themselves (Bartlett, 2007). Purcell-Gates (2007) states that “to begin to explain the literacy achievement
gap as it relates to socio-economic factors, we must . . . look to the ways that literacy practice plays out in the home and community cultural lives of students” (p.14).

NLS scholars also acknowledge how identities are negotiated when people from various social, racial, and class backgrounds cross paths. In Heath’s (1983) groundbreaking work, Ways with Words, she examined literacy within a school system and discovered that participants’ identities outside of school affected their school performance. Students who were Black and/or of lower SES were at a disadvantage compared to White, middle-class students. The school curriculum was much more closely aligned with the practices of White middle-class students, giving them a higher chance of success. The other groups’ literacy practices were associated with their identities, such as oral-literate practices among African-American students, but these practices were not validated in school, and these students had adopted a different identity to succeed in school. Heath’s study illustrates how literacy encounters can cause the negotiation of identity or reinforce one identity over another, and NLS scholars recognize this tendency and address it in their work. In society, different literacies are not equally valued nor do they offer the same access to various forms of capital (Janks, 2014). In this study, I sought to learn how structural definitions of success (i.e. WIOA) compared to students’ definitions of success in an effort to better understand how adult learners perceived their literacy practices (including their ABE programs) as contributing to their success.

The concept of identity is particularly relevant among ABE learners who are striving to meet standards often mandated by others of different socio-economic, ethnic, or racial affiliations (Sandlin, 2004). Stereotypes of ABE students are expressed through policy and curricula, in which negative assumptions about the learners’ character are
criticized and lectured against (e.g., laziness, wastefulness; Quigley, 1997). Along with the deficit identity often ascribed to adult learners, ABE often includes the “valorisation of sameness” (Janks, 2014, p. 104). Forms of reading, writing, or speaking that vary from those approved by the groups in power are not valued and can cause shame among those who practice them (Bartlett, 2015). The power and privilege relating to race, gender, class, and ability that are implicit within ABE programs and legislation are often invisible to students and instructors (Sandlin, 2004). Race, class, gender, and ability matter and are often overlooked in program design and implementation and learner evaluation. The literacies that students value may not be valued institutionally. Understanding the literacy practices of a group of marginalized individuals can provide insight into the literacy experiences (Staples, 2008, pp. 80-81) and organizational discourses that shape their views of success. In this study, I sought to understand what literacy practices the participants valued and how those literacies compared with the forms emphasized in formal settings. The participants’ narratives related literacy and their social practices and provided context for me to understand their perceptions of success.

**NLS counters assumptions of illiteracy as deficiency.** Illiteracy has been described metaphorically as a disease, as a moral failing, and as a threat to civilization, and has been used as a political weapon to combat the real and imagined evils that plague society (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). The NLS view “of literacy as a social practice involving symbolic language . . . creates a need to go beyond a simple view of literacy as a set of skills possessed by some people and not others” (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004, p. 46). In NLS, this deficit perspective is exposed and countered through consideration of
sociocultural factors, local knowledge, and non-Eurocentric points of view (Bartlett, 2007; Daniell, 1999; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984, 1993).

The view of illiteracy as a path to immorality was in part derived from literacy education after the Reformation that focused on teaching people to read Scripture (Graff, 1995). People who lacked knowledge of the Bible were viewed as more likely to sin (Ong, 1982). Today, funding policies are often couched in terms of improvements in literacy leading to moral betterment, and intentionally or not, often place the blame of illiteracy on those who are caught in that predicament (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). This concept is particularly relevant in the current environment of WIOA policy that ties moral qualities (e.g., good parenting) to literacy gains and is explored in this study. The view of literacy as both local and global allows for an understanding of literacy within particular systems, some of which contrive to prohibit people from becoming fully literate. Rather than focusing on individual economic and moral deficiencies, NLS allows for the consideration of structural and systemic deficiencies that contribute to illiteracy, which I seek to explore with the adult learners in this study.

The concept of limited literacy and education as deficiency has been codified by government acts, most recently WIOA, which specifies measures of success for adult learners, particularly relating to economic measures (OCTAE, 2015). ABE students are part of a system that promotes the view of illiteracy and less education as deficiency, whether intentional or unintentional, and NLS provided a lens to examine these claims.

The sociocultural framework of NLS provides an understanding of literacy practices that encompasses
the general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. . . . This includes people’s awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7).

Following Brandt and Clinton’s (2002) caution against false “separations between the local and the global, agency and social structure, and literacy and its technology” (p. 338), I sought to examine both the local and broader (e.g., state and federal) influences on ABE students’ ideas of success.

**Contributions to the Literature**

Current research about success for ABE learners does not center learner voices. Although success is explicitly and implicitly discussed in adult education literature, there is little research that both considers success from learners’ perspectives and compares their views to dominant discourses of success in research, policy, and practice. The research that exists indicates the prevalence of organizational views of success without inviting learners’ contributions to practice and research. Furthermore, the scarcity of learner involvement in forming policy and practice reveals a need to better understand the perspective of those receiving the instruction. Consequently, this research uses NLS as a framework to explore the individual and structural, local and national aspects of success and how literacy and learning practices are involved in perceptions of success.
Chapter 3

Research Design

This study is rooted in the tradition of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Within this tradition, narrative research focuses on how participants relate information to the researcher, through their stories (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005). Through narrative inquiry, I sought to listen to and honor my participants’ stories, looking “for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience” (Patton, 2002, pp. 115-116). As people use stories to make sense of their lives and re-tell these stories, I wanted to hear how the study participants understood their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; D. Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). I used a thematic approach to understand the participants’ perceptions of success, related through their narratives (Riessman, 2008). I also drew on CDA to understand how success is portrayed in the legislative context of WIOA and how these dominant discourses might shape participants’ perceptions (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2014). By using both narrative inquiry and CDA, I hoped to gain a broader understanding of the particular context (e.g., temporal and social) in which ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how students define success and how literacy figures in achieving their ideas of success, and to this end, I focused on the stories the students tell. The participants’ notions of success are not formed in isolation, but rather in a social context with local, national, and global influences; therefore, I also sought to understand how adult learners’ ideas of success compare with the broader organizational discourse about success.
Study Design and Research Questions

For this research, I used narrative analysis in combination with a multiple case study approach. A multiple case study approach allows the researcher to examine individuals’ experiences while analyzing themes across data collected from all participants (Stake, 2005). Multiple case study in conjunction with narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) enabled me to consider how participants made meaning of their experiences and how they viewed success. Clandinin and Murphy (2009) remarked that “lives are lived, told, retold, and relived in storied ways on storied landscapes. In order to study experience narratively, we understand it as a storied phenomenon” (p. 598). As I sought to understand my participants’ experiences, narrative inquiry provided a way to explore in greater depth the stories they told.

CDA provides a way to better understand power dynamics, especially with regard to language (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2014). Because “social actions become realities through discourses, we cannot ignore the role of discourse in trying to understand complex relationships involving social interactions, structures, systems, and everyday lives” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 160). CDA allowed me to place the participants’ stories, narratives they constructed in a particular social context, in the framework of the wider power relations at play (e.g., WIOA legislation). Conversely, narrative inquiry provides a way to see how people make sense of the world in particular settings that CDA may not address. Using a combination of narrative inquiry and CDA allowed me to “assert the power of institutional discourses through the analysis of conversational narratives and to verify the presence of recycled institutional discourses intertextually woven into their fabric” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 163).

Accordingly, I used this strategy to address the following research questions:

1. How do ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life?
2. How do literacy learning and literacy practices figure in ABE learners’ perceptions of success, if at all?

3. How do adult learners’ perceptions of success compare to organizational discourse about success?

**Narrative Inquiry: Representation through Stories**

“We cannot live without stories. Our need for stories of our lives is so huge, so intense, so fundamental, that we would lose our humanity if we stopped trying to tell stories of who we think we are. And even more important, if we stopped wanting to listen to each other’s stories.” (Behar, 2003, p. xix)

In narrative inquiry, researchers consider stories to be a “fundamental unit of human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). To study human experiences, narrative researchers look to the stories people tell about themselves, their lives, and their past. Narrative inquiry has roots in psychology (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1995), linguistics (Gee, 1991), anthropology (Behar, 1993) and rhetoric studies (Bruner, 1986). People choose, consciously or unconsciously, to view and represent their world in particular ways, and in narrative inquiry, the way people choose to relate their lives and the accounts they tell become the research data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 1993).

Narrative inquiry and other forms of qualitative research have many commonalities, but several central tenets of narrative inquiry set the method apart, including: an emphasis on stories, a focus on the particular, making meaning of events and lives, centering on the voice of the storyteller, the position of the researcher, and an acceptance of multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Riessman, 1993). In all these aspects, narrative inquirers take the position that “both the stories and the humans are continuously visible in the study” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7). As previously described, this study focuses on ABE students’ views of success. Listening to their
stories provided insight into their context and ways of understanding the world they live in. Hearing their stories provided insight into their discourses of success and how these fit into broader discourses.

**Emphasis on stories.** Although other forms of qualitative research may collect stories through interviews and conversations, narrative inquirers treat stories as the central element of analysis. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to focus their attention on how people represent their own stories and make meaning from events in their lives (Gee, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). The process of interpreting life events into stories reveals events in the participant’s life while situating them in a specific context (Bruner, 1986; Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry allows people to construct their experiences and relate them as they choose to a specific audience.

In narrative studies, researchers ask participants to relate their lived experiences in what Riessman (1993) refers to as the “performance of a personal narrative” (p. 9). The stories that people tell as they relate their experiences are the foundation of narrative inquiry. This research approach centers sharing experiences with others as an essential component of being human (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Such a view allows for the exploration of spaces in which stories are told through listening, telling, and living in a shared narrative space (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42–43). Narrative inquiry provides

a way of understanding experience . . . concluding the inquiry in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives . . .

. . . Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

Although narrative inquiry captures stories, any story told is only a portion of the larger tale of the participant’s life, and narrative inquiry provides insight into this snapshot of related
experience. In this study, as I listened to the participants, I heard them relate how their views on success were woven into the larger stories of their lives. I used narrative inquiry as a way to understand my participants’ experiences, past and present, and the ways they made sense of their world through stories.

**Focus on the particular.** In contrast to quantitative research, narrative inquiry focuses on details and particulars instead of generalizable data. Narrative scholars “desire to understand rather than control and predict the human world” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 30) and that studying a critical case provides evidence for logical generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Patton, 2002). The emphasis on understanding the particulars of a situation or event or life is in contrast to the value of detached objectivity that is often held as the standard for research. Narrative’s emphasis on the local reflects a rejection of the philosophy that universal laws can be discovered and used to predict, and consequently have power over, people’s behavior.

The turn from an emphasis on generalizable to more particular data is one distinguishing characteristic of narrative studies (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Including personal stories “added richness to social scientific works” and raised previously unexplored issues for consideration (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 24). Narrative researchers eschew the creation of grand narratives in favor of more particular, local stories. Whereas grand narratives seek to predict laws that govern all humankind, a narrative account intends to provide a fixed point for people to draw on in specific circumstances and provide insight into those situations (Chase, 2005; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988). In this study, as I asked the participants about success, I wanted to hear their experiences, both of school and life, and how their particular contexts shaped their understanding of success.
Making meaning of events and lives. How people recount stories reveals how they view experiences and give them meaning (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1988). When describing narrative meaning, “we develop storied accounts that give sense to the behavior of others” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 14) The way people tell their stories reveals how they view and make meaning of their experiences. Both the narrators and listeners “exist in narrative creations and are profoundly affected by them” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 121). As participants in this study shared their stories, I heard their ways of making meaning of past and present events in their lives. The adult learners’ memories are necessarily altered by time and experiences, but these differences did not invalidate their stories (Polkinghorne, 2007).

As people relate aspects of their lives, they may find meaning in what they say that they did not previously see. Likewise, researchers may imbue stories they hear with meaning that the teller never intended. Constructing a narrative account requires both the participants and researchers to become storytellers together and fashion a narrative that is neither one person’s nor the other’s, but has elements of all parties involved (Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 120–122). People make meaning of their history by connecting events in a manner that is meaningful to them, and meaningful representation of these stories is a central objective of narrative inquiry. Hearing the participants in this study describe their stories allowed us jointly to make meaning of their experiences, the participants and the researcher each contributing to an understanding of the narratives. I heard how the participants’ situated themselves in a larger story, encompassing family, community, and history, often a story that encompasses a wider scope than their lives (Polkinghorne, 1988). As I listened to narratives about success and life, I also filtered their stories through my experiences as a researcher, educator, and roles as a mother and wife.
Although the analysis was mine, I used the participants words as much as possible to communicate their stories through their own words.

**Centering the voice of the storyteller.** The question of whose voice is featured in a narrative account is central to narrative studies (Chase, 2005). Narrative researchers place participants’ voices at the core of their analysis. Whose voice is placed at the center of a story reflects a question of power. Although a story is particular to a participant, the researcher has the responsibility to represent the narration faithfully as the story of the teller.

Although the researcher’s voice is unavoidably present, in narrative inquiry, researchers are responsible to ensure that their voices do not overshadow participants’ voices (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). In narrative inquiry, these methods range from a poetic representation and linguistic discourse analysis (Riessman, 2008) to literary non-fiction (Polkinghorne, 1995) to presentation of an interview transcript with very little interpretation from the researcher (Pattillo, 2013). I aimed to present participants’ stories in ways that highlighted storyteller’s voice and style, using lengthy quotes in my presentation of their narratives. I drew on Polkinghorne’s (1995) analysis of narrative, using the participants’ narratives as data to be thematically analyzed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The voice of the participant is never precisely the same voice in print as when spoken and it is never completely separated from the researcher’s voice (Polkinghorne, 1988). In spite of the inevitable interpretation, the stories and words of the narrator are a central aspect of narrative inquiry and are the first consideration for a narrative researcher (Chase, 2005).

This aspect of narrative research is particularly important to me as I engage in this study. In a field where learners’ voices are seldom sought or privileged (Quigley, 1997; Sandlin, 2004, 2006), I sought to listen to my participants’ perspectives and center their stories at the core of my
research. Although my voice as a researcher is a part of the project, my goal was to retain the participants’ narratives as the heart of the research.

**Position of the researcher.** If experience is the lens through which everyone views reality and frames his or her stories, then the researcher’s experience matters as much as the participant’s. Just as the narrator consciously or unconsciously selects thoughts and events to recount, the researcher receives the stories through his or her own social and cultural filter, which may differ from the participants’ views. (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) explore this phenomenon, explaining that these “borders are never clean and clear but are blurred as regions overlap and come together” (p. 59). Thus, the stories told in this study are not exclusively the product of the participants or the researcher but a joint creation that reflects the ideas, values, and experiences of all involved.

The background knowledge of the storyteller and the listener or reader are likely to differ, and each side negotiates the meaning of the narrative based on their understanding of the world (Bruner, 1991, pp. 10–11). The gap in understanding between the narrator and others may be viewed as a weakness of narrative inquiry; conversely, it can be considered a strength in that narrative creates a space where multiple minds can meet to negotiate meaning and gain understanding. Everyone participating in the story, through reading or telling, brings their own personal “cultural tool kit” to its interpretation (p. 20) and, as Bruner (1991) further describes, we inevitably take the teller's intentions into account and do so in terms of our background knowledge (and, indeed, in the light of our presuppositions about the teller's background knowledge). . . . You tell your version, I tell mine, and we rarely need legal confrontation to settle the difference. (p. 17)
The cultural contexts that everyone brings into the interpretation of a story will lead to different readings and interpretations. I was aware of my position in this study as an educator, an academic, and a White, middle class woman, and knew these aspects of my life would influence how I was perceived and how I interpreted the stories I heard. In spite of inevitable differences of understanding, the responsibility of interpreting and “unpacking” participants’ nuanced experiences is the researcher’s (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 143). Reflexivity of the researchers, carefully considering what they bring to the inquiry, is essential as they prepare to tell another’s story (Butler-Kisber, 2010), and I sought to engage in self-reflective practices (e.g., researcher journal) and with other scholars as I considered the data. I was aware of my tremendous ethical responsibility of faithfully representing their participants’ points of view and forthrightly acknowledging points on which they differ as I explored the stories with which participants entrusted me.

**Accepting variable ways of knowing.** As previously discussed, narrative inquiry shifts from generalizations and number-based data toward an alternative way of viewing the world. Meaning, in narrative research, “functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11). It is not a concrete object that is available for study and observation. Narrative meaning is “an activity, not a thing” that is constantly being made and re-made (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 7). The diverse nature of meaning draws narrative researchers away from a practice of viewing research through a general approach that assumes that all reality is alike and is able to be treated in a similar manner. Researchers who use narrative inquiry embrace ways of discovering and knowing information that cannot be measured (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
Different ways of viewing knowledge are clear when considering the example of how information is presented (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, pp. 26–28). For a viewpoint that values decontextualized knowledge, information must be able to support itself since it is unconnected to its surroundings. In contrast, a narrative way of considering information places narrative context at the center, and shared knowing within a community is valued, providing “a rich context in which claims of the world can be evaluated” (p. 27). Narrative knowing is not simply analyzing and measuring facts but includes finding resonance with others rather than seeking objectivity (Butler-Kisber, 2010). As participants in this study described their notions of success, the notion was portrayed various ways related to their individual experiences, histories, and circumstances. Their ways of knowing differed from documented definitions of success and often could not be objectively measured but add to the understanding of what success means.

Bruner (1986) described two modes of thinking: the logico-scientific mode and the narrative mode. He presents these two ways of approaching the world as equally valid but useful in different ways. The logico-scientific, or paradigmatic, mode is a way of thinking that leads to concrete facts, measurements, and predictions. In narrative thinking, people attempt to use information around them to make sense of their lives through stories, although the stories may not always be “true” in the same manner that scientific facts claim a single truth. Thinking in narrative terms also leads to an alternative way of conceptualizing human nature. The idea that we live our lives as we tell our stories puts into question many psychological formulations of human nature because it implies that personality is much more dynamic and open than many theories allow, is always in interaction with the social and cultural stories available to us, and
academics don't know more than ordinary people do about their own stories. (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 78)

As I heard the participants’ stories, I wanted to listen to all parts of their stories, even parts that did not immediately appear to connect with success. I tried to keep in mind that participants’ ways of knowing may differ from mine, and the ways success is interwoven in their stories may not be immediately obvious to me. This approach to knowledge is markedly different from many research methodologies that privilege the researcher’s knowledge above the participants’ insight and may not account for the sociocultural dimension of the data with which they interact.

**Key Components of Narrative Inquiry**

Several components are usually present in narrative inquiry. These components are the building blocks of a study and include some form of analysis, either narrative analysis or analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), a sequence of events, and the relationship between the participant and researcher. This section describes each of these key components in the field of narrative inquiry and how they relate to this study.

**Sequence of events.** Stories generally have a sequence of events, answering the question “what happens next?” for the reader (Goodson & Gill, 2011; Riessman, 1993). The sequence may be chronological or in another order that highlights information the researcher wants to emphasize. However it is arranged, the sequence of events presented in a narrative inquiry is meaningful (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). In a narrative account, “the organization of past events into plots” often using a literary construction, gives a temporal order to an account (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 59). There are two types of referents: the events that a story includes and the plot of a story (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 60). The emplotment of a narrative, or order that events are presented to the reader, is determined by the researcher to
draw attention to aspects of the narrative. The order presents a meaningful whole that leads the reader along a logical sequence of events. As I listened to the narratives in this study, participants did not always present their stories in a strictly chronological order, sometimes alternating between past and present events as they described their experiences and ideas.

**Analysis of narrative.** Analysis of stories is a key component of any narrative inquiry. Once stories are collected, the researcher uses the stories to understand the relationship between participants and the world they live in and construct through storytelling. Polkinghorne (1995) described two methods of analysis: *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*. The method I used in this study, analysis of narratives, uses an inductive method to derive themes from the data, looking across a story or often multiple stories to see the commonalities and to produce a core description of the experience. The data serve as the ground on which the findings are based. In constructing the research report for this study, I drew on excerpts from the data to illustrate the findings and demonstrate how the findings were derived from the evidential data (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 138). Selections of any length from the narrations, ranging from phrase or sentences to pages of stories, can be viewed across stories from one participant or several to understand the common themes throughout their tales and experiences.

By contrast, narrative analysis presents the data in storied form. In other words, analyzing the data produces its own story, weaving the participants’ and researcher’s stories together and using techniques of emplotment to determine the order in which information is presented to the reader (Polkinghorne, 1988). Analysis constructs a “plot that provides coherence among the data” (Collins, 2013) in ways that may play with temporality, voice, and story (Staples, 2016). Although a narrative analysis approach can bring light to aspects of a study, I chose a more conventional approach to understand the themes in this study’s narratives.
Sociocultural situation of narratives. In narrative inquiry, every story is culturally, socially, and historically situated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). As people’s stories are reduced to print, many of the nuances of expression and gesture are lost, along with the setting in which they tell their story and occasionally the background information they provide. Narrative analysis in narrative inquiry provides an important addition to thematic analysis by not only examining what is said but how it is said. As I analyzed the interview transcripts for themes, I frequently returned to the interview recordings and my observations to refresh my memory of vocal tone and body language. Their stories were not only words on a page, and I attempted to consider non-verbal cues as I interpreted their narratives.

All narrative inquiry begins “in the midst”, meaning that any narrative began before the researcher arrived and will continue after the story is told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). Narrative research provides space for “social and cultural influences . . . [to be] treated as resources” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 55). Any narrative that the researcher captures is part of a much wider story, and an important element of narrative inquiry is alerting the audience to the larger context in which the narrative is set (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). I was keenly aware that I was stepping into a small corner of the adult learners’ stories, and their narratives were part of a much broader social and cultural context. Their stories were not told in isolation, and narrative inquiry provided a vehicle for including the social and cultural realities that informed their stories.

Concerns of validity. One frequently expressed concern with narrative research is that the researcher may not be able to verify the information they receive from participants. The concern is often expressed as: if the participant is not being truthful and research is based on something false, doesn’t that invalidate the research? This view of research as measurably true,
however, aligns with a positivistic view of research, seeking and expecting to find objective truth (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narrative researchers are not seeking a definitive account; rather, they hope to discover how the participants situate themselves within the stories and what they reveal about the sociocultural context (Riessman, 1993, pp. 64–65). The stories people relate are “laced with social discourses and power relations” and each person involved will have her or his own version of what happened (p. 65). Ahearn (2001) provides an example of qualitative validity when she describes a husband and wife’s answers to her question about their marriage: the husband describes it as an arranged marriage and the wife says it was a capture marriage. In response to the husband’s question about what she would record, Ahearn’s answer was “both.”

Even though two people may provide vastly different accounts of the same situation, neither account may be false. This is not imply that facts do not matter but rather shifts the focus from obtaining verifiable facts to how people represent themselves and their experiences. The distinction between fact and fiction is often blurred, both in people’s memories and in what they choose to relate (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research aims to present trustworthy results, not to find and display an ultimate account of events (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Riessman, 1993). In my research, hearing how people choose to represent their views on success helped me to understand how they situated themselves in their narratives and the cultural context of their experiences.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to understand the themes in the various program (at all levels) documents I reviewed. CDA allows the researcher to critically examine text (written or spoken) and also provides frameworks to deconstruct and extract meaning (implicit and explicit meaning), in addition to investigating and revealing sociocultural implications (Gee,
The researcher uses CDA to uncover both “little-d discourses” and “big-D Discourses”: “little-d discourses” consist of the words (phrases, sentences, etc.) chosen to communicate ideas and experiences; “big-D Discourses” can be determined through analysis of “little-d discourses” and present broader ideologies and thought processes among a broader context of a society (Gee, 2014; Van Dijk, 1993; Willig, 2013). D/discourses guide people’s perceptions and actions, often at an unconscious level, and prevalent D/discourses can pervade a society, shaping ideological undercurrents that people may unwittingly subscribe to (Underhill, 2011; Van Dijk, 1993). I also referred to my observations and researcher notes often to gauge my current thoughts and compare them to my thoughts during the interviews and observations.

**Discourses and narrative data.** CDA frames linguistic data as a way to understand implicit biases and perceptions within individuals and social groups. It provides a framework to analyze the meanings, both implicit and explicit, embedded within narratives or documents. I used Gee’s (2014) concept of “big-D” and “little-D” discourses to understand the word choices and statements within AEFLA and understand ideological undercurrents embedded within the legislation’s language (Gee, 2014; Van Dijk, 1993; Willig, 2013). Texts, such as WIOA, are socially and historically situated and are the product of social interactions (Fairclough, 2001). CDA involves systematic reviews of data to identify recurrent themes while considering “language, as a representative meaning-making system and an organizing principle of society, which produces unequal material effects, generates and maintains social relations of power, and makes changes in social practices” (Shin & Ging, 2019, p. 5).

Examining what is said as well as what is unsaid reveals whose voice is privileged within a text. The words used reinforce power relations to the point where their messages become viewed as “common sense practices” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 107).
As I used CDA to understand the social implications and consequences of language in AEFLA, I sought to understand the power dynamics in the legislation. WIOA was created in a national, legislative context disconnected from the everyday lives of the adult learners in this study, and I wanted to see how success was portrayed in the legislation text and how it compared to the adult learners’ discourse around success. CDA allowed me to investigate the power dynamics at play within the text and examine whose interests they serve.

**Unit of Analysis**

A unit of analysis is the main group of actors who express the studied phenomenon (Baptiste, 2011). For this study, ABE students enrolled in classes in two rural Pennsylvania counties interviewed individually were the primary unit of analysis. The two rural counties were part of an adult literacy program affiliated with a state university, and the program was receptive to researchers working with its participants. Rural ABE students, with their distinctive challenges, comprise a population that has not been widely studied in adult education literature. Documents that provide additional information about organizational discourse related to success (i.e., WIOA and related documents) were also a unit of analysis for this study.

**Site Selection and Description**

Site selection for this study involved finding an HSE program with instructors willing to facilitate my connection to adult learners who would be willing to participate in the study. As a former HSE teacher, I drew on my connections to previous colleagues, and as a graduate student, I drew on my relationships with university associates. I sought a personal connection, if possible, to begin the study with a trusting relationship between instructors and myself, knowing the influence instructors had as program gatekeepers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The sites were selected based on their potential to have students who fit the inclusion criteria, the willingness of
staff to work with a research study, and researcher access to the sites. In the end, my search led
to a program in two locations, funded by one grant. The instructors at each site graciously agreed
for me to observe their classes and interview students. The site were both located in rural
counties, but there were some differences in the basic county demographics (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Watermill County</th>
<th>Bricksburg County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>150,000-170,000</td>
<td>100,000-120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>2-4%</td>
<td>3-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational levels</td>
<td>High School diploma: 90-95%</td>
<td>High School diploma: 85-90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher: 40-45%</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher: 20-25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$45,000-60,000</td>
<td>$45,000-60,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Approximate area demographic ranges used to protect confidentiality

The two sites were in different towns approximately an hour apart and had teachers
specific to each site. Both programs offered similar classes focused on helping students pass the
HSE exam, although the program structure was different at each location. Site 1 was located in
South Bricksburg (pseudonym), and approximately 12-15 students attended class each day.

General program information for both sites is included in Table 2 (below). This site had shared
facilities between adult education classes and various other programs (e.g., Career Pathways).
The ABE classes were divided by subject, level (determined by TABE scores), and time of day. I
attended and recruited from the Language Arts\(^1\) classes held Tuesday and Thursday mornings.
Students often attended both Language Arts and Math classes, and the student population for the
classes was similar, so I selected the Language Arts class as the class from which to recruit. The
classroom was set up with small tables in a U-shape around the classroom, and each table could
seat two people. Class was approximately three hours long and began with the instructor

\(^1\) HSE exams are divided into five subject areas with corresponding: reading/writing (test may be combined),
mathematics, science, and social studies.
teaching a selected concept (e.g., persuasive writing) and providing time for learners to work on assignments related to the concept.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>South Bricksburg</th>
<th>Watermill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult learners served*</td>
<td>Total: 152</td>
<td>Total: 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male: 90; Female: 62</td>
<td>Male: 22; Female: 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learners enrolled**</td>
<td>Total: 129</td>
<td>Total: 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male: 53; Female: 76</td>
<td>Male: 20; Female: 51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Program participant information over one year

*Includes any contact with the program (orientation, classes)
**At least 12 hours of program attendance

The second site was located in Watermill (pseudonym). These classes were structured differently than in the South Bricksburg location; students of all levels and for all subjects met in one classroom, and instruction was individualized. During my time there, the student population was smaller than South Bricksburg with four to six adults attending most days. The program information is included in Table 2 (above). Classes met in one large classroom with several round tables for students to do their work. The tables could seat six to seven students comfortably, but usually two to four students were at each table. Students worked on subjects of their choice and the instructor joined each learner at their table, providing individual instruction and feedback.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2012) to identify participants who met the selection criteria. The inclusion criteria were:

1) Enrollment in an ABE program (at least 12 hours of class attendance);

2) Students who completed some high school before leaving school;
3) Students whose goal is to obtain an HSE diploma.\textsuperscript{2}

I recruited participants from students who were currently involved with the selected ABE programs. With the permission of the class instructors, I attended several class sessions as an observer introduced by the instructor, and my goal was to familiarize myself with the students and class and for the learners to have an opportunity to meet me. After attending several classes, I presented information about my study to class participants and requested volunteers. Several adults volunteered quickly and several others agreed to join after individual conversations explaining the study and answering any questions they had.

For qualitative research, there are no specific criteria for selecting a particular sample size (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002); rather, the number of participants should provide adequate data to “yield insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). I knew I wanted a relatively small number of participants due to my own time and material constraints (e.g., travel to sites, volume of transcripts) and participant availability. The small number of participants allowed me to focus on the aspects of each narrative, not conflating their stories (Riessman, 2008). Since my aim was to analyze each participant’s story in detail, interviewing more participants would have reduced my ability to consider the specifics of each case (Riessman, 2008). A narrative inquiry approach allowed me to listen to and examine individuals’ experiences while considering commonalities across the participants’ stories (Bruner, 1991; Riessman, 1993; Stake, 2005). Six participants joined my study, and they reflected the criteria for enrollment in the ABE classes, including current residence in Pennsylvania and completion of program entry requirements.

\textsuperscript{2}One participant, Kiki, had previously obtained her high school diploma but was enrolled in the same classes as the other participants with the goal of obtaining higher scores on a community college placement exam. Although she was not working toward passing the GED test, her goals and classes were comparable to the other participants, supporting her inclusion in this study.
**Participant selection and context.** Before recruiting participants, I discussed the study with the instructors at each site and asked their advice for the most effective way to recruit participants from the classes. At the South Bricksburg site, the instructor introduced me during her class and I shared a brief description of my study to the students and asked anyone interested in participating to talk to me during the class break. Three students approached me and provided their contact information, and the instructor advised me that if I returned consistently, I would likely find more interested students.

I followed a similar process at the Watermill site; however, no students indicated interest the first week. I discussed the lack of interest with the site instructor, and she suggested returning to observe the class several times and discussing the study individually with students as they became more accustomed to my presence. After several weeks of observing classes and talking with participants at both sites, five students from South Bricksburg and one student from Watermill agreed to participate in the study. These students met the inclusion criteria and were willing to share their stories and their lives with me. Volunteers participated in two interviews at least two days apart, depending on participant availability.

The participants reflected a wide range in terms of age, race, background, and employment status. These participants’ narratives provided an array of “stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20) and a way to gain insight into their varied experiences and sociocultural contexts. The six participants ranged in age from 19-56 years; all participants had completed some high school, and four were employed. Participants chose pseudonyms during the first interview. The following table (Table 3) provides details for each participant. The following section describes each participant.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Last high school grade attended*</th>
<th>Employment status**</th>
<th>Class location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Watermill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
<td>S. Bricksburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>S. Bricksburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KC</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiki</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12***</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>S. Bricksburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>S. Bricksburg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Participants

* May have completed or partially attended

** Includes full-time, part-time, or significant volunteer time

*** Completed 12th grade at an alternative high school

Participant Biographies

Bill. Bill was a 37-year-old White man who had lived his entire life in Watermill. He had a son who was in his senior year of high school and lived several hours away with his mother, Bill’s former partner. Although Bill was currently “sticking around [Watermill] and sticking it out,” he aspired to move to Florida to attend a motorcycle mechanic institute. Although he had held many jobs over the years (e.g., working at restaurants, motorcycle shops, tractor dealership), his dream was to own a “motorcycle shop, tattoo shop, all in one shop. Down south somewhere, like Florida, Daytona area, something like that, where we can ride all year long.” His motivation to get his GED® diploma stemmed from its requirement to attend the motorcycle institute.

Bill spoke positively of his HSE preparation classes, but his previous schooling experiences were largely negative. He dropped out of school in 11th grade. He had previously repeated 9th grade and was 18 years old when he decided he was not “getting anything out of [school] anyway” and “said, ‘You know what? I'm just going to go to work.’” He described being bullied as “the fat kid” throughout school, which contributed to his not wanting to attend school:
And I’m not trying to say that was my excuse or anything like that, it just makes it hard.

You know what I mean. You wake up not wanting to go, you know what I mean? You just don’t want to be there, for one.

Bill’s positive early school experiences were largely related to assignments that reflected his interests, such as an essay he wrote on his Irish heritage, and an assignment that incorporated information from a trucking magazine. Bill regretted dropping out of high school, describing it as a decision he made when he was “young and dumb,” and his experiences with the HSE program were positive. He had been consistently employed after leaving high school, but he found the hours of some of the jobs made it difficult for him to manage his diabetes, so he found a job with an “actual regular schedule,” which seemed to help his health. Between our first and second interview, he passed the Language Arts GED® test and was preparing to take the Math GED® test soon after.

As Bill shared his story, he mentioned bullying as a factor in his negative schooling experiences, ultimately influencing his decision to leave school. Although he minimized the effects of bullying, multiple research studies support the link between being bullied and leaving school early (Archambault et al., 2009; Cornell et al., 2013). Bill reported feeling like he was “not getting anything out of [his classes] anyway” when he left school. Later in his life, when he attempted to start his restaurant business, factors beyond his control, such as the property he rented being foreclosed, affected his employment and financial status.

Although Bill spoke disparagingly of his academic abilities, he used literacy skills outside formal schooling to develop competencies in his areas of interest. Bill described spending hours looking at trucking and motorcycle magazines, learning information that contributed to his skills and knowledge of motorcycles. He had learned to work in a variety of
jobs while increasing his motorcycle mechanical skills in his free time. Even though Bill’s literacy skills were considered lacking by formal educational measures, he showed competence in learning and applying skills he learned through experience. Skills such as learning how to work on motorcycles or manage a chronic medical condition were areas of expertise developed outside of school and demonstrate competencies not measured by WIOA standards.

**Brianna.** Brianna, a 19-year-old Black woman, was the youngest study participant. She was living in South Bricksburg at the time of the study, after living in several towns over the past few years. She attended high school in a large city several hours from South Bricksburg and lived with her father during that time. Growing up, she lived with her father at times and her mother at other times. Brianna’s mother and father lived within 30 minutes of each other, but the moves between the two resulted in attending multiple schools throughout her education. She attended a charter high school, which she described with mixed feelings. Brianna spoke positively of several teachers and mentioned a school project that she felt proud of completing. The project was a multi-media anti-bullying presentation that she and some of her classmates did together. She took obvious pride in her work and emailed me a video of their presentation. Despite some positive experiences, Brianna had a negative view of the school in general, describing other students as “unfriendly” and the discipline policies of the school as “set for failure” and difficult to meet. She left the high school with only two weeks left in her spring semester of 12th grade, saying she did not think she “would’ve graduated if I would’ve stayed. Even with just two weeks left” because of her number of absences. She planned to attend college, and had earned a scholarship to a nearby university that she could use once she obtained her HSE diploma.
When describing her future career, Brianna hoped to study physical therapy and work with children. She was also interested in photography as a hobby but did not see it as a stable career. She repeatedly emphasized the importance of her family in her life, describing them as “everything” and “the base of our foundation.” One of the contributors to her school stress was the strained relationship between her father and step-mother, which ended in divorce her senior year. She had the option to complete 12th grade at a high school in South Bricksburg, but she “didn’t want to be in a classroom full of younger kids” and thought: “I’ve been through so much in my life, my maturity level is not what theirs is and I wouldn’t be able to handle it,” and she thought the HSE program would be a better fit. At the time of the interviews, she had not taken any GED® exams yet but planned to take them soon, probably starting with the Language Arts test.

Although she did not mention it as a factor in leaving school early, Brianna’s frequent moves likely affected her school experiences. Multiple studies have connected residential mobility with increased high school drop-out rates (Gasper et al., 2012; Metzger et al., 2015; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Scanlon & Devine, 2001), particularly in single-parent families (Scanlon & Devine, 2001), which was Brianna’s situation throughout most of her schooling. She also discussed repeated illnesses and high stress levels as deterrents to her desire to attend school. Despite her mention of upsetting family situations contributing to her stress and possibly her health problems, Brianna did not specifically mention them as factors contributing to her dropping out. Even though she may have been unaware of the direct effects of these factors, it is likely that they influenced her decision.

Her identification with racial and religious minority groups as a Black, Muslim woman may also have unconsciously added to her mental and emotional strain. Historically, the unequal
distribution of human and material resources for the benefit of a sound and healthy academic and social/personal identity formation necessitates a stronger support system for populations that have been denied or offered limited resources, such as racial minorities (Diangelo, 2016; Sleeter, 2016; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Additionally, a study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Goodell & Escarce, 2007) showed a large disparity between Black, Latino/a, and White access to healthcare and subsequent health outcomes, and the discrepancy in healthcare is true even when income levels are similar. These systemic factors likely affected Brianna in ways that she did not fully discuss during our interviews.

Overall, Brianna discussed her schooling experiences positively and repeatedly mentioned her love of reading and writing. She described reading with her grandfather from an early age and literacy was highly valued in her family. She took pleasure from writing poetry on many topics on her own time, and she even turned class assignments into poetry rather than prose essays. Although her poetry reflected the assigned topic, it was in a form that would not be recognized on a standardized test such as the GED® or HISET exams. By WIOA standards, her preferred literacy skills would not necessarily lead to higher employability or literacy skill gains as measured by standardized tests.

**Dee.** Dee was a 42-year-old White woman who had recently become unemployed for the first time in her life. Dee grew up in a small, rural town near South Bricksburg with her five siblings and parents. She left high school in 10th grade to help her older sister care for her children. She thought about returning to high school, but when she talked about it with a teacher, she found out she “was gonna have to take tenth grade all over again. So, hotheaded, I hung up and never went back.” She started working at a manufacturing company and eventually with
construction companies. She worked most of her adult life working in the construction field, where she “ran roller, compacter, flagged, dug,” and provided site security. An unexpected scarcity of work left her without a job, and she had been unhappy with her position and its negative effects on her health. She felt disrespected by her employers and described being left “thirteen, fourteen hours in the cold or the heat and not once see a foreman come by” to relieve her for a break, and “it started working on my kidneys. . . . I said no, I'm not ruining my health for this no more.”

Dee had generally negative feelings toward her school experiences. She had to repeat first grade “because I wasn't listening to directions, I did it my way, and that was it,” and from year to year, she “always failed the exams, the tests, quizzes, oh yeah. And I think they just passed me because they knew I tried. So they just passed me from year to year.” Her father was often traveling with his work as a truck driver and her “mom was working two jobs so she wasn't home a lot either when I was in my teens” and had left school in the 5th grade, and Dee said only two out of her five siblings graduated from high school and the others all dropped out. Dee said she “never went to school. I’d sleep all day, run all night” until she decided not to return.

Dee was married and had a son and a daughter. Her son, Devin, was in a severe car accident during high school (approximately seven years before the interview), and her life after his accident had largely centered around his recovery and subsequently helping him adjust and manage life with a disability. She described her son’s hard work toward recovery, and while discussing him, it was clear how much effort she exerted to support him. She spent countless hours dealing with hospitals, insurance companies, and rehabilitation facilities. Dee learned about different medical devices Devin used and helped him investigate career options that would help him achieve independence.
Dee leaving school to babysit her sister’s children is an example of early caretaking, cited in literature as common reason for school attrition (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Additionally, limited family educational support, such as Dee experienced, is a predictor of low academic achievement (Alexander et al., 2001). As children engage in parentified behaviors, taking care of home or childcare matters, the responsibilities may undermine their attention to schoolwork (Chase et al., 1998). Even though Dee did not directly identify these factors as reasons for leaving school early, it is possible that they contributed to her decision to drop out.

Although Dee described herself as an indifferent student who “partied way too much,” she discussed her love of reading romances and mysteries. Through her experiences helping Devin navigate complex medical systems and insurance claims, she gained considerable medical literacy and expertise, a form of literacy that standardized tests cannot measure and that WIOA does not recognize.

KC. KC was a 26-year-old Black man who had lived in South Bricksburg for several months. He primarily grew up in southern states, living with his mother, grandmother, and two brothers. He expressed an enjoyment of reading since his childhood and talked about both positive and negative experiences with his schooling. Growing up, he spent most of his time playing football, listening to music, and doing schoolwork. He talked about his father, who lived in a different state, trying to connect music and school to help him study by telling him to “remember that schoolwork like you remember these [music] words.” KC repeatedly discussed the importance of school to his family and spoke proudly of his mother as the first in their family to complete college, which she attended as an adult.

KC left high school in 12th grade after a disagreement with his football coach, who was also one of his teachers. He felt betrayed by the coach and expressed frustration with the school
KC openly discussed how incarceration and involvement with the juvenile court system affected his education and employment. He was first involved in a juvenile court and detention center for an act he claimed he was not a part of and that others “just pinned something on me and now I got a charge on my back.” He was also incarcerated as an adult, which disrupted his first encounter with ABE classes and HSE diploma goals.

At the time of the interview, KC was single. He had four children, three boys and one girl, from two previous relationships, and he first moved to South Bricksburg to be closer to several of his children. He found work as a cook in a local grill after meeting the manager, and when the manager asked if he wanted a job, he “dropped everything and went to work.” He enjoyed the work, which he described as “stress but it’s great,” but he aspired to attend college and find other work: “there's a lot of things I want to be. Mechanic. Aircraft mechanic. Or regular mechanic.” Although he did not have a precise career path, KC thought that having his HSE credential would open doors for employment he would enjoy. KC had previously taken the GED® tests and passed “everything except for math [which he missed by] fifty points,” but he had to retake the tests after the GED® tests were overhauled and re-introduced in 2014.

KC framed his narrative of leaving school as the result of a series of injustices against him from coaches, teachers, and law enforcement. From his perspective, the legal and educational systems had wronged him, and he left instead of continuing to be hurt by them. Multiple research studies have demonstrated a connection between incarceration or negative interactions with the legal system and early-leaving for school, and this connection is particularly strong for Black males (Allen, 2017; Cramer et al., 2014; Irby, 2016).
Despite his negative encounters with school and legal authorities, KC spoke of enjoying reading, writing (particularly music lyrics), and math. He wrote and recorded music prolifically, using language and rhythm in complex and playful ways. He also had considerable knowledge of recording technology that he used for his own and friends’ projects. These forms of language use would not be recognized or rewarded under HSE exam standards, and it unlikely that KC would be able earn a sustainable living with his music, so these particular skills would not be valued under WIOA. Additionally, KC had learned and used skills related to frequent moving (e.g., finding housing, learning transportation systems) and to finding employment: even with his record of incarceration, he had never been without employment for a long period.

Kiki. Kiki, a 37-year-old Black woman, was the only participant with a high school diploma. She described the reasons she dropped out of her first high school:

I got pregnant when I became a senior. I waited till my daughter was six months old and then I went back to high school . . . an adult school that was for students who either dropped out or had children and wanted to continue education.

She described her alternative high school as addressing practical needs, such as

there was a daycare center right next door to the school so I never had to worry about having a babysitter for my daughter. Number two, the teacher was nuns. So they really enforced rules that I could never have got away with in regular high school.

At the same time, the “teachers were very patient. If you ever needed extra help, they was willing to help you. And I think that made a huge difference.”

She earned her high school diploma, but years later, when she wanted to enroll in community college, she “did very poorly on [the] tests,” and her placement test scores were not
high enough for admittance. In the ABE program, she was taking the same classes as the HSE preparation students, hoping to improve her test scores.

Kiki had grown up in one location with a supportive family and extended family nearby. She had two daughters, one who she had in high school and another, younger daughter. She was married to the father of her second daughter, and they had moved to South Bricksburg a little more than a year ago because they “felt like it’s a better environment and there’s better opportunities for [their] daughter” there. Her older daughter was living with her father while she finished her senior year of high school, and Kiki visited her most weekends.

Kiki discussed wanting to take culinary arts classes at the local community college in the hope of eventually having a “food truck or [her] own catering business.” She had spent many years working in the food industry and hoped to use her knowledge to be able to work for herself, “in a job that I like.” Her family provided strong motivation her to persevere in her schoolwork and career ambitions, and she was willing to work hard to improve all of their lives.

Although she had a high school diploma, Kiki was unable to access the education she desired. The nearly twenty-year gap between completing high school and attempting to enroll in higher education likely contributed to the low test scores on her placement exams. Although Kiki did not directly address the issues, it is likely that her status as a racial minority affected the educational support and employment opportunities she was offered throughout her life (Diangelo, 2016; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Additionally, caring for her infant daughter, even with school and family support, likely presented challenges to her employment and further education immediately after high school.

While not a typical ABE student, Kiki had shown determination and perseverance in completing high school under challenging circumstances and in consistently finding
employment, as well as her strong desire to be a positive role model for her family. These attributes are difficult to measure or specifically evaluate, but they were characteristics that Kiki used to bring herself through difficult times.

**Miriam.** Miriam, a 56-year-old, biracial woman, was the oldest study participant and the one who left high school the earliest, in ninth grade. She had a speech impairment that made it difficult to understand her at times, and my interviews with her were the shortest of all the participants. She grew up near a large city with her mother, who was White, her father, who was Black, and seven siblings. She described difficulties of growing up in a racially diverse family, particularly in her neighborhood, which has predominantly Black and Hispanic: “Being that my mother was white. So it was kind of hard, especially my sisters and my brothers, going to school. They had a fight like every day, they had a fight.” She described a generally negative experience with formal schooling and was expelled in ninth grade for missing too many classes. She regretted not trying to return, and thought that she “could’ve been working in a bank right now if I would’ve stayed in school. But I was cutting class, hanging out with my best friends.”

She was currently single and had a son and a daughter who lived near her. She was employed part-time as a custodian at the time of the interview and also volunteered at a nursing home and also received a disability stipend. Miriam openly discussed her history of depression, for which she had been hospitalized several times. She described herself as a caring person, and she expressed her desire to work in a job where she could “give back to the community” and help others, a goal she mentioned several times throughout our conversations. She had been taking ABE classes for many years, and she described some of the benefits of the classes as helping her “comprehend stuff and stay out of the hospital.” She enjoyed the ABE teachers and classwork,
but she was not comfortable using a computer and expressed nervousness over taking the GED® exam on a computer.³

Miriam had found means of using literacy to address difficulties in her life in a variety of ways. She described journaling as a way to manage her mental health, which, given her history of hospitalization for mental health concerns, was a valuable form of literacy for her. Miriam also had learned to navigate the employment system, balancing her work time with the requirements and restrictions of the money she received from her Social Security disability check. The skills she exerted to navigate the various components of her life were not literacies recognized by standardized assessments; however, these competencies allowed Miriam to live independently and pursue her ambitions academically and for employment.

Data Collection

Narrative research views participants’ experiences as “situated action,” as actions that occur and are retold within a particular context (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8). As I sought to understand how participants perceived and situated their stories, I was mindful of three facets of narrative research: temporality, place, and sociality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These aspects were simultaneously explored during the research through interviews, participant activities, observations, and document analysis.

Interviews. I conducted two interviews with each participant at least two days, but usually one week, apart. I followed semi-structured protocols (Appendices A and B), which loosely followed Seidman’s (2006) outline for a series of three interviews; however, I limited this study to two interviews based on conversations with the class instructors about participants’ availability and time constraints. The first interview explored the participants’ backgrounds and

³ At the time of her interview, the South Bricksburg ABE program did not offer the HISET HSE exam, which has a paper exam option.
their past experiences with adult literacy and educational programs. The second interview followed up on any questions remaining after the first interview, explored participants’ views of success in greater depth, and focused on their views of the future and how their understanding of success might influence future plans. I spoke to participants face-to-face for all interviews and used an audio-recorder during the conversations. The interview length for both interviews ranged from 20-50 minutes, with most lasting 35-45 minutes.

For the interviews in South Bricksburg, the interviewee and I met in a small office/meeting room down the hall from the classroom. We sat at a table in the room, and the recorder was placed on the table. The room allowed our conversations to be private, away from other students and teachers, which I hoped would encourage participants to speak openly. The interviews with the Watermill participant took place in a small room used as a storage closet, connected to the main classroom. The setup of the classroom as one large space without other connecting rooms presented challenges for the class, when a student required quiet or privacy, and also for privacy for the interviews. The small room had adequate space for two chairs for the interview. The room was sometimes used for students to take their TABE tests, so it was an area they were familiar with using when they needed a private space.

**Participant activity.** Although the interview questions allowed me to hear participants’ narratives related to literacy and success, I also wanted to better understand the context of success in their lives, so I asked them to complete an activity between the two interviews. Involving participants in data collection, particularly visual data, can facilitate a shift from a “researcher-centric” view of a project to one that has a greater participant focus (Prosser & Loxley, 2008, p. 31). Combining interviews with other data from participants allowed me to see
into their lives through a means of their choosing. Participants were given the choice of the following activities:

1) With your phone, take several pictures of things you see throughout the week that represent success to you. Email the pictures to me at [email address] or bring them to your next interview, and we can discuss them.

2) Draw a picture or write a paragraph addressing this quote: “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” – Winston Churchill
   Do you agree or disagree? What does this quote mean to you? Please bring your drawing or writing to the next interview.

3) Find something that represents success to you and bring it to your next interview. This could be something from home, a picture from a magazine or other media, or something else that has meaning to you.

Four participants selected Option 1 and brought pictures to the next interview, one participant brought an object that represented success (Option 3), and one participant did not specifically select an activity but spent time discussing a statement her father often made about success. We spent several minutes at the beginning of the second interview discussing their activity and how it related to their ideas of success.

Observations. In addition to interviews, I collected observational data to better understand the context of participants’ narratives. I attended ten classes in each location, and was present for at least three classes before beginning the interviews. I was in each class for approximately three hours and observed the interactions between adult learners, between students and instructors, and the discourse used in teaching classes. For example, through observing interactions between instructors and students, I had a better idea of their relationships and how these could affect students’ learning. I could also see how students responded as a group or individually when they needed help or had questions. Additionally, I wanted my presence to become normalized to students with the hope that some familiarity would increase their comfort in talking with me.
**Document analysis.** Another source of data for this study was document analysis. Document analysis as a valuable part of qualitative research, especially viewed as the social product of the writer(s) and a reflection of current practices (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007). Documents may corroborate or add to information that is available from observational and interview data. The documents may provide further insight into information the participants related to me. Documents from the state and federal governments offered insights into discourses about success in the adult basic education field relating to students, instructors, and programs. Documents considered for this study included federal WIOA legislation with particular attention to AEFLA and a Pennsylvania guidance on WIOA for state programs.

Additionally, I kept a journal and recorded my impressions and thoughts after each interview. These analytic notes allowed a space for me to reflect on the interviews, consider gaps that could be addressed in the second interview, and process my thoughts and emotions after talking with the participants (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Reflecting on the interviews allowed me to see discourses and connections between the interviews that might not have surfaced without written reflection. Additionally, several participants shared difficult parts of their lives with me during the interviews. I often left the interviews with a sense of empathy for some of their experiences, and the journal allowed me to process some of my own feelings and reactions. Taking time to understand my own thoughts gave me space to recognize ways my own views influenced my understanding of participants’ narratives.

**Preparation of Transcripts**

I audio-recorded each interview with participants after obtaining their permission. Each interview was professionally transcribed, and I reviewed each transcription for accuracy after it
was completed. I then uploaded then transcripts to NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software in preparation for my analysis.

**Data Analysis**

As previously described, narrative research provides an opportunity to focus on the data from a relatively small number of participants (Creswell, 2007). As discussed previously, I applied Polkinghorne’s (1995) concept of *analysis of narrative* as I considered the stories told to me and gain understanding of perceptions of success within participants’ particular socio-cultural context.

**Analysis of interviews.** As described above, I used Polkinghorne’s (1995) analysis of narrative to look across the data for themes throughout the participants’ experiences. My process of analysis began as I listened to participants and noted themes in their interviews. For example, all participants mentioned the importance of family in various ways as integral to their notions of success. As I noted possible themes, I was able to incorporate further questions drawing on these ideas into second interviews and my reflections on their stories. I then uploaded interview transcripts to NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software for qualitative analysis. This software allowed me to organize, examine, and search all the data electronically. The software has the capability of extracting selected text from each interview and comparing it to text from other interviews or observational notes.

As I re-listened to the recorded interviews and read and re-read the transcripts, I considered how each of the individual’s stories contributed to a predominant narrative present through their collective narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I explored these larger stories, I created codes and themes to capture some of these narratives across accounts (Riessman, 2008). As I read through the transcripts, I developed codes that related to aspects of
the participants’ narratives. For example, my initial identification of a broad theme, “the importance of family,” evolved to encompass several themes, such as “providing for family,” “being a positive role model,” and was a sub-part of another broad theme, “motivation.” As I coded the transcripts, I began to group related codes to develop themes across participants and interviews (Patton, 2002). This process led to the themes I presented as the master narratives, such as *emotional fulfillment, persistence and hard work*, and *recognition*, to name a few.

**Analysis of documents.** I used CDA to analyze AEFLA in WIOA, the corresponding Memorandum from OCTAE, and a related Pennsylvania state brochure developed for distribution to adult education programs and community business partners. I wanted to see how the particular concept of *success* was represented throughout the documents. To determine the organizational discourse around success, I read through the documents using Fairclough’s (2001) three dimensional method for CDA: 1) *describe*, 2) *interpret*, and 3) *explain*. I examined how the text *described* adult learners through the words and phrase in the legislation and accompanying documents, then interpreted how the themes related to adult learners’ identities and success. For this study, I focused on those specific themes to *explain* “the relationship between the interpretation and the matrix of the historical, social, and cultural context by considering how the texts (re)produce, interrupt, and/or affect larger discourses” (Shin & Ging, 2019, pp. 7–8).

Through CDA of the legislative documents, I explored how success in adult education is portrayed under WIOA and considered the power dynamics involved.

**Ethical Concerns**

One concern about narrative studies is the potential for the researcher to take without giving. Researchers have at times used information they gathered to their advantage and to the disadvantage of the research participants (Smith, 1999). This abuse of power in research can
extend to policy decisions based on research, and these decisions may be to the detriment of groups involved. Similarly, if research is related to trauma, the participants may relive the traumatic experiences as they recount their stories (Connolly & Reilly, 2007). In these situations, it is important for the researcher to provide resources to the participants, which could include counseling services or other types of assistance. The researcher must not only take from participants and should consider the potential consequences for the participants to avoid this pitfall of narrative inquiry.

Although I did not consider the subject of this study likely to raise traumatic issues with the participants, I had some general resources available to participants if the topics we discussed were disturbing to them; however, no participants expressed distress or concern after our interviews. I also ensured that participants understood the consent form and fully agreed to everything included. Additionally, I explained the process I planned to use to analyze their interviews so the participants had some idea of what would happen after they talked with me and understood the process in which they participated.

Researcher Role

The relationship between the researcher and participant often differs between qualitative and quantitative research, usually involving greater participant-researcher interaction in qualitative studies. In narrative inquiry, stories are collected through in-depth interviews, and the researcher becomes a listener and confidante to potentially intimate and poignant tales (Chase, 2005). Interviewers who approach collecting data with a very structured plan often find themselves initially frustrated when their interviewees stray from the selected questions and tell unsolicited stories. However, many listeners often appreciate the additional data in retrospect.
when it provides additional context for their participants’ lives and insight into other relevant stories through the conversational relationship they created.

Chase (2005) discusses the dramatic shift that a narrative listening approach entails from a quantitative view, when participants are sought for answers to researchers’ questions. Instead, the narrative approach is more collaborative, including dialogue between the narrator and the listener as they discuss a topic together. It is the researcher’s responsibility to frame the interview in such a way that the interviewee feels comfortable disclosing details of her or his life story. The interview process can be open-ended, providing opportunities for the researcher to query ambiguous answers or to probe further into a topic of interest (Riessman, 1993).

As I listened to the participants’ stories, I was affected by them and changed during the process (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). I heard stories I never expected and learned about success in ways I could not have predicted before the study. Likewise, the storytellers may be altered from relating events in their lives. Researchers may not be able to neatly package the answers that they find. Rather, they may find that the answers within the narrations transcend the original boundaries and raise as many new questions as they answer. In narrative research, participants, researchers, and the relationships they co-create are not considered static but continually evolving. As researchers relinquish thoughts of objectivity, they begin to engage in relational interaction with the participants within a specific context, and the relationship often changes how the data is viewed and interpreted, and I saw this transformation occur in this study.

During the study, I was aware of my role as an outsider to the classes, a White woman, younger than some of the participants, and connected with a university. I had previously taught students in similar classes and informed them of this at the beginning of the interview process, and this common experience helped create a rapport between us. All students whom I
interviewed expressed admiration and appreciation of their current instructors, and that respect was a positive influence toward our conversations. Many participants shared very personal and often difficult aspects of their lives with me, and I sought to respect their disclosures and honor their stories to the best of my ability. In this respect, my role as a researcher was both to listen to their stories and analyze and share their narratives in a way that combined their voices with my voice as a researcher.

Data Quality and Trustworthiness

Narrative research does not fit the paradigm of quantitative research and methods of evaluating its quality (e.g., generalizability, validity); however, it does not follow that there are no standards for evaluating its rigor (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Lincoln and Guba (1986) propose the criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity as means to evaluate the rigor of a qualitative study. This view “rejects the notion that an inquirer can maintain an objective distance from the phenomena (including human behavior) being studied” and suggests that the researcher/participant role is one of learning together (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 75).

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and I assessed the presence of these qualities in this study according to Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) criteria (p. 77). Within this study, I engaged with the participants over several weeks and sought to familiarize myself to them before beginning the interviews. My observations of the classes provided valuable insight for the study and also served to acquaint the participants with me. My observations also helped me to form a broader picture of the participants’ lives as I noted their interactions with other students and with instructors. Additionally, I was able to triangulate the data through reviewing studies presenting similar data and by discussing the data in this study with colleagues and other academics. Time
and geographic constraints prevented member checks, but I provided my contact information to participants and informed them that they were welcome to approach me with questions about the study or their interviews at any time.

I provided thick, descriptive data about the participants and the class settings so others can assess the transferability of this study (e.g., degree of similarity to their situations). I also attempted to be transparent in my methods and maintain thorough records of the process and my analysis to establish dependability and confirmability of the analysis and findings in this study.

**Authenticity.** Lincoln and Guba (1986) also propose criteria for evaluating the authenticity of a qualitative study: *fairness, ontological authentication, educative authentication, catalytic authentication,* and *tactical authentication* (p.78-82). One aspect of ensuring fairness is an “exploration of values when clear conflict is evident” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 79). Although participants’ narratives did not overtly contradict each other, I was prepared to engage with and attempt to clarify contradictions in subsequent interviews. Fairness, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1986), also includes measures for study participant to address potential wrongs or inequities. To this end, I provided all participants with contact information for myself and for IRB in case they felt the need to communicate any questions or problems.

In this study, I viewed ontological authentication, or “improvement in the individual’s (and group’s) conscious experiencing of the world” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 81), as increasing my comprehension of the complexities embedded within the study. Although I began the study with knowledge of ABE in general and first-hand experiences with teaching, conducting this study brought me to a greater understanding of the depth of complexities within the adult education field. Likewise, educative authentication involves increased understanding of topics in the study along with a willingness to share the knowledge gained. Although I cannot speak for
the participants’ knowledge, my understanding of success in ABE increased tremendously, and I hope to share what I have learned with adult learners, practitioners, academics, politicians, and anyone else interested. Catalytic and tactical authentication involve taking action, seeking change, and pursuing a balance of power in unequal situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, pp. 82–83). Although I have not yet seen these measures accomplished, I kept power relations and future action firmly in mind when designing the study. My hope is that this study will become part of change in adult education, leading to more equitable practices and relationships.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the location of the ABE programs, the limited number of interviews, and documents examined in CDA. Both program locations in this study were in rural areas, likely presenting different challenges than urban ABE programs (Prins & Schafft, 2009). Inclusion of both rural and urban sites could have provided a broader perspective on success and literacy, but time and geographical constraints did not allow for this expansion. In the future, including perspectives from urban sites could deepen our understanding of topics discussed in this study.

Time constraints for the adult learners and myself limited the number of interviews to two. Ideally, I would have engaged the students in three interviews (Seidman, 2006), but I wanted to honor the participants’ class time, which they sacrificed to talk with me. Additionally, adult learners often do not attend every class, and it could have presented a challenge to find time with each participant over three classes. The documents used for the CDA portion of this study were the most significant to official policy; however, WIOA has a multitude of related formal and informal documents, and given the time needed, CDA with these documents could add to our understanding. Despite these limitations, the participants’ perceptions of success and their
understanding of literacy practices’ involvement in success provide valuable insight into ABE for those involved in the field.
I liked to read a lot of history books when I was younger. I was really into the Babysitters Club books when I was younger. I don't think I really had a particular subject. I just, any book that I found interesting was good. I know my mother said I was really into history. She always said I would pick up a book to read about. Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson. I was really into those. I'm still into that today. I will always watch a history movie with no problem. And I was a good student. I was just a bad student. I had good grades but my behavior was just always terrible. So what he [teacher] would do is, he would always sneak my name in the essay contests. And I would never know until one of my classmates would walk past, there used to be a bulletin board by the office and they would walk past it and be like, congratulations. And I used to be like, what are you congratulating me? They were like, you didn’t know that you won the essay contest? And he would always be like oh, I put your name in. . . He was one of those teachers where he gave every student that confidence. He always made us feel like you can do whatever you want. If you feel like you're not writing on your point, I'm gonna put your name in to prove that you have those skills.

I never wanted to be that kid that the other students thought was too too smart so when I was in grammar school, I would pretend to act like I didn’t know anything. And when the teacher gave me the schoolwork, that's when I would ace it. [Laughs] I never wanted to feel like I was the smart kid in school so I think that was my downfall. . . I didn't want to be teased. -Kiki

Kiki’s descriptions of success encapsulated the varying and sometimes seemingly contradictory views participants expressed in their narratives. The more I heard participants’ stories, the more curious I was about their ideas of success and how their ideas aligned with the notions of success expressed in ABE discourse.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand how ABE learners define success in their current roles as students and in life. Through their narratives, I hoped to explore how their perceptions of success connect with their learning and literacy practices and intersect with the organizational discourse about success. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from two in-depth interviews each with six study participants. The findings focus on themes related to the research questions, and I present the participants’ narratives as related to their discussions of success within the framework of their lives and their ABE classes. This chapter centers participants’ stories relevant to the first two research questions:
1) How do ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life?

2) How do literacy learning and literacy practices figure in ABE learners’ perceptions of success, if at all?

This chapter presents themes from the participants’ narratives relating to success in their personal and academic lives and is organized as follows: the first section explores how the participants defined success and the following section describes participants’ literacy practices and participation in ABE classes and the intersections with their perceptions of success.

Success in Life and Learning

The first section presents the discourses that participants used as they defined success in their lives, both private and academic. Participants’ sense of success reflects the social and educational environments of their past and present lives, and the findings indicate that the students use a variety of discourses to describe successes achieved and hoped for throughout their lives. In particular, the study participants framed their ideas of success around narrative themes of emotional fulfillment, finances, academic accomplishment, recognition, and persistence and hard work. As participants discussed their views of success, they also described obstacles or barriers to success in their lives.

Emotional fulfillment. As participants shared their stories, their narratives repeatedly connected their ideas with emotions, and these emotional connections were strongly linked with participants’ notions of success. While listening to and coding the participants’ responses, I found several common discourses that they used to describe their perceptions of success related to emotional fulfillment, which I categorized as connected to a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment rather than a specifically quantifiable goal.
Success is helping others. The most common way participants described success was in the context of supporting others in their lives through their actions, stories, and examples. For several students a key aspect of success was helping someone achieve something. Dee spoke at length about her son, Devin, who had been in a catastrophic car accident when he was in high school. He suffered extensive injuries and had a long and arduous rehabilitation in which Dee was extensively involved. As she talked about success, she repeatedly turned to Devin as both an example of success and what she hoped to achieve in her own life. She described Devin as her “success boy,” detailing his post-accident journey from extensive rehabilitation to working toward a tech career. She felt great pride in her work assisting him and counted that as the major success in her life. Dee also considered her role in helping both her children graduate from high school as a major success in her life.

As Brianna described her idea of a successful person, she referenced her grandmother, “because she's not selfish. If you're not selfish, you have more room to give and more room to receive.” Her grandmother inspired her to do the same: “I would say in order for me to be successful, I would say trying to help other people be successful at the same time. I guess if you're trying to help someone else be successful, that means you're always thinking about being successful.” When Brianna thought about success, her first thoughts related to interactions that benefit other people as well as oneself. Kiki also emphasized using one’s own story to motivate others as an important aspect of success, saying “each story can motivate somebody else to succeed in what they're going for.” She talked about her success as not only affecting her life but going beyond herself to encourage others striving to meet their goals.

Success, for Miriam, was embedded in helping others. As she described someone she considered successful, she talked about a friend who “always makes sure I go to school every
day, she makes sure I get up and go to the nursing home.” Talking about success in her own life, she repeatedly referenced having a career that allowed her to help others and to “give back to the community.” Likewise, a particular example of success in her life included her volunteer work with people with disabilities, “helping them ride the bus and all that. I helped a lot of – Like this girl was at my job . . . I helped her from being shy. I was her peer mentor. Now she's open, she talk and everything now.” Miriam took great pride in being able to make a difference in people’s lives. Her career goals all included careers that would allow her to work with people and help them in some way. Her aim to help others was so much a part of her notion of success that she specifically mentioned desiring her obituary to state, “she helped people.” For these participants, having the means, time, and ability to help other was a key aspect of success.

**Success is being respected.** When talking about success, participants acknowledged the role of feeling respected and appreciated. As they discussed what success might look like in their lives, several students expressed a desire to respected in ways that they had not experienced in the past. Dee considered respect a primary component of success, stating: “I want [a job] with respect because I've been in construction almost my whole life. There's no respect there.” Although she had been paid well at her previous job as a construction flagger, she aspired to a job in which she was treated better than her former experiences:

No bathroom breaks, nothing. They just treated you like you're a thing out there. It was awful. You wouldn't see [the bosses] . . . . They'd drop you off at 6:30 in the morning, you wouldn't see them till 7:30, 8:00 o'clock at night.

For Bill, the idea of success, particularly with regard to his HSE diploma, was also tied to feeling respected, as he described wanting
more of a solid respect. Even just self-respect on my part. Because you tell people you
don't have your diploma or anything, to me it's a little embarrassing nowadays to say that.

So that's what I'm getting out of it there too. Just kind of a little self-gratification.

Bill’s comments represent a feeling many of the participants expressed of expecting society to
treat them differently after the obtained their high school credential. Part of success included
greater respect for themselves as they met their goals, alongside the respect they hoped to receive
from having a different job that provided opportunities for autonomy that they previously lacked.

**Success is finishing something.** Success as completion of a goal, especially in hardship,
was a common theme through participants’ narratives. Bill’s narrative captured the idea that
passing the GED® exam symbolized more than the completion of a credential:

> And now that I'm trying to be at a point in my life where I'm actually finishing things.
> Doing things I started, even if it's things I started to do a long time ago. I'd like to at least
> say I finished something. So more than anything, I think that's what it [getting the GED®
> credential] is for me. Kind of just a personal goal, you know what I mean. Restart kind
> of. Hitting a do-over button.

Brianna drew on a similar narrative when she described success in her life when she won a high
school leadership award after a difficult personal period: “I had recently lost a grandparent. So I
didn’t think I was going to go and finish anything . . . But I still pushed on and did what I had to
do and I'm still doing it.” For her, the process of completing the necessary application and
interviews despite emotional distress represented success as much as the award itself. As Kiki
described success in her life, she echoed this theme, saying, “I felt successful when I went back
to high school when I had my daughter.” The only participant with a high school diploma, Kiki
described attending and completing her education at an alternative high school after the birth of her first daughter as a primary example of success in her life.

Brianna described her grandfather’s attempts to complete his college education despite various obstacles as an example of a successful person, even though he did not ultimately accomplish his. She remembered accompanying her grandparents as her grandfather attended classes:

He went to like college four different times because he just wanted to finish but he didn't get to finish because of his sickness . . . . we used to get up super, super early in the morning . . . we had to drive [to the university], stay there for like a little bit, the whole day or whatever, while he did his classes, then drive all the way back home. And we did that like twice a week.

Although he did not ultimately accomplish his goal before his death, he instilled the value of completing something in his family as one trait of a successful person.

*Success is independence.* When thinking about life in the future, success included a measure of independence. For Dee, her success was wrapped up in her son Devin’s progress in being able to live on his own. Her goal was that he would be able to live independently, planning for the future when she might someday be unable to care for him or after she died. KC also saw independence as part of success, and he described independence as having stability in his life and for his children.

*Success is being a positive role model.* Many participants strongly felt that their success reached beyond their own lives and saw success as being a positive influence for those around them, particularly family members. For Bill and Kiki, their academic success was only part of the success they hope to achieve as they demonstrated their persistence and achievements to their
children. Bill explained that earning his diploma and continuing with his goals was one way he could make up for some of his regretted past and show his son a different way:

Because you know, I've been harping on him for a couple years, don't do it the way I do it. Because he threw it in my face, like I said, he threw it in my face one time. Well, start getting in some classes here and do it too. Like I said, he's graduating [from high school] in the next month . . . . I was kind of hoping to be a lot closer or a lot further along than I am to kind of do it together. But hey, you know what I mean, I'm still doing it.

Likewise, Kiki’s daughter was a strong motivation for her educational goals:

You have somebody who looks up to you now. So if you don't get that education, how can, when she [her daughter] gets older, how can you make her go to school and work hard when you're not doing it? Kids seem to reflect off of what their parents do. I realize when I went back to school, I have to do this for her.

Brianna, the youngest participant, mentioned wanting her brothers and sisters to look up to her, and KC discussed feeling like he had failed his brothers by not being a better example for them.

Participants also described an emotional motivation for success relating to their commitments to others, such as KC commenting: “Success is when you can make sacrifices and you can handle your responsibilities.” The idea of success for these participants was interwoven not only with their achievements but with how it would affect those they loved.

Success is facing fears. In her creative activity, Brianna showed me a picture she had taken of a roller coaster at an amusement park. She described going on the ride despite her fear of heights, proclaiming, “that was success because I faced a fear.” Further reflecting on success, Brianna discussed an essay she wrote that resulted in winning a scholarship to a local university. She described winning the scholarship as success, but placed more emphasis on the subject of the
essay: courage. She described moving to a city from a rural area and the courage it took to adapt to her life there, which was one success in her life. To Brianna, the entire process represented success: writing the essay, winning the scholarship, answering extensive interview questions, and attending an awards ceremony. Alluding to her depression and grief over the recent loss of her grandparent, she mentioned, “I didn't think I was going to go and finish anything . . . . But I still pushed on and did what I had to do and I'm still doing it” and felt a strong sense of accomplishment at completing everything involved. For her, success was not defined by one moment (winning the scholarship) but by the many phases she navigated before and after that moment, overcoming emotional barriers.

**Finances.** The idea of financial contribution and stability, particularly relating to family, was strongly connected to *success* for most participants. As the students discussed success, the most common discourses they expressed included: providing for others (usually family), financial stability, and having more than they needed.

**Success is having enough to create stability.** As participants discussed success, a recurring theme was financial provision for a stable future, both for themselves and their families. Bill mentioned the importance of finances in the form of employment benefits, acknowledging that is it “just the way the world works. Insurance, retirement . . .” and expressed his concern with having a job that provided those benefits. KC also discussed the importance of having insurance for his family, desiring to make “sure their insurance is good” as one way he could provide for them. Both men recognized the importance of not only having a paycheck but also having a job that could provide for medical expenses and for future retirement. Although most participants expressed a desire to have the financial means to make ends meet, only one expressed a desire to accumulate surplus finances. Bill exemplified this sentiment with his
statement that he aimed to be “[j]ust making enough to make sure the bills are paid. I don't need to be loaded. I just want to be comfortable, that's it. Just comfortable. So that's (a fine line).”

Participants also defined success as relating to financial goals providing stability, such as owning homes or property. When referring to an example of success in his life, Bill, an avid motorcyclist, described the process of buying his first bike: “I built my credit up enough to buy [a motorcycle]. Just from working and saving and everything else.” For his selected creative activity, Bill showed me a picture of his current motorcycle (Figure 1). The new motorcycle was a symbol of financial success as he overcame bad credit and saved enough money to buy a new motorcycle large enough for him and his girlfriend to ride together. He expressed great pride in surmounting financial difficulties to attain his goal and saw the better credit as leading to greater financial stability in all areas of his life.

![Figure 1: Bill's photograph](image)

Comparably, KC referred to one aspect of success as: “being smart and putting money away. . . . I'm looking into getting some property to own.” For KC, the goal of owning property was connected to his personal success as well as providing for his children’s future. Dee also
mentioned her desire to own her own home instead of renting as a way to create financial stability for her family.

**Success is being a provider.** Financial success for many participants included providing necessities for their families and their immediate needs, such as food and transportation (KC), “making enough to make sure the bills are paid” (Bill), paying rent, and having good credit. For KC, his first concern was “[m]aking sure there's food in the house . . . . bills to pay, we're okay.” The idea of financial contribution was also equated with success for many participants. For Dee, earning a paycheck was strongly connected to her sense of self-worth and feeling valued:

> Because I don't have a job, I'm not bringing any income in. My husband is pulling it all and that's not me. I've had a job, I've supported myself, and that's where I feel like I'm a failure. I'm not helping. And that's not me. I can't just sit there and not do nothing . . . . I've had a job since I've been seventeen. I'm forty-two. This is the first year without a job and it's not a good feeling, it really isn't, for me. Makes me feel worthless more or less.

Other participants mentioned having enough money to buy necessities and additional items, such as sports equipment for their children. Interestingly, there was not a difference in male and female responses related to being a provider. Although *provider* is traditionally considered a male role, both women and men in this study expressed providing for their families and themselves as part of success.

**Success is having more than you need.** Only one participant, KC, expressed a desire to accumulate wealth beyond basic provision. KC was excited to dream about other possibilities after covering the necessities, using a car analogy to illustrate some of his aspirations: “So I can deal with the station wagon, I can drive the station wagon, but I want like a Ferrari.” Notably, none of the other participants expressed interest in having more than meeting their basic needs.
Despite the connection of success and money, several participants made a clear distinction between success and merely accumulating wealth. Although he discussed the value of owning property and providing for his family, KC was adamant that having money did not automatically equal success: “I want to make the statement too, success is not money [emphasis added]. Because I think money makes people stupid. It changes some people. My main goal in [earning more money] is not to change.” While acknowledging the value of having money, merely acquiring wealth was not motivation for earning his HSE credential. Similarly, Bill and Dee differentiated wealth accumulation and adequate provision, as previously described. Although Bill, Dee, and KC connected finances to success, the other three participants did not discuss money in their interviews, indicating that money and success were not immediately associated for half of the participants. These findings show that success for these participants was linked to financial goals but was not the only or even most significant definition of success for anyone.

**Academic accomplishment.** Academic progress and accomplishment were also common ways students described their ideas of success. The research participants were all part of an academic program by choice, and to some extent for all, their ideas of success were linked to their program performance and goals. When participants described success in terms of academics, they often used more measurable descriptions (e.g., scores) than when linking success to other aspects of life, such as examples of obtaining high(er) scores (e.g., for HSE and TABE tests) further learning, Career Pathways goals, additional education, and progress in class.

**Success is achieving high scores and doing well in class.** Improving scores on tests or class assignments was one measure of success for many participants. At the time of the study, Bill was the only participant who had passed any HSE exam sections. He passed the GED®
Language Arts exam between our first and second interviews, and he was glad to move on to the next test, math, which he planned to take soon. As participants described their views of success as students, they often discussed high(er) scores on an HSE practice test or exam or TABE as measurable markers. Dee equated her academic scores with her self-confidence: “Passing this GED® is really gonna boost my confidence. Like I said, I do have comprehension problems. A lot of times, I don't understand it.”

Similarly, Kiki viewed success in academics as measurable, remarking on tests and assignments: “I see the results. When I'm ready to take the test to see if . . . I reached a higher level, that's how I know I'm doing what I'm supposed to do” and “I know I'm doing good when I look back and do my work or we go over an assignment and I'm getting some of the answers correctly.” When KC described someone he considered successful, he labeled his cousin as my hero . . . because she's smart. She graduated school. She went to college but she came back. She got good enough grades to go places. I really think knowledge is power . . . I feel like once I get this high school career, GED®, I want to, I really want to test high on this thing. I do.

As he discussed his cousin’s academic success, he reflected on his own goals, which were strongly linked to obtaining his high school equivalency credential. For him, success included earning the credential but also encompassed getting a high score, which symbolized success beyond merely earning the credential.

Several students specifically mentioned the TABE test as a mark of success. Kiki, KC, and Miriam all referenced improving TABE scores when discussing success. For example, Kiki commented, “I know if I reach a higher level [on the TABE test], the class is working.” Interestingly, although TABE or HSE exam scores are a marker for achievement for some
students, these are merely one aspect of success the participants described. In contrast, scores are the foremost, if not the only, measurement many organizations use to describe success for their students.

Positive comments from teachers also helped students feel successful. Brianna and Kiki mentioned comments on their essays, both written and verbally, that showed them they were doing well and meeting class goals. For Kiki, who already had her high school diploma, higher academic scores signified being closer to goal of passing the college placement exams she needed to continue her education. Miriam specifically mentioned an instructor’s comment about her “nice narration” from an assignment several weeks previously and understood that to mean that she was progressing in her academic efforts. She also described her class attendance as directly related to her success, commenting, “So for me to succeed, I need to come to school and listen and pay attention and don't have my mind somewhere else where it's not supposed to be at,” and then went on to link being in class with achieving higher test scores.

**Success is progress.** Although many participants described high scores as a measure of success, the idea of learning and understanding more than before was another component of success. For example, Dee equated success with her accomplishments in class, stating she had days “when I do my worksheets and I get most of them right and other days where I say I'm never going to get this stuff.” She felt successful on days when she understood the material and became discouraged when she did not see progress in her work. Similarly, KC measured his academic success in part by “the reaction from some of the teachers” as they evaluated his work. As he began to get more answers correct, he felt like he was making headway, even if he still had more to learn before taking an exam. Teachers played a large role in how students perceived academic success, as Bill described: “[the teachers are] great about [helping him]. They make
you feel like you're actually moving forward, you know. Even when I don't think that I am. Just they're right there to pump you up.” The notion of making progress toward their academic goals, even without official test scores, was key in the idea of success for these participants.

**Success is having more opportunities.** Although Bill was happy to have one GED® test completed, he was more focused on finishing all the exams so he could move on to a new phase of life, attending an institute to become a licensed motorcycle mechanic. To him, the academic success of passing the GED® exam was merely one step on the way to achieving his ultimate goal. Bill also acknowledged the value of continuing his education in the current social and economic environment commenting “you need an education anymore now than anything. You can't do anything these days without [a diploma] — And not saying that not having one is a bad thing. It isn't. But just the way the world works.” For Bill, the academic and financial aspects of success were intertwined, allowing him to live the life he wanted:

I'm here, the GED®, and this program is great. I probably wouldn't have gone through with it if I didn't have to. If it wasn't for the school that I want to go to, I probably wouldn't have done it. Because I mean, I went through truck driving school and I didn't need it. You know what I mean. And I have that to fall back on eventually one day. Just you know, just honest, just being honest about it. But I'm glad I did. Definitely glad I went forward with this. Just this program alone, GED®, I think will open a lot of doors for me. A lot more than before. You know but I've always, I've always had a job though and I've always worked and I've never once had a job ask me for my diploma.

Although he had been managing without his high school diploma, Bill saw the value in having the credential, and he knew he needed it to attend the program he desired. Brianna echoed the notion of having “a lot more options with an education and a degree,” describing how she would
achieve success in the future, and Dee also discussed assisting her son as he took online class toward a certification as steps toward independence. In these participants’ views, academic success would enable them to have the success they envisioned in other aspects of their lives.

**Recognition.** Less common but still present in several participants’ discourse was a view of success as *recognition*, described both as public recognition and as simply being noticed. One participant, Miriam, highly valued recognition, and the creative activity she chose captured the pleasure she felt at being recognized for her efforts (Figure 2):

![Figure 2: Miriam's item](image)

It is difficult to convey the pride and pleasure Miriam expressed at this recognition.

Although she was employed part-time as a custodian elsewhere, she volunteered at a nursing
home and greatly enjoyed her work there. In fact, her hope was to be hired as a nurse’s aide doing the same work once she obtained her HSE credential. She described receiving the certificate, smiling as she said:

   It's like a reward thing you get, when you're doing something good. I got that the other day when I came in. And she said Miriam, I have something for you. And they noticed about me caring about the residents [emphasis added]. . . . So...she noticed what I do. I transport them [the residents] downstairs and upstairs for dinner and lunch. So they've been noticing me. They said Miriam, I don't know what we would do if you wasn't here.

While discussing the acknowledgement, Miriam mentioned the importance of being noticed several times. The recognition she received for a job well done was integral to her definition of success. Dee also brought a certificate as a representation of success, sharing that out of all the people in his physical rehabilitation program, her son had earned the certificate for his hard work. KC discussed the importance of recognition to him, contrasting wealth with being known:

   “But I'm not focused on that [money], I want notoriety. When I leave this world, I want people to know me for what I've done.” To him, being recognized for his accomplishments was an integral part of success.

   Other participants also described instances of recognition from teachers as one way they measured success. Miriam talked about earning a “student of the quarter” award, and Brianna noticed that when she did well in class,

   [a teacher] will try to make me participate and I don't really like participating or talking to people like that. So she'll tell me to read something and make me answer questions or she'll try to take my paper and read my paragraphs or something. If I'm not really doing
that well, I notice she'll pick whoever's doing pretty good out of the group and then she'll
tell about their papers.

Both Miriam and Brianna evaluated their success in class based on teachers’ responses. These
participants’ narratives show how recognition was one way they understood and measured
success in their lives.

**Persistence and hard work.** Throughout participants’ narratives, they repeatedly
attributed examples of success in their own and others’ lives to not giving up and continuing
despite difficult circumstances along with hard work. Without exception, participants described
success as the result of individual effort and used the following discourses throughout their
narratives.

**Successful people never give up.** When asked to identify successful people in their lives,
a common theme was the importance of persistence, of not giving up in spite of difficult
circumstances. As Bill discussed qualities that make someone successful, persistence was at the
top of his list:

> You gotta be willing to stick it out . . . . I like to get all these things, get them started and
get them going and don't have to necessarily follow through. I'm following through with
this one. I'm working on this one. Definitely doing it.

He believed that “following through” and continuing to work toward his goals would enable him
to pass the HSE exams. Brianna described her dad as a successful person, saying, “No matter
what, he never quits. He'll find a way. If he can't find a way, he'll figure out a way.” Similarly,
Dee discussed her son, Devin, as a highly successful person, describing him as continually
working hard to overcome physical challenges created by an accident when he was in high

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4 Note: *Persistence* as used in this section reflects the participants’ views of not giving up. This use is in contrast to
the common use of the term as consistent class attendance or program completion in ABE programs.
school. Dee repeatedly mentioned Devin persistently “plugging away” and “fighting through,” particularly in the early days after his accident, but even at the time of the interview, nearly a decade after the accident occurred. She described the severity of the aftermath of his accident, noting, “he had to learn everything all over. He was in a lot of pain. I had to watch that. But he kept fighting through and that's what saved him. He didn't give up on himself.” Devin had to re-learn everything from walking to talking to feeding himself, and Dee helped him as he persevered. Notably, Devin’s success story did not fall within the bounds of what some may consider typical. Dee viewed him as successful because he fought for his life and mobility and viewed her role in assisting him as noteworthy success in her own life. However, even after a number of years, he still had physical limitations that kept him from complete independence. To people observing from outside the situation, Devin may not have seemed successful, but to Dee, who continued to help him achieve greater independence, he exemplified success through all he had already overcome.

Kiki expressed similar ideas about people she considered successful, saying: “They never stop. They kept going no matter how hard it got, they kept pushing. And I think that's what makes anybody successful. You can't give up, you can't quit.” Brianna echoed these ideas, describing a time when she considered herself successful despite multiple obstacles, saying “I still pushed on and did what I had to do.” Her view of success was rooted in surmounting the barriers she faced through persistent effort.

**Successful people work hard.** As participants defined success in people they knew, they often looked toward family members or close friends as their examples. For Bill, his mother, a single mom to him and his sister, exemplified success. He described her working long hours and taking classes when she changed careers, saying “she totally flipped around what she was doing
and made it work to her advantage”, changing from a night job as a bartender to a night clerk in the hospital emergency department. Bill admired the hard work his mom put into starting a new career that she thought would be better for their family. KC described his grandmother as the most successful person he knew, largely because she had “a heck of a drive, man. Get up and go.” KC saw the hard work and lack of rest his grandmother had to provide for her family, including his mother and siblings. When talking about what someone would need to succeed, KC described the hard work and dedication necessary:

You have to have consistency. You have to have a drive . . . you just never give up, never stop. Even when things seem rough and you feel like you can't do it, in school and in your life, you just gotta remember, when I'm finished with this, when I'm finished with this, I'm gonna be in a whole better place. It's gonna be worth all of this headache.

Because anything easy is not worth anything. It's better when it's hard.

For him, the hard work required to accomplish goals demonstrated the intrinsic worth of what he wanted to accomplish. Kiki also described success in terms of hard work, mentioning a saying her father often quoted: “Successful people never rest.” She heard this phrase often throughout her childhood and agreed with it.

Miriam’s narrative expressed how she had internalized the notion of hard work leading to success as she explained: “I need to come to school and I need to study more” to pass an HSE exam. In her mind, more working hours would equal greater success in class. Bill expressed the same ideas when talking about obtaining his GED® credential: “You just gotta really want it . . . and just come in and do it. The classes are free. The teachers are more than willing to help. You just gotta come in and do it.” From his perspective, success passing the GED® exams was probable if one came to class and put enough effort into the work.
Two participants, Brianna and Kiki, mentioned the importance of a strong support system along with persistence and hard work. Brianna talked about her family being her support group and both encouraging and challenging her “to be the best that I can for them and myself and my future.” Kiki also attributed success to having a strong support system in addition to personal dedication to one’s goals.

**Barriers.** Along with the discussions of success, participants often mentioned barriers that previously or currently made achieving success challenging. These obstacles included: interruptions to education (transitions, children, work); negative past formal educational experiences contributing to leaving school; dropping out of school (often in response to negative school experiences, e.g., bullying, fights; technology); having a child at a young age; emotional barriers; early caretaking; mental health; having a negative or lackadaisical attitude; lack of support from teachers or family; discouragement from not reaching past goals; incarceration; and relationships. This list was extensive for many participants and contributed to their feelings and approaches toward success, both in educational endeavors and other aspects of their lives.

**Literacy Practices**

In the final section of this chapter, I present narratives that illustrate how literacy practices and ABE classes intertwine with participants’ views of success. Participants’ stories took me into their homes, schools, work, and lives as they shared their families, struggles, triumphs, and dreams. The questions I asked were based on their literacy practices and current and former education, but as they related their thoughts and memories, I saw clearly that their comments about literacy were not in isolation and reflected much of the context of their lives. When participants told their stories, I heard
narratives that went beyond the questions I asked and included accounts of mental illness, incarceration, and medical conditions for themselves or family members.

As I learned how success looked to the study participants, I relied on NLS’s sociocultural approach to help understand how the interplay between literacy activities and the participants’ communities shaped their descriptions of success. NLS provided an important lens for understanding many of the factors that contribute to the participants’ experiences and notions of success and how literacy is used within that context. In this section, I share participants’ narratives with some of the context they provided that address the research questions: How do literacy learning and literacy practices figure in ABE learners’ perceptions of success, if at all?

**Literate identities and success.** This section focuses on how participants aligned particular aspects of their identity as successful people with literacy practices. Literacy, from a sociocultural perspective, varies based on the context and ways individuals position themselves (Bartlett, 2007). As students continue to make and re-make themselves through their engagement with teachers, other students, materials, and past experiences, they situated themselves as individuals who had or lacked literacy skills, and their position sometimes changed based on the context of official or popular literacies.

As participants discussed their perceptions of success in life and academically, they repeatedly alluded to past education experiences, often expressing a deficit view of their literate identities with relation to previous formal schooling. Participants also frequently expressed negative experiences with past teachers in formal education, citing negative or critical comments from teachers about their work or abilities. Bill had memories of teachers “yelling at me in the hallway, telling me I'm not gonna advance to the next grade because of this or that,” and teachers who would “whack you across the knuckles because your writing was terrible.” He described
himself as a kid who was “always getting myself into trouble” and his early memories of school included negatives experiences with teachers: “a lot of my teachers, they got mad at me. And they threatened to hold me back whenever I was in elementary school. Oh, you're going to have to stay here another year till you get this right.”

Other participants also had negative encounters with previous teachers, citing disapproving comments, such as Dee being called “the mouthy one,” or teachers discouraging their ambitions. KC described talking about his plans to play football in college with one teacher who responded by advising him to “stick to driving trucks because you ain't gonna play no football past high school.” Most participants also reported repeating a grade at some point in their schooling. These experiences led them to internalize the message that they would not be successful at school and left most with a negative feeling toward formal education and the literacy practices involved.

As participants discussed their former schooling and their current involvement in education, I noticed a difference between the ways they related their two experiences. When referring to their time in the formal education system, their stories often included comments referring to school as feeling “useless” or “set for failure.” Bill’s narrative captured these thoughts as he described his experiences in middle and high school:

You wake up not wanting to go, you know what I mean? You just don't want to be [in school], for one. And add not getting anything out of it anyway from the classroom. It just wasn't great for me. I didn't like it . . . When you've just had enough, you've just had enough . . . That's the point I was at. I just had enough of everything. I had enough with the people, I had enough with the school. Done.

Brianna had a similar impression of her high school:
I didn't want to be there. The school was difficult. Their discipline system is set for failure . . . it makes me feel like well, I shouldn't even come to this class, then. I'm not getting anything out of it, really.

Dee agreed that she often did not want to attend school, and when she did, she was usually “looking at the clock, ready to go,” instead of paying attention to the teachers. Many of the participants internalized this idea of school not being worthwhile or important enough to their future to endure the discomfort they felt at the time. Miriam also described feelings of failure related to school when she “felt like I didn't fit in with the class because everybody was probably ahead of me.” All participants either dropped out of school or were expelled, usually adding to their negative impressions of formal school and negative self-descriptions of their literate identities. These participants thought that attending school was not worth the emotional and mental distress they felt when they were there. The formal literacy practices represented by schooling embodied a sense of academic and social failure among participants.

In contrast, when describing their current educational experiences, participants often had a more positive outlook. Rather than linking their classes with past feelings of failure, students viewed their current learning and literacy practices as part of a path to meet their goals. As previously described in the section on academic discourses related to success, participants saw their involvement in ABE classes as a means to open doors to their ambitions. Whereas school was previously viewed as useless, now participants saw adult education classes, and the reading and writing involved, as essential to their success in life.

**Formal vs. informal literate identities.** As participants discussed their literacy practices ranging from texting to reading (for pleasure and class) to writing poetry, they had marked

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5 Kiki is an exception: she initially dropped out after having a baby, but she re-entered an alternative high school and graduated.
differences in the way they talked about their academic efforts and their personal enjoyment. For example, several participants expressed embarrassment at perceived inadequacies in their literacy abilities (e.g., they should be at a higher level or practice more). When relating some of her high school experiences, Miriam described feeling like she “didn't fit in with the class because everybody was probably ahead of me” and KC felt similarly, explaining that even in his current ABE classes he felt “like some people are ahead of me like with learning and how they put together words and stuff like that.”

Bill also expressed feeling discomfort with his current writing skills, saying he didn’t “like to do it because I'm just kind of embarrassed by it [his writing ability]. I don't know why it's never gotten any better over the years. I don't know why it was even that bad to begin with.” Kiki also felt that her writing ability was inadequate, and when asked what others (her husband, teachers) would think of her writing, she described their response as thinking her writing was “all right. I can be better.” Miriam also described her writing deficiencies, explaining, “Sometimes I think it's my structure and my spelling. Because I don't know where the periods go at, the exclamation points go at. I didn't have all that in school.” KC also found his formal writing skills lacking and contrasted them with writing lyrics for his music:

I could be way better [at writing]. I could be strong. I'm a medium writer right now. I'm very frustrated because . . . I can write music . . . . I want to be able to do more storytelling. I need to get my punctuations right . . . . I want to figure out how, because it's like poetry when you write music . . . . [My teacher] would probably say he could do better, I know he can. And I agree with her. I actually do. I can do better.

When considering his writing ability, KC felt that he and others would evaluate his academic writing differently than his personal writing. Most participants also described their academic
reading practices unfavorably, and many reported particular difficulties with reading comprehension exercises and expressed a lack of success, usually expressed as general frustration or missing questions on classwork, in related class activities. As these participants talked about their formal literacy practices, they emphasized their performance, as evaluated by teachers and tests, and often found themselves deficient and unsuccessful by these standards.

In contrast, when asked about their personal literacy practices, students usually had a successful and positive perception of their literate identities. As participants described their chosen literacy activities (e.g., reading for pleasure, journaling, poetry), they were more likely to describe themselves as strong readers and/or writers. Kiki enjoyed writing stories and “writing about myself or the things that I’ve been through,” and KC also expressed interest in writing about his life, even wanting to write a book about his life someday. Brianna contrasted writing for herself and writing for assignments or exams, noting:

If you give me an argumentative essay, I can write it, I can put everything in there that I need to. But sometimes if I get a topic that I'm not interested in, it's complicated to write so well on it than when I am concentrated and I like the topic. Because with my poetry, I don't write on a topic so it's like I'm just pouring my heart out. And I can't do that with essays when you're writing for a test or something.

When she had a connection to the topic, she felt that her writing was better. Similarly, participants had more positive views of themselves as readers when they were able to choose the material. Dee described difficulty comprehending much of the material she read for her ABE class but proudly discussed reading over 500 e-books on her Kindle over the four years she had a job in construction security and had little else to occupy her on the job. She particularly liked mysteries, saying “it’s gotta be exciting.” When the class material failed to capture her interest,
she found it much more difficult to engage with the readings. Miriam and Brianna enjoyed reading about popular culture in print and electronically, and KC found ways to incorporate writing about his life into his music. For Miriam, her writing identity was also connected to her mental health, and she referenced writing practices that she learned when hospitalized for mental illness, sharing, “sometimes, when I get depressed, I write things down when I be depressed. So that's a good thing, that I write stuff down.” She recognized the value writing had for many aspects of her life, not just academically. All participants additionally described proficiency and comfortability with informal reading and writing, such as texting, using social media, and reading news articles.

**Literacy practices and success.** As they discussed their literacy practices, participants’ narratives of success were linked to their literate identities, and they perceived themselves as more successful when they felt engaged in their literacy materials and encouraged by instructors. While talking about class writing, Bill found meaning in reading about and writing an essay on diabetes, a disease he suffered from. He described the difference he felt in writing about a topic that affected his personal life versus a random topic:

That [diabetes] was one of the better topics I can remember doing in class. Everybody is different. If everybody had something they could relate to, you know, then you know, how much easier would everything be? As far as some of the stuff, I feel that I just did it just to do it, just to get it done but that one really stood out to me because it was something I could relate to.

Although Bill acknowledged that at times he would have to engage with topics of less interest to him, the connection he had with diabetes motivated him to write, and he reported feeling like his writing was better than usual for that essay. Similarly, Kiki and Miriam both expressed high
interest in materials on historical Black leaders, which they found directly related to their lives as self-described African American and bi-racial women, respectively. They discussed excitement at reading and writing about figures and events significant to their lives. As students engaged with the topics, they clearly felt more successful using their literacy skills, particularly writing.

As participants told stories involving literacy and learning practices, not all school narratives were negative, and some participants mentioned affirmation from teachers both in the past and present. Most participants shared stories of enjoying school when they were elementary-aged, and many remembered specific names of teachers they had liked. Dee remembered some of her elementary school teachers offering extra help: “They'd sit and take the time with me and explain. They'd take time out, if I would just show up, they would stop what they were doing. Not in class or anything but at recess or something.” Kiki fondly recounted a memory of one of her middle school English teachers, remembering him as “one of those teachers where he gave every student that confidence. He always made us feel like you can do whatever you want.” She recalled how he submitted her essays to writing contests without her knowledge and of her surprise at winning. His assurance of her writing ability gave her greater confidence in her own writing. Brianna remembered one of her high school teachers helping with more than schoolwork: “He was always there. If you ever needed anything, help and stuff, a token for the train, anything. He's a great guy.” Although adverse school experiences outweighed the positive, participants had strong memories of the times teachers encouraged them, and those memories contributed to positive literate identities that promoted feelings of academic success. In spite of damaging past experiences with literacy and schooling, the affirmative experiences were all the more noticeable in contrast and emphasize the influence teachers can have in helping students feel successful and helping them move toward their goals.
Juxtaposed with participants’ descriptions of instruction in their younger years was an overall favorable impression of their current teachers in the ABE program as encouraging and even excited about their success. Participants unanimously described their current teachers as constructive, supportive, and helpful. Bill expressed his appreciation for his current instructors, especially when he was frustrated by his progress: “they make you feel like you're actually moving forward, you know. Even when I don't think that I am. Just they're right there to pump you up.” He also acknowledged their extra effort to help him and others when they “take the time to explain it and like I said, they've brought me in extra materials too just on certain things. Just so I can maybe get it a little bit more.” Brianna also acknowledged her instructor’s efforts:

She keeps us interested. I never really feel bored in there, even if I have something like social studies that I don't like to read, she'll joke around and stuff. She'll make it seem like you know, we're not just sitting in this boring adult class. So her class is good. I like her class.

Dee similarly compared her current ABE instructors with her teachers in school, and appreciated the time they devoted to her understanding:

They'll show me what I'm doing wrong, not just tell me the answer. They'll show me. So then I can remember it for the next time; they're doing an excellent job. I'm learning. Slowly but I'm learning. More than I ever did the whole time in grade school or high school. I appreciate that. Because it's gotta take a lot of patience for people like me.

Likewise, Kiki agreed that her instructors not only kept her interest but positively challenged her academically: “I love [my instructors]. They're very patient. [One instructor] really makes the class fun. She tells little jokes and stuff like that. She's really funny. And she pushes you, which makes it even better.” Miriam commented about her current teacher: “she actually cares about
her students. So she want us to succeed.” Her statement captures the difference most participants
drew between earlier and current schooling: in their ABE programs, their instructors wanted
them to succeed where previously they felt that most instruction discouraged success or left them
feeling bound to fail.

**ABE participation and success.** Most participants defined success using some variation
of the idea of having a “good life,” which included home ownership, reliable and enjoyable
work, providing for family, and supporting themselves, as previously discussed. Participants
commonly described their participation in ABE classes as a step to obtain one or more of these
goals. Most students enrolled in the classes with the goal of obtaining their HSE diploma, usually
considered an intermediary step toward participants’ longer-term goals, such as pursuing another
educational program or securing employment. As Bill described, “I'm here, the GED®, and this
program is great. I probably wouldn't have gone through with it if I didn't have to. If it wasn't for
the school that I want to go to, I probably wouldn't have done it.” When thinking about his life in
ten years, Bill saw his ABE classes, leading to further schooling opportunities, as integral to
achieving his goal of becoming a certified motorcycle mechanic:

> And that's where school [comes in], and hopefully within ten years, definitely would like
to have my own business. And doing the things that I'm going to go to school for, for
myself, whether it even just be at home in my own garage on my own time.

Dee, who also had years of employment without her credential, agreed that “I wouldn't be here if
I didn't have to be, no. Because I was, I'm fine. I know what I need to do in life and this GED® is
just something you gotta do.” Health concerns and lack of employment opportunities led Dee to
the conclusion that her previous jobs were not going to be viable options and that she would need
her HSE credential to find other opportunities. She perceived the ABE classes, leading to her
diploma, as necessary, stating, “Because there's not really any jobs out there that's even gonna be worth the pay without at least GED®. So. That's what's keeping me going.” Likewise, Miriam recognized the need for ABE classes and her HSE diploma to achieve her goals: “I want to do nursing assistance. You gotta have a GED® for that with the nursing home where I work at. You gotta have a GED® or high school diploma for that.” She underscored the importance she, along with others, placed on this academic achievement, saying, “To be successful, you've got to want to do it, you've got to want to earn your GED®.”

Some students focused on what the credential would enable them to do in the future but did not discuss an HSE exam as specifically related to their goals. KC, Miriam, Kiki identified higher Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores as one measure of success, but other participants did not mention TABE levels within their discussions of success. One participant (Miriam) mentioned more time in her classes as leading to higher scores for the TABE and GED® practice tests and eventual success passing the GED® tests.

Bill, Dee, and Miriam were pursuing their HSE diploma as a step to desired employment, and Brianna and KC were pursuing the credential so they would have access to higher education. Brianna, who won a college scholarship during her time in high school, needed the diploma to use her scholarship and continue with her goal to become a physical therapist. KC described his motivation for taking the classes as “I've always wanted to go on a college campus [to study]. And I knew getting my high school equivalence or GED® would get me there.” Kiki, although she had her high school diploma, needed some of the formal literacy skills from the ABE classes to pass the placement tests to enroll in college classes.

Participants also referenced ABE classes contributing to their success in less measurable ways than obtaining a diploma. As discussed previously, Bill thought having his HSE credential
would give him additional self-respect, and Dee referred to the extra confidence that passing an HSE exam would give her. Success was viewed as two-fold for Kiki, who hoped for eventual success on her college placement tests but also was eager to learn information that would help her when working on homework with her fourth-grade daughter. For these students, participating in the ABE classes provided opportunities for success in their lives that went beyond earning a credential. Although participants signed up and engaged in the classes to obtain their HSE diploma, their narratives demonstrated that they viewed success as broader than solely earning their diploma.

One notable omission for participants was that the class itself did not seem to be viewed as a social space or other students as a potential resource. Students seemed to mostly work independently and did not appear interested in forming connections, either social or potentially work-related, with other students. Bill was the only student to comment on potential connections in the ABE classes, saying:

Sometimes there's a bunch of people in here [the GED® classes] but a lot of times there isn't. And it's not that I know anybody really personally or talk to them outside of here but everybody is kind of here for the same thing. So you know what I mean, you can all kind of relate.

He appreciated the idea that the other students had similar goals but acknowledged a lack of connection between people enrolled in the program. His comment underscored the notion expressed throughout participants’ narratives that achieving success is essentially an independent task, possibly with some help from instructors. Participants’ views of their ABE classes and HSE diploma as a means to an end supports the idea that they will only attend and participate in classes as long they see it as helpful to their own goals.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have provided data to describe the participants’ perceptions of success in life, as students, and how literacy learning and practices, including their ABE classes, relate to their notions of success. As the ABE learners shared their stories, they each had a unique view, but the narratives all had points of overlap. A major finding of this chapter is that participants’ descriptions of success were not primarily financial, and emotional perceptions were the most prevalent way to frame success throughout their narratives. A further noteworthy finding is that the learners had a marked contrast between their formal and informal literate identities, including in their ABE classes, and correspondingly, their narratives showed that they viewed success as broader than solely earning their HSE diploma. In the following chapter, I will address the third research question concerning comparison of participants’ narratives to organizational discourses of success.
Chapter 5

Findings – Document Analysis

This chapter describes findings related to the third research question: *How do students’ perceptions of success compare to organizational discourse about success?* To address this question, I used CDA and the methods described in Chapter 3 to examine four documents that help frame the dominant discourse throughout the field of adult education: (1) Public Law 113-128, also known as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)\(^6\) (specifically the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act [AEFLA], Title II of WIOA), (2) the corresponding Guidance Document\(^7\) as national legislation effecting ABE (Employment and Training Administration Advisory System, 2017), (3) a Memorandum on WIOA Title II, and (4) a Pennsylvania-issued brochure summarizing WIOA. Issued subsequent to WIOA, the Guidance Letter describes how organizations should implement and measure learner and organizational performance. The Program Memorandum (*Vision for the adult education and family literacy act in the workforce system and initial implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2015*) from OCTAE provides the vision for WIOA implementation, particularly for AEFLA. The Pennsylvania state-issued brochure is designed to be distributed to potential workforce partners and provides “the essentials of Title II adult basic education services in Pennsylvania” (Pennsylvania Adult Education Resources, n.d.). Together, the documents create a narrative of how federal policy frames success and constructs a model of a successful adult learner. In this chapter, I provide examples of discourses about success present in WIOA and the corresponding

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\(^6\) Specifically, I examined Title II of WIOA, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA).

\(^7\) Training and Employment Guidance Letter WIOA No. 10-16, Change 1: Performance Accountability Guidance for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I, Title II, Title III, and Title IV Core Programs; Published August 23, 2017.
documents, including how success is portrayed for learners, instructors, and organizations. I then compare the discourse in WIOA and related documents with the discourses in study participants’ narratives.

To understand the organizational discourse about success, I asked several questions as I analyzed WIOA and the corresponding documents: 1) According to the documents, what does a successful learner look like? 2) What do successful instructors and organizations look like? 3) How is success measured? This chapter addresses these questions and then compares the organizational discourse to participants’ discussions of success.

A Successful Learner: Characterized and Measured

Using CDA, I analyzed the documents for explicit and implicit descriptions of adult learners. Although the legislation directly affects adult learners through specifying program guidelines, goals, and benchmarks, the documents are addressed to organizations and instructors rather than the adults in the programs. To understand how success is characterized for adult learners, it is important to note how the learners are portrayed in the legislation and corresponding documents, so I examined the language used to describe the adult learners, looking both at words used specifically to describe them and indirect language that contributes to their representation. Within the federal policy, success for adult learners is not specifically described; however, through its depiction of best practices and goals for organizations, the documents draw a picture of what a successful adult learner would look like.

The federal policy is ostensibly designed to serve adult learners, and the stated purpose of AEFLA (2014) is to “assist adults” toward four goals:

“(1) assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and economic self-sufficiency;
(2) assist adults who are parents or family members to obtain the education and skills that—

(A) are necessary to becoming full partners in the educational development of their children; and

(B) lead to sustainable improvements in the economic opportunities for their family;

(3) assist adults in attaining a secondary school diploma and in the transition to postsecondary education and training, including through career pathways; and

(4) assist immigrants and other individuals who are English language learners in—

(A) improving their—

(i) reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension skills in English; and

(ii) mathematics skills; and

(B) acquiring an understanding of the American system of Government, individual freedom, and the responsibilities of citizenship.”

8 Throughout WIOA and related documents, success is framed as primarily economic. The first stated purpose of WIOA focuses on literacy skill development leading to employment. Language in WIOA consistently emphasizes economic goals, such as improving economic opportunities for families. The legislation is purportedly designed to aid adults involved in AEFLA programs; consequently, the documents’ depiction of adult learners emphasizes the obstacles the policy intends the learners to overcome.

Collectively, the documents construct a narrative of adult learners as lacking or at a deficit. The primary depiction of adult learners in WIOA and the related documents centers on

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8 None of the participants in this study were English Language Learners (ELLs); therefore, goals related to ELLs are not discussed in this report.
their perceived deficiencies, primarily economic. The first two purposes of AEFLA explicitly prescribe economic goals, and along with these statements, increasing “an individual’s ability to…obtain employment” is listed as one of the three defining components of adult education. The characterization of these adults as not adequately able to provide financially for themselves and their families positions them as undermining economic success, not only for themselves, but for the entire economy. The description of adults receiving services as “individuals…with barriers to employment” is repeated throughout the Memorandum and echoed by the Pennsylvania state-issued brochure (Pennsylvania Adult Education Resources, n.d.), highlighting employment as a primary focus of the policy. The Pennsylvania brochure also includes the statistic that the United States is “below the international average for math and reading skills,” further emphasizing the deficit perspective (Pennsylvania Adult Education Resources, n.d.).

Throughout WIOA and the corresponding documents, the goal of economic gain is established as a primary measure of success. As adult learners are portrayed as economically deficient, one key to success is overcoming the perceived economic shortcomings. Thus, to be considered successful in this way, one must:

- overcome barriers to employment,
- achieve economic self-sufficiency (e.g., eliminate reliance on government-funded programs),
- increase one’s earnings within a specific time after participating in an adult education program,
- be employed or enrolled in further education that leads to employment after participating in an adult education program.
Table 4 lists the six performance measures used in WIOA Title II, AEFLA. These criteria are used to evaluate organizational success; consequently, the performance measures describe goals learners must meet for organizations to be considered successful, an evaluation ultimately tied to organizational funding. Additionally, the Guidance document emphasizes “performance accountability” and outcome achievement for program participants, which are largely measured by economic standards, such as the ability to find and retain employment.

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<td>Percentage of participants enrolled in an education or training program who attain a recognized postsecondary credential or secondary school diploma during participation in or within one year after exit from the program AND are employed or enrolled in an education or training program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurable Skill Gains</td>
<td>1) Documented achievement of at least one educational functional level, or 2) Documented attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent Other: post-secondary credits, apprenticeship program, or knowledge-base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness in Serving Employers</td>
<td>Two of the following three approaches: 1) Retention with same employer 2) Repeat business customer 3) Employer penetration rate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: WIOA performance measures (from Guidance; Employment and Training Administration Advisory System, 2017)
Student and corresponding organizational success are calculated through various formulas provided in the Guidance, several of which use economic measures, such as median earnings and employment rate after exiting the program. The language and formulas used continue the depiction of program participants as potential employees, and their success is measured by their ability to fulfill that role.

Another way adult learners are portrayed is as lacking academic skills. One of WIOA’s stated purposes is to “assist adults to become literate.” The perceived lack of academic skills is also characterized as troubling other aspects of life, as conveyed through the intent to help learners improve their parenting and citizenship. Parents are portrayed as deficient in their ability to nurture their children with WIOA’s second stated purpose to “assist ... parents or family members to obtain the education and skills that are necessary to becoming full partners in the educational development of their children.” The phrase “basic skills deficient” is used to describe adult learners throughout WIOA, and that phrase is repeated or rephrased as “lacking basic skills” throughout the other documents. In fact, the terms “individuals with low skills” and “adult learners” are used interchangeably in the Memorandum, highlighting the learners’ deficiencies in the aspects WIOA measures, including academic measures. Six performance accountability measures for programs, two gauge academic achievement (i.e., high school equivalency credential and improvement on standardized tests).

In academic terms, success is measured by literacy, specifically assessed by a higher score on a standardized test or by earning a high school equivalency credential. Included in the idea of academic success is the idea that family members will also positively influence their children with their increased literacy skills, and English Language Learners will become better citizens. However, these notions of academic success are not the ultimate goal of this policy and
are embedded in creating greater employability and economic success. This connection is illustrated by describing the seemingly academic performance measure of Measurable Skill Gains as a way to “help fulfill the vision for a workforce system” (Guidance). This language closely ties academic performance to economic measures.

**Successful Instructors and Organizations**

As described previously, WIOA specifies the performance measures organizations must meet to be considered successful (see Table 4). The Program Memorandum provides a detailed plan for adult education providers to implement AEFLA under WIOA, framing AEFLA as “an extraordinary opportunity to improve the quality of life for individuals with low skills” and touting literacy and numeracy as “fundamental skills necessary for workforce success, as well as for personal and social well-being” (Memorandum, p. 1). Successful instructors, as part of successful organizations, are ones who are able to play “an integral role in the workforce development system by providing access to educational services for adult learners through the one-stop delivery system” (Memorandum, p. 1). Additionally, instructors and organizations must support learners’ “transition to postsecondary education and training through the use of career pathways” (Memorandum, p. 1). The Memorandum is infused with enthusiastic language such as “extraordinary opportunity,” “improve the quality of life,” “access to education and training,” and “best practices derived from the most rigorous research.” These words and phrases echo the type of phrasing often found advertisements, using language to persuade and excite people for a particular purpose. The language used and goals expressed highlight WIOA’s vision for instructors and organizations to mold adult learners into economically self-sufficient citizens.

The Pennsylvania brochure I examined summarizes WIOA for adult education organizations’ business partnerships (see Appendix C). The brochure was easy to find on the
Pennsylvania Adult Education website\(^9\); however, I could not find a corresponding brochure that summarizes WIOA for potential students. This difference demonstrates the priority Pennsylvania places on recruiting workforce development partners for adult education organizations, reflecting the priorities of WIOA. The brochure is one example of how organizational success is tied to workforce partnerships.

**Comparing Participants’ and Organizational Discourse about Success**

As described in Chapter 4, participants’ perceptions of success centered on the following narrative themes:

- emotional fulfillment (helping others, being respected, finishing something, independence, being a positive role model, facing fears),
- finances (financial stability, providing, having more than you need),
- academic accomplishment (class/test achievement, progress, increased opportunities),
- recognition, and
- persistence and hard work.

Comparison of the discourse in WIOA and related documents and the participants’ discourse reveals the similarities and differences between their perceptions of success. Although the narrative of success constructed in WIOA and related documents centered on economic measures, financial concerns were only a small part of how study participants viewed success.

These two narratives stand in contrast to one another and illustrate potential points of tension between the organizations enacting policy and adult learners who bring their own goals. When organizations providing ABE services focus on helping their adult students achieve

\(^9\) [http://www.paadultedresources.org/wioa/](http://www.paadultedresources.org/wioa/)
economically based goals prescribed by WIOA while students are attempting to be successful in their own ways, both service providers and learners could be frustrated by their different goals. When discussing their ideas of success, only half of the participants mentioned specific financial goals and often used other measures to describe their ideas of success. AEFLA’s significant focus on economic success is evident through five of the six performance measures’ economic focus. The fifth performance measure for credential attainment is tied to employment or further training:

A participant who has attained a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent is included in the percentage of participants who have attained a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent only if the participant also is employed or is enrolled in an education or training program leading to a recognized postsecondary credential within one year after exit from the program. [emphasis in original] (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014)

In this measure, academic achievement is only validated in conjunction with employment or increasing one’s employment potential through further training. Consequently, the only non-explicitly economic performance measure is Measurable Skill Gains, which measures academic skills achievement through standardized tests. However, even this more academically oriented goal carries economic implications since the educational progressions measured are to “help fulfill the vision for a workforce system.” The narrative woven throughout all performance measures centers on the ultimate goal of education and training leading to greater economic contribution from the participants.

In contrast, the participants’ narratives include economic and employment goals but only as one measure of success. For example, the participants’ narrative of academic achievement as a
stand-alone measure contrasts with the WIOA requirement that program participants must obtain a high school equivalency credential *and* have employment. Participants’ discourses of success are more comprehensive, engaging emotional and mental aspects of life as well as economic facets. In contrast, the performance measures set by WIOA have detailed formulas that quantify students’ achievements to assess organizational success, often related to funding, but not encompassing other aspects of life.

Despite the differences, participants’ narratives and policy discourse overlap in several ways. The following table (Table 5) summarizes the discourse in participants’ narratives around success and shows how they correspond to WIOA Title II discourse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ success discourse</th>
<th>WIOA-related success discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional fulfillment</td>
<td>Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial stability</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improving economic</td>
<td>• Economic self-sufficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opportunities for family</td>
<td>• Improving economic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accumulating wealth</td>
<td>opportunities for family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Economic contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Credential attainment</td>
<td>• Credential attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Class performance</td>
<td>• Parents engaging in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Academic progress</td>
<td>children’s educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>Not addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work</td>
<td>Not addressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Comparison of participants’ and WIOA success discourse

As summarized in Table 5, the participant and organizational discourses overlap the most in financial and academic aspects. This correspondence is unsurprising considering the emphasis on quantifiable, economic measures in WIOA. Many of the participants’ less quantifiable views on success (e.g., emotional fulfillment, hard work) had no parallel discourse in policy. The divergence between the participants’ and organizational discourses highlight the different stories from which both groups operate. The organizational discourse centers on the economic benefit
learners bring to the economy as potential employers and contributors while the participants focus more on qualities that lead to a life of dignity, as they perceive it. This is important because the participants’ narratives focus on success reaching far beyond economic and financial motives.

**Performance Narrative and Measures**

Even though the word “success” is not explicitly used in AEFLA, the policy and its accompanying documents clearly define standards that adult education providers—and therefore adult learners—must meet. Meeting performance measures is a significant part of obtaining and retaining funding for organizations, and the economic focus of performance indicators results in instructors within these organizations emphasizing the same measures for their students. These measures also influence the types of texts and activities that instructors choose, such as resumes and other employment-related documents, emphasizing topics that seem relevant to institution-set goals.

These requirements place the burden of organizations following up with program participants six to 12 months after program enrollment. To know if participants are employed and their earnings requires continued contact with the learners or possibly with employers, if known. To report Measurable Skill Gains, program participants must take a standardized test to demonstrate educational functioning level (EFL) gain, which is measured by a post-test that is administered after a specified time in the program and that shows improvement from a pre-test completed at program entry. If a learner decides to leave the program before taking a post-test or declines the test, their progress would not be counted. Additionally, reporting a learner obtaining a secondary second diploma or equivalent relies on learners reporting their success to organizations, which may or may not occur. Adult learners can be difficult to contact once they
leave a program, and emails and phone calls may not be returned despite considerable effort from program staff. This reality greatly increases the difficulty of obtaining accurate results for the performance indicators. Consequently, the success of adult learners, as defined by AEFLA, is exceptionally difficult to gauge accurately through the prescribed system of performance indicators (Jacobson, 2017).

**WIOA Narrative**

Within the WIOA narrative, adult learners are primarily described as lacking and in need of “basic skills,” literacy, and economic help, to name a few examples. Although economic gain and improvement in literacy and numeracy skills should not be discounted, this discourse positions adult learners as individuals who must fundamentally transform to be considered successful. For example, they must change from “skills deficient” to skilled workers and from dependent on government resources to economically self-sufficient citizens. This discourse is based in neoliberal ideology and positions students as in need and powerless to help themselves. It reduces adult learners to what they lack without recognizing their strengths and experience. Language used in WIOA and related documents locates adult learners as passive recipients of information and services while positioning instructors and organizations as possessing the knowledge to bestow. In this model, adult learners are assumed to have limited power to achieve success independently as they define it.

Notably, although the WIOA narrative positions adult learners at a deficit and posits a narrow view of success, adult educators may not personally subscribe to the policy views. In fact, educators may feel trapped by disparities between their views of educational practices and the requirements they must meet to obtain funding (see e.g., Prins et al., 2018, pp. 81-83).

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10 Although I have multiple personal and anecdotal accounts of these difficulties, there is a dearth of published research on this topic and opens a possibility for future exploration.
Chapter Summary

AEFLA and the corresponding documents create a particular narrative about teaching and learning. The discourses expressed in the documents describe success as: attaining and keeping employment, increasing earnings after program completion, attaining credentials in junction with employment, demonstrating skill gains, and increasing effectiveness in serving employers. Although these measures may benefit adult learners, they reduce acceptable goals to only those which align with official WIOA policy, particularly emphasizing economic growth to the exclusion of other potential learner goals. By linking the specified performance goals to program funding, WIOA requires programs to adopt the narrative of economic success and, in turn, to require the same from their adult learners. The WIOA narrative contends that if adult learners do not fulfill the goals set for them, the national economy will suffer, resulting in ominous outcomes for learners, organizations, and the nation.
Chapter 6

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of how ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life. In this chapter, I discuss how the data presented in the previous two chapters illuminates notions of success articulated by participants and in policy. I approached this study from a sociocultural perspective, examining the intersections of discourses of success in ABE literature (Belzer, 2004; Sandlin, 2006; St. Clair, 2004) and the social practices view of literacy within New Literacy Studies, as well as drawing on CDA to understand the power dynamics involved. Participants’ narratives of success show that systemic and institutional factors intrude into their conceptions of success and literacy. A New Literacies framework for literacy practices and a CDA perspective are crucial to understanding ABE learners’ notions of success and the power dynamics governing classroom practices. Furthermore, these findings indicate that understanding learners’ perceptions of success can help adult educators connect students more meaningfully to their classwork.

Differences in Adult Learners’ Perceptions and Organizational Discourse on Success

As discussed in the preceding chapter, adult learners’ perceptions of success align with the organizational discourse primarily in financial and academic domains. The policy discourse present in WIOA and its accompanying documents emphasizes the financial benefits not only to adult learners but also to society, and likewise with academic achievements, such as obtaining a high school equivalency credential. Furthermore, in the policy discourse, adult learners’ accomplishments are considered successes only insofar as they are linked with financial accomplishments (e.g., increasing earnings or obtaining a diploma and having employment). The
language used throughout WIOA and related documents reinforces the neoliberal discourse that is embedded within the policy, represented as opportunity and enrichment for adult learners.

Neoliberal ideology is the notion that “human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2007, p. 22). Within a neoliberal framework, individuals are “characterized by hyperindividuality, flexibility, and a strong sense of personal autonomy and responsibility” (McLean, 2015, p. 200). Under this ideology, education is framed primarily as a means for technical and economic skill acquisition rather than a social orientation (Elfert, 2019), and individuals are viewed as responsible for securing their own educational opportunities. Situated within these ideals, the financial (primary) and academic (secondary) goals described by WIOA Title II and related documents become the focus of adult education.

The language of WIOA, particularly the Memorandum, is heavily imbued with business terms (e.g., “service,” “partner,” “market”) and positions the learner as a “customer.” Holland (2016) epitomizes the business orientation of WIOA with the characterization of the two sides of WIOA’s “dual customer approach”: “job-seekers” and “employers,” notably not using the terms learners or students (p. 425). WIOA’s emphasis on quantifiable measurements to determine progress and success neglects less easily measured outcomes such as “civic engagement, social inclusion, or understanding of local labor market conditions,” skills that can lead students to “more sound and autonomous lives in their families, communities, and society” (Shin & Ging, 2019, p. 12). This negligence demonstrates some of the root causes for the divergence between participants’ and policy understandings of success.
In the two categories where learners’ narratives overlapped with the policy discourse of success, finances and academics, the organizational discourse centered on how adult learners improve their financial situations. Although there were similarities between the participants’ and WIOA’s narratives, the underlying objectives diverged in several critical ways. Within the policy discourse, the financial focus revolves around economic self-sufficiency and contributions to society. Even in the discourse surrounding families, the emphasis is on improving economic opportunities for families, specifically for adults to have “sustainable improvements” in their economic situations (see Sec. 202). Participants’ discussions of success in financial terms centered on financial stability or providing for their families. For some adult learners, such as Dee, who lack employment, finding a job would improve her economic situation; however, the question remains if that would be true for all learners. Four of the six participants were employed at the time of the study, and the two who were not employed had previously held jobs. Obtaining their high school equivalency credential could provide additional opportunities for employment, but WIOA presupposes that such opportunities will necessarily provide higher earnings. Since WIOA is a national policy, such benchmarks assume the availability of higher-wage jobs everywhere in the country, an assumption that data does not support (Hull, 1997; Jacobson, 2017; Levine, 2013; Pickard, 2016; Rank, 2004).

The WIOA discourse highlights adoption of an autonomous view of literacy by those in power. The model of literacy proposed by Goody and Watt (1963) claims that acquisition of literacy results in greater economic development and success for a society. This stance promotes widespread literacy as leading to economic development, democracy, and other social benefits. Their view of literacy decontextualizes learners’ abilities and disregards how literacy is embedded in social institutions and cultural contexts (Purcell-Gates, 2007; Street, 2005).
Additionally, the economic focus of WIOA narrows adult learners’ identity to that of worker or potential employee. In contrast, the learners’ discussions of financial success, as one of many conceptions of success in their lives, were broader and intertwined with other depictions of success. Gaining the academic skills necessary to earn the credential was valued by all participants; however, considering the importance that WIOA places on increasing earnings, the lack of mention of finances is striking and indicates a potential for conflict between students’ views and WIOA’s definition of success. The notion of merely earning more money was not a priority for any participant. For others, finances were part of contributing to family finances and creating stability for themselves and their families. Although one participant, KC, stated a desire to amass sufficient money to purchase a status symbol Ferrari, he countered that desire with his statement that “success is not money,” indicating a broader view of success for his life. The lack of emphasis on financial success directly contradicts the neoliberal perspective of WIOA, in which “learners are assumed to have employment as their primary goal” (Belzer, 2017, p. 16). Far from being the primary goal, half of the participants did not mention any financial aspect of success in their narratives.

In narratives of academic aspects of success, participants’ perspectives also diverged from the policy discourse. For all participants, academic success encompassed obtaining their high school equivalency diploma, with the exception of Kiki, who had her diploma but enrolled in the class to review math and language arts skills. Additionally, within the WIOA framework, even the adult learners’ goals of secondary education are treated as “a step along the way to employment and increased earnings” and this perspective minimizes opportunities for discussing other learner goals and purposes for literacy (Belzer, 2017, p. 16). By requiring the learners to work toward a particularly defined type of success, organizations’ views of success may not
capture the multi-faceted goals students bring to the program. The differences in learners’ and organizational perspectives are unequal: organizational objectives will take precedence (controlled through funding, etc) whenever the goals do not align.

A Critique of Grit

As discussed in the review of literature (Chapter 2), adult education settings are rife with the perspective that adult learners often fail to meet organizational success benchmarks due to lack of effort (Sandlin, 2006; Sandlin & Clark, 2009; St. Clair, 2004). The discourse embedded within WIOA policy and related documents reinforces the notion of grit popularized by Duckworth and colleagues (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). They describe grit as “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years, despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087–1088). This idea of individual responsibility reaffirms neoliberal ideology, in which individuals are responsible for climbing out of poverty. Participant narratives in this study reveal how this popular notion has become internalized by adult learners. Within their narratives, participants revealed how they have adopted this framework and how they contest it. As they described achieving success in their lives, all participants mentioned persistence and hard work to some degree. When discussing their past negative schooling experiences, self-blame often featured in their stories, regretting past choices and actions and wishing they had persisted to complete high school. Their conversations reflected thoughts that if they had only worked harder or stayed longer, they would have been more successful in school (Golden, 2017). Although there may be some truth to their thoughts, none of the participants mentioned structural issues that contributed to leaving school early, such early caretaking or racial or class biases that may have contributed to dropping out or being expelled (Prins & Schafft, 2009).
On the surface, the concept of grit may appear to empower students, giving them control over their destinies through their choices to work hard and continue in the face of hardship. However, “grit discourse allows privileged socioeconomic groups to preserve their position under the guise of creative pedagogy. This phenomenon does not require malevolence on the part of its enactors. In fact, it can coexist with perfectly benign intentions” (Ris, 2015, p. 2). Even if unintentionally, promoting the idea that students will succeed if they can persevere assumes “that everyone has the same chance; what separates those who succeed from those who do not is a matter of individual effort and determination” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1022). Ignoring structural problems such as lack of employment opportunities (Rank, 2004) and specific challenges for rural students (e.g., transportation; Schafft & Prins, 2009) disregards the extra effort required for these students to overcome obstacles in their lives. The mentality that working harder and persevering are enough to succeed results in society and individuals blaming themselves when they fail, rather than working to change systemic inequalities.

This study shows how WIOA fosters a deficit identity for adult learners, which then compels the learners to pull themselves up by their bootstraps within the system WIOA reinforces. Stories in the grit narrative “assume that everyone has the same chance; what separates those who succeed from those who do not is a matter of individual effort and determination” (Sandlin & Clark, 2009, p. 1022). In contrast, the participants’ narratives in this study reveal structural and social barriers, such as racism, sexism, and ableism. The grit narrative communicates that “poverty itself is not so bad” and leads to character development, conveniently providing a way to escape hardship without requiring change from those holding power (Ris, 2015, p. 11).
Grit also aligns with neoliberal ideology in its individualism and approach to “social benefits, where they are merely a reduction of one’s personal burden on others rather than a concerted effort to achieve common goods” (Stitzlein, 2018, p. 6). In this view, an individual contributes to society through overcoming obstacles that prevent economic productivity. However, this perspective neglects to acknowledge that some types of adversity “may stem from root causes that are too deep for individuals to face alone” (Stitzlein, 2018, p. 9). WIOA policy focuses on economic contributions to society (i.e., reducing economic burden on society), and reinforces the ideology of adult learners overcoming their own barriers to achieve specific goals. These goals are set by WIOA and, as discussed in the findings chapters (Chapters 4 and 5), may not be aligned with adult learners’ own goals. This practice reinforces working toward objectives set by those in power, which are unlikely to lead to dismantling the systems that ultimately benefit those in power. This is not to say that those in the margins, such as many adult learners, receive no benefit. In this study, the participants often aspired to the goals established in WIOA (e.g., employment, greater earnings); however, their own ideas of success were broader and included non-material outcomes (e.g., helping others, feeling respected). Many of these goals cannot be attained merely by trying harder. In fact, the “grit narrative, and the pedagogy that emerges from it, can serve only to mask the pathways we need to traverse in our research, policy, activism, and pedagogical practice” (Golden, 2017, p. 364).

Many people likely lack sufficient time and energy to contemplate injustices in the system, let alone how to combat them. Thus, embracing and promoting grit reinforces success as policy, rather than adult learners, defines it. Rank’s (2004) analogy of musical chairs illuminates the disconnection between desired and available employment: imagine a game of musical chairs
with ten players but only eight chairs. The game is structured so that two people are bound not to find a chair and thus lose. As Rank describes,

The critical mistake that has been made in the past by those who employ the old paradigm is that they have equated the question of who loses out at the game with the question of why the game produces losers in the first place . . . . By focusing solely on individual characteristics, such as levels of education, we can shuffle people up or down in terms of their being more likely to land a job with good earnings, but we are still going to have somebody lose out if there are not enough decent-paying jobs to go around.

(2004, p. 177)

The idea that hard work and persistence are enough to ensure employment discounts structural issues and ignores the root causes of the scarcity of employment in general or of desired employment. The notion of self-reliance found within the grit narratives “is linked to domination and unequal power relations because it reifies our current system, instead of illuminating how this system was historically produced” (Sandlin, 2006, p. 92). As adult learners work within the WIOA framework, it is easy for them to internalize the message that if they can only work hard enough, they will find employment and economic success, a promise that depends on factors beyond their control.

**WIOA, Identities, and Success**

Within WIOA, as described in Chapter 4, adult learners are ascribed deficient identities relating to economic, academic, and parental aspects of their lives. To address these inadequacies, WIOA specifies benchmarks for students to attain success according to government policy. Therefore, for an adult learner to be considered successful according to WIOA, they must meet performance criteria. The policy and accompanying documents show a
marked lack of learner contributions to its design and implementation. Learners are portrayed as passive recipients of the services deemed necessary to improve their lives, specifically their economic status, as the policy directs and instructs education service providers. Furthermore, WIOA offers little encouragement for learners’ voices to contribute to the planning. This top-down attitude of prescribing goals and performance measures for students evokes Freire’s “banking method” of education, an approach in which the educator’s job is to deposit information into the mind of the learners without promoting or guiding critical analysis of the educational material presented. Freire (1970) decries the banking method as a form of suppression in which educators deny learners opportunities for critical thinking, intentionally or inadvertently. Freire’s hope for educators is that they develop a relationship with learners and guide them through the process of critical thinking, using the method of “problem-posing” in which educators and learners work together to analyze problems that affect their lives (Freire, 1994, pp. 102-103). Although WIOA policy and the related documents do not explicitly prohibit or prevent this type of relationship – indeed, all the teachers involved in the classes in this study cared deeply about their students – the top-down nature and economic focus of the policy create an environment where students are conscripted to meet the organizations’ goals.

The performance measures of WIOA place a burden on adult education providers of producing “recognizable workers, parents, and citizens” (Shin & Ging, 2019, p. 10), creating an environment of business transaction rather than consciousness-raising. The language in WIOA presents adult learners as empty containers, ready for knowledge and transformation, but without acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge the learners already have. Likewise, within the neoliberal language of WIOA, learners are portrayed as empty, passive, and incapable. In contrast, although the learners in this study desired to gain the credential and knowledge from
their classes, they all had histories of employment and skills they used in life and in jobs. The depiction within policy as passive recipients of knowledge ignores the skills that the learners already have. For example, Dee had found employment that supported her and her family for most of her life, and the antagonistic environment of her previous well-paying job drove her to search for new skills and her high school equivalency credential to broaden her options. Likewise, Bill and KC had found jobs that financially supported them, but they hoped that having their HSE diploma would open doors to new opportunities.

The one-dimensional portrayal of adult learners as deficient and in-need neglects the life skills and job skills the learners have when joining ABE programs and ignores the wider cultural interactions between adult learners and their daily lives (Sandlin et al., 2013, p. 7). Indeed,

WIOA seems to imply a conception of literacy that has narrowed to a specific set of tasks and purposes related to employment. Similarly, learners are assumed to have employment as their primary goal (postsecondary education, although a key goal of WIOA, is framed primarily as a step along the way to employment and increased earnings) and have thus largely been removed from discussions about their goals for learning, their purposes for literacy, and how they could inform policy, practice, and research. (Belzer, 2017, p. 16)

In contrast, Equipped for the Future Content Standards (EFF), an alternative framework for Adult Education standards developed in the 1990s, was designed to help “learners more effectively fulfill a range of roles in addition to that of worker” (Belzer, 2017, p. 15; Stein, 2000). These standards were written with the learner as the primary “customer” and to help “develop the knowledge and skills they need to accomplish their goals in life … [and] to create standards that enable us to align program and system practices curriculum, instruction,
assessment, and reporting with the important results defined by adult learners" [emphasis added]” (Bingman & Stein, 2001, p. 6). Whereas WIOA primarily focuses on economic gain, EFF provides an alternative view of Adult Education standards that learning in ways to help adults become better family members, co-workers, employees, and citizens, promoting personal and professional growth (Stein, 2000). While adult education programs exist to provide skills learners desire, WIOA’s assumption of employment as the primary goal ignores other valuable aspects of adult education.

Furthermore, the dream jobs that study participants described may or may not result in increased earnings from current or previous employment. Five study participants, Bill, Kiki, KC, Miriam, and Brianna, described their desired future employment in terms of jobs that involved their interests, not in economic terms. For instance, Bill’s dream job as a motorcycle mechanic combined his enthusiasm for motorcycles with work that he thought would pay his bills. His self-described goal was to be financially “comfortable,” which may or may not indicate increased earnings from his present economic situation. Similarly, other participants described deal employment as connected to their passions, such as photography (Brianna), helping the elderly (Miriam), and cooking (Kiki). The other participant, Dee, did not specify a particular job but strongly desired to be employed at a place where she felt respected. This stipulation came from leaving a well-paying position where she earned money but did not think she was treated like she deserved.

For all participants in this study, money was not the most important prerequisite for accepting employment. The participants in this study cared about the quality of their employment, not only the amount they earned, and the dignity and “social esteem” their employment offered (Honneth, 1996, 2004, p. 362). In contrast, increased earnings is one of the
performance measures specified in the WIOA Guidance as a primary indicator of organizational performance. Within the WIOA framework, learners’ primary identity is as a worker, contributing financially to society. In contrast, within the learners’ paradigms, their identities were rooted more in helping others, being respected and recognized by their families and employers, and making progress toward their goals. Although earning money and providing for their families and themselves were considered important, their identities did not center on economic achievement. This contrast creates potential for tension when adult learners’ priorities do not match what policy emphasizes. Moreover, WIOA policy creates a competitive environment for organizations that provide ABE services by requiring competition for scarce funding, leading organizations to emphasize students meeting performance measures (Belzer, 2017; Shin & Ging, 2019). The discrepancy between learners’ visions and organizations’ goals has the potential to create a chasm between learners and instructors by stressing a part of the learners’ identity that they may not value as highly. Possibly, the learners may not even be aware that such goals are necessary for organizations to meet, creating objectives that are invisible to the learners and consequently problematic to meet.

The WIOA paradigm fails to characterize adult learners as having a wealth of knowledge and experience, as having a voice in their own education, as having power and ability to make “good” decisions and collaborate in decisions affecting their lives. Such characterization of adult learners as deficient fails to acknowledge the wealth of skills and knowledge these adults have in many facets of life, instead concentrating on their perceived lack. This framework requires adult learners to shift their identity from the ascribed deficient identity to the promoted self-sufficient identity. The goal within the policy is for learners to transform from one identity to another. In contrast, as adult learners in this study described prospective life changes after obtaining their
credential, their focus was less on transformation and more on fulfilling certain goals. Kiki described the ability to provide more help to her daughter as part of success but did not see herself as already less than the “full partner” WIOA describes. For her, returning to school and modeling hard work and persistence in classwork were as important as the knowledge or credential she hoped to earn. Likewise, Dee considered having both her children graduate from high school as success and felt that she had a large part in her children’s completion, even before obtaining her own high school equivalency diploma. Participants saw their HSE diploma as a step to some of their goals and in a way, to becoming more complete versions of who they already were. They lacked the credential and desired to obtain it; however, all participants viewed themselves as contributing to their families and society in general. Rather than viewing the HSE diploma primarily as a step to becoming a better worker or economic contributor, the participants viewed their success more broadly, incorporating elements of emotional fulfillment and recognition along with financial and academic components. Learners in this study talked more about what they wanted to do – which included paying bills – but did not necessarily focus on achieving the highest-paying employment. The shift in identity that WIOA mandates did not correspond to participants’ visions of success within their narratives. The multi-faceted identities they expressed defied the primary identity of “worker” ascribed in WIOA policy.

The quantification of specific skills tied to the labor market amounts to a form of social control, regulating types of literacy taught in ABE organizations, often focusing on non-fiction, informational texts “with employment and higher education eclipsing other purposes for literacy and numeracy learning” (Prins, 2017, p. 97). Adult learners value the types of skills promoted by WIOA and have many of the same aims specified (e.g., higher wages, obtaining an HSE diploma, continuing their education); however, their scope is much broader than policy specifies
and financially supports. Generally, adult education organizations emphasize the skills that provide the best possibilities for their continued funding (Eyster & Nightingale, 2017; Pickard, 2016), implicitly communicating that those skills have the highest value.

**Myth of the Good Student**

In this study, all adult learners reported feelings of inferiority and failure when discussing formal schooling and literacy experiences, and their narratives revealed their perceptions of their literate identities. Their discourses reveal that they have, to some extent, internalized the dominant literacy discourses present in society and reinforced through policy (e.g., achieving high test scores, writing essays in a prescribed way). Participants’ views of their formal literacy skills and experiences contrasted with their discussions of their informal literacy identities. When they referred to reading or writing in the context of formal schooling or adult education classes, their descriptions were almost invariably negative or self-deprecating; however, when they described literacy activities outside of class (e.g., writing poetry and song lyrics, journaling, reading personally selected materials), participants expressed confidence and enthusiasm. However, participants mimicked the institutional discourse when discussing their literate abilities and identities, only valuing the literacy practices encouraged by the ABE organizations (e.g., essay writing, scoring well on homework assignments).

As they described their literate identities, students adopted the “Discourse of deficits” described by Rogers (2003, p. 120) in an in-depth case study on family literacy. Like the family Rogers featured, participants in this study had learned to see themselves as deficient in the types of literacy that institutions value rather than valuing their proficiency in contexts outside formal education settings. They saw themselves through the eyes of the institution. Early schooling
experiences influenced and shaped their perceptions, often negatively for many participants (Belzer, 2004; Rogers, 2003).

Educational policy is built on “benchmarks and measurable ways of being literate” that learners must meet to be considered successful (Compton-Lilly et al., 2012, p. 54). Consequently, Bill’s enthusiasm for motorcycle magazines, Kiki and Miriam’s interest in Black history, Dee’s copious romance novels reading, KC’s song lyrics, Miriam’s journaling, and Brianna’s poetry do not fit into the paradigm of literacy skills that promote economic success. WIOA “neglect[s] the learners’ wealth of knowledge an experiences” while primarily measuring skills tied to economic gain (Shin & Ging, 2019, p. 12). The adverse memories of formal schooling that adult learners carried with them predispose adoption of a negative student-identity, a perspective that the WIOA discourse reinforces. The government policy supposes that ABE classes to lead directly to measurable skill gains. However, Reder’s (2012) Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy (LSAL) found that participating in ABE increased learners’ engagement in literacy practices, which eventually led to skill gains. As learners become more interested in real-life literacy practices, such as the practices mentioned above, their literacy skills will increase over time. However, using standardized test scores (e.g., the TABE) at the end of a program will not accurately reflect this learning that occurs over a longer time (Reder, 2012). The LSAL study shows that by increasing learners’ engagement in everyday literacy practices, ABE programs can foster long-term skill gains.

Within the neoliberal conversation, students, instructors, and curriculum together co-construct the notion of the “good student” equaling the “good employee” (e.g., high attendance, no problems with childcare, taking responsibility) (St. Clair, 2004). As adult learners enter programs with negative presuppositions about their intellectual abilities, it is easier to internalize
the discourse of needing to become something other than they are. This language implies that without the educational opportunities provided by WIOA, parents would not be able to fully engage in their children’s education or adequately provide for their families. To be sure, learners enter programs with the intent of changing, of learning more, and of meeting goals which likely include changes; however, the difference lies in the perception of the necessity of essential change. The neoliberal discourse embedded within WIOA claims that adult learners must transform to become something that they previously were not. Study participants embrace change, but their view is more aligned with taking another step to meet their goals, some of which align with WIOA and some which are beyond the policy’s scope. They already view themselves as productive workers and contributing family members, objectives which WIOA purports they have not yet achieved.

The “aspirational myth” of the good student (Sandlin, 2006; St. Clair, 2004) not only calls for adult learners to be transformed, but also places the burden of transformation on the individual. Adult learners who enter classes with negative presuppositions about their abilities as students may be inclined to internalize the deficit perspective presented through WIOA (e.g., economic, educational, parental, skills) and related discourses. The critique of their skills is implied, often communicated indirectly:

Instead of being told by instructors how they fall short of the desirable standards, learners are able to compare themselves to a mythologized figure and make their own judgments. For example, if I know the good employee has no problems with childcare it makes me cautious to bring forward my own concerns about where my children will be when I am working. Once again, the truth of the myth is not a large concern if it functions as an
explanation of why some people are successful, why others are not, and most importantly, how I can be.” (St. Clair, 2004, p. 92)

These stories reinforce the notion of character, hard work, and positive attitude always leading to success (Sandlin, 2006; St. Clair, 2004), a notion that is not always substantiated in reality.

Notions of becoming a “good student” are closely tied to the messages adult learners receive from both local and global sponsors (Brandt, 2001; Brandt & Clinton, 2002), ranging from their classes to messages communicated through popular media. In this study, adult learners dichotomized how they perceived literacy and learning practices as part of their success. Without exception, participants wanted to improve their literacy skills to the point where they could pass HSE exams and earn their secondary equivalency diploma, which they counted as success; however, their perceptions of success included literacy practices that transcended the scope of success as defined by the organizational discourse.

Literacy sponsors in the study participants’ lives defined literacy in specific and measurable ways (e.g., higher TABE scores, passing HSE exams). Although participants assumed these views, they also adopted literacy practices that challenged the dominant literacies. Brianna discussed taking the essays assigned in her Language Arts ABE class and writing poetry on the designated topic rather than the assigned prose. Similarly, KC spent hours each week writing and refining lyrics for his original music, and Miriam mentioned writing in her journal as an important part of her mental health practices. If part of success for Miriam includes staying out of a mental health hospital, then this literacy practice is very much a part of success. In spite of this, journaling does not fit the literacy practices assigned in her classes. The autonomous model of literacy embraced in WIOA discourse fails to account for the literacy practices that reflect participants’ personalities and communities. Participants often did not view these
practices as equally valid and valuable forms of literacy, thus aligning themselves with dominant views of literacy. The specific literacy practices seen as adding value to the broader economy, mostly focusing on informational reading and writing, are the practices that count when formally assessing success and only value certain types of knowledge (St. Clair, 2004). Adult learners in this study often considered themselves successful when recounting their private literacy practices but unsuccessful as they discussed their classwork.

**Implications**

The commodification of knowledge demonstrates how knowledge and learning can become a type of currency in society. Through realizing other ways to interpret the benefits of their education (such as self-confidence or empathy), adult learners can appreciate literacy skills in ways that surpass the skills valued in government policy (Brookfield, 2001). This stance positions the field of adult education in a distinctly political role, organizing and equipping learners to understand and act against oppressive forces (Baptiste, 2008). Adult learners in this study described success in multi-faceted ways, encompassing emotional fulfillment, academics, finances, recognition, and hard work and persistence.

**Implications for policy.** Within this study, WIOA discourse revealed policy-making with little regard for adult learners’ views and experiences. The policy defined success and portrayed adult learners in particular, often deficient, ways. This study adds to the literature demonstrating the constricting, detrimental implications of WIOA on ABE. Based on results from this and other studies, policymakers are urged to consider adult learners’ perspectives and stories when forming legislation and considering funding. By viewing adult learners as competent partners in education reform, policy could shift to include a view of success beyond
economic measures. Such a view would likely lead to positive social outcomes, benefiting broader society (Belzer & Kim, 2018).

**Implications for practice.** When participants described success in their current role as students and in life, they frequently equated non-material outcomes, especially those related to emotions, with success (e.g., feeling useful or respected, finishing something, being independent). These descriptions of success differ from the standard organizational discourse focusing on passing an HSE exam, financial gain, and higher TABE scores. Knowing how students define success for themselves and view success in others could help adult educators and program directors assess how they portray success in their classrooms. If there is a significant difference between how students and instructors view success, both in and out of the classroom, the difference could lead to conflicting goals. However, if their views of success can be aligned, students might have new ways to see how success in the classroom and program complement their own goals. To some extent, students see the need for the classes and exams or they would not attend the program; however, making more explicit connections could help students understand how specific activities are integral to their success. Conversely, adult educators should consider how the lessons and goals in the classroom align with students’ expressed goals. Potential areas of conflict include required activities, such as TABE assessments, which programs often need for funding accountability, but that students scarcely mentioned and may not be concerned about. Students will inevitably need to read and write about topics that do not interest them, but the positive effects of relevant topics should lead instructors to consider ways to incorporate some of these type of assignments into their lessons. Adult educators also must consider obstacles to success, which were often significant and deeply rooted in past
experiences, and contemplate how these barriers might continue to affect their students’ current work.

It seems that the measures of success that teachers and the government are using are “invisible” to students, so they might not even know how their success is measured. For example, some of the measures required for funding include post-testing and students meeting stated goals (e.g., obtaining their HSE, attending a post-secondary institution, employment goals). The students have their own goals, mostly to get their high school equivalency diploma, but also less measurable goals, as discussed in this study (e.g., respect. Students are not aware of the requirements to get funding, which may be tangential to their goals. If they are asked to complete a post-test assessment at an agency, it may not provide much benefit to them, but it is essential to the agencies with whom they work to have these assessments to keep the program funded and viable. The benchmarks that are set for the program involve the students, but often without the students’ knowledge or explicit consent.

Additionally, the students’ goals are selected from a pre-set list, generated by the PA Department of Education, which also sets the goals that the program needs to meet. This could cause conflict between the students’ and the program’s goals. For example, if a student has passed an HSE exam but still wants more practice in a subject (e.g., extra writing instruction), a program cannot count the student’s work toward any measurable goals, so there is no incentive to serve the student. Students who cannot help meet program goals may be given less time and priority than students who are seen as more able to contribute to the program goals, ultimately justifying the continuance of the program and its funding. WIOA, enacted in 2014, is intended to increase employment opportunities, and one of the primary means is through increased education. WIOA includes job growth goals that specify the type of job and/or wages (e.g. high-
demand or high-wage) requisite to receive funding. As programs strive to meet these goals to obtain necessary money, students often remain unaware of the financial factors driving the larger program goals.

The lack of connections between students seems like a missed opportunity for instructors to promote learner success. If programs can help connect students to each other, they may be able to use the social space to help meet their goals. This aspect may not be a particular aim of students, but if instructors can assist students in making those connections, the classes may become a more positive, helpful space for people involved. For example, instructors could include a monthly time to discuss parenting issues, a space for learners to share or donate home items, or even the simple practice of promoting classroom introductions to promote intra-classroom connections and help students form potentially helpful networks (Prins et al., 2011). If programs can help connect students to each other, they may be able to use the social space to help meet their goals. This aspect may not be a particular aim of students, but if instructors can assist students in making those connections, the classes may become a more positive, helpful space for people involved. The more connections instructors can make between students’ own goals and their classwork, the more likely students are to stay in classes and work with the program. Students’ brief or limited attendance in adult education classes is often cited as a problem in the field, and the less students believe classes will help them, the more likely they are to stop attending.

Participants’ discussions of success were largely communal and success was not viewed as an individual achievement. They often discussed success within the context of their families and communities, not only as individuals. Educators could capitalize on these aspirations using class as an opportunity to build community and considering the relational aspects of ABE classes
Similarly, Welton (1993) discussed “a vision of a lifeworld and system world acting on each other to mutual benefit” (p. 88) in which adult educators could work within the system to promote a more democratic and equitable environment for learning. Welton (1993) claims that since people are generally unaware of their involvement in the systems that oppress them, gaining knowledge about the hegemonic processes provides an opportunity for the learners to counter the existing structures (p. 13). Not only does this provide an opportunity incorporating learners’ notions of success into ABE, but it also creates an environment that can provide insight into the ways that adults learn.

It is important for adult educators to note that when participants described success in their current role as students and in life, they frequently equated non-material outcomes, especially those related to emotions, with success (e.g., feeling useful or respected, finishing something, independence). These descriptions of success differ from the standard organizational discourse focusing on passing an exam HSE, financial gain, and higher TABE scores. Knowing how students define success for themselves and view success in others could help adult educators and program directors assess how they portray success in their classrooms. If there is a significant difference between how students and instructors view success, both in and out of the classroom, the difference could lead to conflicting goals. However, if their views of success can be aligned, students might have new ways to see how success in the classroom and program compliment their own goals. To some extent, students see the need for the classes and exams or they would not attend the program; however, making more explicit connections could help students understand how specific activities are integral to their success. Conversely, adult educators should consider how the lessons and goals in the classroom align with students’ expressed goals. Potential areas of conflict include required activities, such as TABE assessments, which
programs often need for funding accountability, but that students scarcely mentioned and may not be concerned about. Adult educators also must consider obstacles to success, which were often significant and deeply rooted in past experiences, and contemplate how these barriers might continue to affect their students’ current work.

It is also important to note that not all adult education are federally funded. In these cases, adult learners can still benefit from the practices mentioned above, and depending on their funding sources, they may have greater autonomy in determining their programming.

**Implications for future research.** This study provides a view of adult learners’ perspectives on success in their personal and academic lives. Their stories provide a counter-narrative to success as commonly described in policy and classrooms. Within the literature, there is little description of success from adult learners’ perspectives, and further research in this underexplored area is warranted, providing more insight from the population ABE serves. Likewise, participants in this study discussed barriers to success, and although the field includes some discussion of this topic, perspectives from adult learners would enhance these discussions. Additionally, although participants did not always acknowledge or discuss how their race or gender shaped their educational or life experiences, these aspects of identity are implicated in how people view and experience success or failure. Using a framework of intersectionality could provide an avenue for exploring these factors among adult learners, particularly for women who are people of color.

Further research into networking among adult learners and use of authentic literacy practices in classrooms could expand the field of adult learning. NLS provides a framework that could be used to consider the full repertoire of adult learners’ literacy practices (e.g., poetry, journaling, reading romance novels) and the literate artifacts they produce. Using NLS to
examine these literacies could demonstrate the strength of their literate lives outside the narrow paradigm of autonomous literacy and reading comprehension, as measured by standardized tests. Likewise, exploration of how both adult learners and instructors view the goals of AEFLA could provide additional insight into their view of power relations and possibly grounds to begin reform. Another possibility for future research is how ABE instructors navigate the tension between their own educational philosophies and the requirements imposed through policy. Although not a focus of this study, I was intrigued to observe instructor-learner relationships, and further study of this dynamic could be of value to the field. Another area for future exploration could be to expand the data to include urban areas rather than only the rural communities involved in this study.

**Conclusion**

This study offers insight into how adult learners’ discourses on success. Participants defined success in a variety of ways, but there were many common threads throughout their descriptions. Adult learners enroll in programs with the hope of improving their lives. Their stories contrast with the organizational discourse on success in many ways and expand our understanding of how organizations may better serve students.

This study promotes the creation of new narrative that better incorporates learners’ perspectives of success. Adult learners’ narratives expand the discussion of success beyond economic gain to also include personal, professional, and civic development, elements largely ignored in AEFLA policy. The current policy creates an environment of scarcity and competition, particularly among adult education providers, as mandated outcomes are not equally matched with resources. In view of these relatively recent changes in adult education, it
is my hope the stories of the participants provide insight and nuanced understanding to adult learners’ perspectives on success.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Guide for Interview 1

Introductory/background

How are you today?

What is your name?

What name would you like to go by for this study, to help protect your privacy? You can choose any name.

How old are you?

Tell me about where you grew up.

Tell me a little about your family (past and current).

Are you working right now? What kinds of jobs have you had in the past?

When did you leave school (what grade)? What caused you to leave school?

When did you start the GED program? Is this the first time you have been in a GED program?

When you were a child, was there a specific job you wanted to have when you grew up? Is that different from now? How has that changed?

What are some memories you have of reading and writing in school?

What kinds of reading and writing did you do outside of school?

Describe a time in school when you felt successful. Who or what helped you feel successful?

Describe a time in school when you didn’t feel successful. Who or what made you feel unsuccessful? Did the way you felt (successful or not) ever change while you were in school? Do you still feel the same way now?

Describe the most successful person you can think of (someone you know). What do you think makes them successful?

What do you think needs to happen for a person to succeed? For you? What qualities do you think someone needs to be successful?

What do you think might be some barriers to your success?

What motivates you to work toward your goals?
Guide for Interview 2

What made you decide to start this program?

What do you hope to get out of participating in this program?

Think about 10 years from now. What do you want your life to look like then?

What makes you feel like you are doing well in your classes?

What do you think it takes to be successful in your classes? How can you tell if you are successful or not?

Describe a time in your GED class when you felt successful. Who or what helped you feel successful?

Describe a time in your GED class when you didn’t feel successful. Who or what made you feel unsuccessful?

When you run into obstacles, who do you turn to for help?

What reading and writing activities do you do throughout a typical day? Week? [Follow up with probing questions or examples of activities (texting, helping kids with homework, reading news articles, Facebook . . .)]

Do you consider yourself a strong reader? What makes you think that you are/are not?

Do you consider yourself a strong writer? What makes you think that you are/are not?

How do you think others would describe you as a reader/writer (partner, parents, teachers, friends)? What would you want them to know about you?

Discuss creative activity (questions in Appendix B)
Appendix B

Creative Activity Guide

*Creative Activity*

You can choose one of the following activities, whichever one you feel the most comfortable doing. Please complete the activity and bring your creation to the second interview.

1) With your phone, take several pictures of things you see throughout the week that represent success to you. Email the pictures to me at ssf124@psu.edu or bring them to your next interview, and we can discuss them.

2) Draw a picture or write a few paragraphs addressing this quote: “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” – Winston Churchill
   Do you agree or disagree? What does this quote mean to you? Please bring your drawing or writing to the next interview.

3) Find something that represents success to you and bring it to your next interview. This could be something from home, a picture from a magazine or other media, or something else that has meaning to you.

*Questions to discuss creative activity (during Interview 2)*

When you were creating or finding this work, what were you feeling or thinking?
What is going on in this drawing/writing/picture?
What does this piece say about you?
What does this piece say about what success means to you?
Appendix C

Pennsylvania Adult Education Brochure
Appendix D

Sample Interview Transcript: Bill (excerpt)

I: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

R: Well, I grew up right here in [Watermill]. Still sticking around here and sticking it out. Trying to get a GED here because I'm planning on going to school after and hopefully moving to Florida. Or at least somewhere down south, anyway. Florida for a little while.

I: Why Florida?

R: Well, that's where the school that I want to go to is, right in Orlando. So. There's only two of them. There's one in Orlando and there's one in Phoenix, Arizona.

I: What school is it?

R: It's MMI, Motorcycle Mechanics Institute.

I: There's only two.

R: There's only two that offer the Harley Davidson training program. So. You know. Exactly. It's either Florida or Arizona and Arizona is not very appealing. It's all desert.

I: There's definitely some nicer things about Florida. Can you tell me a little bit about your family, growing up and now?

R: Well. Just you know, pretty basic really. My mother, she worked all the time, single mom. So I spent a lot of time with my grandparents. But you know, that was great. Growing up as a kid, spent a lot of time with them.

I: Did they live in [Watermill]?

R: Yeah. Everybody lived in [Watermill], we're all from here. So it was always very local. Not too far to travel to their place. Pretty much right now, everybody worked, that's what it was. My grandparents, I can remember whenever I was young, my grandfather was retired always but my grandmother, she still worked and they finally both retired together. And yeah, for a while, they just kind of did what they did and they was it. They're both passed now. But still got my mom, my aunt. I got a sister. She, we all live right around the area here. My sister, not anymore but she used to work at the hospital but my mom and my aunt, they still do.

I: Just one sister?
R: Just one sister.

I: Do you have a partner or any kids or anything?

R: I do have a girlfriend. Yep. She's a little bit older than I am, which makes it a little tricky sometimes. And yeah, I do have a child. He's actually, he's eighteen. He's going to be graduating high school here at the end of next month. No, what month are we in? April still. Just still barely in April. End of next month, 31st of May.

I: Congratulations. Is he in [Watermill] too?

R: No, he actually lives with his mother and her new husband in [town]. They're in [town] area. They're out there. I mean, they are out there. Like those fields out there. Yeah. I wouldn't want it, that's for sure. He has nothing to do out there. Yeah.

I: Are you working right now?

R: I am. I'm working over in Center Hall over in Valley Ag & Turf, hauling John Deere tractors. Delivering them, picking them up, setting them up, that kind of deal. Just started there, just stared there last week. Just a regular 8:00 to 5:00 kind of deal. Well, I've been getting back a little bit late. But I, a couple years ago, I was recently diagnosed type II diabetic so having an actual regular schedule really helps that. Because I was working at a pizza shop and that was just not working out for me at all. Late nights and my schedule was all thrown off. Couldn't do that too well.

I: What do you do there specifically with the John Deere stuff?

R: Well, whenever a customer comes in, tractors still aren't set up yet. So I'll put some of them together for the customers and sometimes the customer wants added accessories or stuff like that, so we'll do that kind of stuff over there. I take them to the home and kind of give them a little training demonstration on their tractor and hope they like it [laughs]. You know. After I'm done, I'm out of there, you know.

I: What other kinds of jobs have you had? You mentioned the pizza shop.

R: I've been a cook for the better part of my life. Had my own restaurant for a little while.

I: What kind of restaurant?

R: It was a barbecue, [unintelligible] [00:04:45] restaurant over in Spring Mills. Not that the business wasn't doing well. I'm not much of a, I guess, paperwork business kind of end of it. I just kind of jumped into it because I found a restaurant that had all the equipment, everything good to go. One of those too good to be true things and the landlord was already back on his
mortgage and just a couple months into it—In fact, there was an apartment above my restaurant. I moved into the apartment on a Thursday and Monday, the sheriffs were there with foreclosure papers for my landlord.

I: Oh no, are you serious?

R: Yeah. So I had payed him all this rent and did all this and did all that and yeah, he wasn't paying his end. So I just had to grab all my stuff and leave. That was it.

I: What kind of restaurant were you planning on?

R: We were doing barbecue. We had, I had a smoker out back and we were right along the creek right there, right in Spring Mills too. So yeah. It was all right. For a little while, for a short time. We had pizzas of course because you can't go wrong with having a pizza oven and making a couple pizza here and there.

I: Really you can't, especially if kids come.

R: Yeah, exactly. Yep. Kids loved it too. So you know, we were there long enough to kind of make a slight impact. I was open maybe for three months. Already had some people that were regular customers coming in and stuff. It was okay. And then like I said, yeah, just one day, just one day, there I am sitting—Of course it was on a Monday when I'm closed and I had my smoker just roaring with meat for the week and they come with these papers. And it's like, you couldn't have came there before I put, you know, sixty dollars worth of meat in there. Yeah. So. We ate good that week [laughs].

I: Did you, have you ever thought about owning your own motorcycle business or anything?

R: Yeah, actually. I would like eventually, because I know it's something I'm probably going to have to start in my garage while I'm working out of a Harley Davidson dealer, which won't be hard because I will get a discount on parts. But, do that for a little while but I would like to have my own motorcycle shop, tattoo shop, all in one shop. Down south somewhere, like Florida, Daytona area, something like that, where we can ride all year long. Yeah.

I: That's awesome. You've had a really interesting background.

R: I mean, I guess so. Unfortunately whenever I was in my younger days, of course knowing everything, just kind of [unintelligible] [00:07:22], just got out of school, and I just started working. That's really what I did. And yeah.

I: What grade were you in when you left school?
R: Eleventh. Well, it would've been my senior year but I had failed my freshman year, had to repeat my freshman year. Went through tenth grade. And about the middle of eleventh grade, I just said, you know what—Because I was already eighteen obviously because I had been held back. I said you know what, I'm just going to go to work. [Laughs] Work full time.

I: What caused you to leave school?

R: Well, I don't know. School was, I don't want to say it was rough. Just didn't feel like I was getting anything out of it. You know what I mean. Just didn't, you know. But then again too, like I said, whenever I knew everything, I didn't pay attention. Acting up in class and that kind of stuff. Just doing it all wrong, really, is what I did. Like I said, I knew then that it wasn't gonna do me any good. So I just yeah, found a job, found a full time job and yeah, just went to work. That's it.

I: What kind of job did you do then, right out of school?

R: Well, right out of school, I worked, obviously I worked in kitchens. I had that background to go right into a kitchen and start working. But for a little while right after I had gotten out, I worked at a place called Piezo Kinetics. In fact, they're still up behind, she's now in an industrial area but they were behind Uni-Mart here in [Watermill]. And it was just a manufacturing plant company. Yeah. It was all right too, it was full time work, benefits and everything. So at nineteen, eighteen, nineteen, that's pretty good. But of course you know, young and knowing everything [laughs] you know, didn't quite work out. So. I was in a pizza shop for the last I don't even know how many years. Like I said, I even had my own partial, I guess. We leaned more towards the barbecue but of course when it's all said and done, you're making pizzas just as much. But just tired of doing it. Just tired of doing it. And I actually, health reasons, you know what I mean, I just can't do it. I can't work the late hours anymore. I don't want to [laughs]. I'm too old for it. So this is what I'm doing. I'm getting back on track here I guess and as soon as I get this GED, I'm going to school somewhere for something. I don't care what. Anything other than what I'm doing.

I: When did you start the program here?

R: Actually I started last summer but I took a job over at the Harley Davidson dealership that we have here just kind of doing maintenance work and stuff around there. Around 322.

I: By Spring Mills?

R: Yeah. Yep. And it actually progressed into a management position out there. They have storage units and they were getting U-Hauls and they sent me up there to run it all but it didn't make any money. When you're the first one to go on that, you know, that's what happened really. I mean, I lost my job there and that's really kind of, I had a company truck and everything like that and of course, I don't have a legal vehicle anymore except my motorcycle so here I am.
riding in the rain. It's all right, hey, I don't mind. It's okay. I was holding off as long as I could watching this weather channel. Like I think the weather, like I think the weather might [unintelligible] (were wrong) [00:10:45] today.

I: I think it's supposed to be nicer later. Hopefully by the time you leave.

R: I hope so. That's what I'm hoping. That's what I was hoping for when I left my house, it had been a little nicer. But yeah. I started last summer and I was here for a good while. Actually I had been more than the spring that I started, and I quit coming in the summer, something like that. Yeah. Because I was here long enough—Actually, I had taken my first pretest for the language arts part back last summer and they said even then, I was mot likely to pass. And as soon as I lost my job over there, I came right to here and said listen, hey, can you let me back in? And they had no problem with that. As soon as I lost my job over there, I came right to here and said listen, hey, can you let me back in? And they had no problem with that. And within just a couple weeks of being here, I took another one of those pretests for the English and I scored higher than I was the first time and I didn't even finish it. So. I'm ready to take that test. I am taking that test tomorrow.

I: That's the one you're taking tomorrow?

R: Yep, that's the one I'm taking tomorrow.

I: Good luck with that.

R: I'm hoping. That will be the motivation I need. I know it will be.

I: Is that the first one that you've taken, then?

R: Yeah. That would be the first one I've taken. Hopefully math is next. That's where I'm furthest at right now, just in math.

I: Sometimes I feel like just even taking one is like, a boost.

R: Yeah. Well, whenever I looked on the scheduling form too, I realized this was the longest one also. The longest test to take.

I: So once you get that done.

R: Yeah. And then after again, I haven't really done a lot with the social studies or the science yet. But I don't know. I don't know really how much could have changed in science and history, you know what I mean? So hopefully I can still retain some of that information from when I was in school.
Vita
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EDUCATION
2019 Ph.D., Adult Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
2006 M.A., Linguistics and Exegesis, Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE
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