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**THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GED® STUDENTS:
WHAT DO THEIR EXPERIENCES TELL US?**

A Dissertation in

Adult Education

by

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Abstract

The General Educational Development (GED®) Tests, established in 1945, helped determine soldiers' high school qualifications for the workforce, as they returned home from WWII. Because many soldiers dropped out of school to join the military, achieving a certain score on the test was a way for them to demonstrate that they had attained high school equivalency. Today, this credential has evolved into a second chance certificate for many high school dropouts. The southwestern Pennsylvania students, who were part of this research, demonstrated the persistence, tenacity, and determination they needed to achieve the goal of passing the battery of five GED Tests. The theoretical framework of functionalism explored how these students fit into a society that values educational credentials. The educational opportunities offered through the adult education programs these students attended, enabled them to discover their strengths, abilities, and capabilities. Some researchers believed these were qualities they possessed all along and in the case of these adult learners, they believed it was the support they received especially from their teachers that assisted them in learning more about transitioning to work, post-secondary opportunities or training. They grew not only academically, but personally as well. They were grateful for the patience, flexibility, and respect shown to them by their adult education teachers, something they felt was lacking in their former educational settings. Their families and classmates also supported their efforts. Many of the students experienced extraordinary changes in their lives that helped them fulfill their goal of receiving their GED credential. Those who were parents wanted to continue to be role models for their children and reinforce the importance of a good education to them. The methodology of qualitative interviewing helped convey the experiences as the adult

learners explained their individual processes of entering an adult education program and preparing not only for the GED Tests, but also for their future. Their experiences tell us that while some students were down, they were never out. They would not let their circumstances dictate their future. Their stories demonstrated that they had learned from their life lessons to be persistent and diligent in order to achieve their goal of receiving their GED credential.

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surrounded by such wonderful people in my life, and I thank you all for the part you played in helping me transform my dream into a reality.

Chapter 1

The Need for The Study

In 1945 the General Educational Development (GED®) Tests established certain academic criteria for soldiers returning home from WWII, who were required to verify their high school skills in order to return to the workforce. Because many soldiers dropped out of school to join the military, achieving a certain score on the test was a way for them to demonstrate that they had attained high school equivalency.

At that time, the government commissioned the American Council on Education (ACE), to devise testing in five subject areas: English grammar, social studies, natural science, literature, and mathematics. The official GED website from the American Council on Education states,

Recognized throughout North America, the GED Testing Program has served as a bridge to education and employment for an estimated 15.2 million people over its 60-year history. About one in seven high school diplomas issued in the United States each year is based on passing the GED Tests. (<http://www.acenet.edu>, 2006)

Now, some 65 years later, adults are still taking the GED Tests in order to attain, retain, or advance in their employment or take advantage of post-secondary/training opportunities in order to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Researchers like Tyler, Murnane, and Willett (2000) and Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997) have provided economic statistics pertaining to various populations of

GED test takers for well over a decade and while these figures were impressive and did tell a story of economic gain, they did not convey the entire story about those students who took the GED Tests. There is much more to the GED account than whether the scores translate into economic prosperity. When I spoke to adult learners who had passed their GED Tests, they eagerly shared accounts concerning major decisions they had to make in their lives, barriers they needed to overcome in order to enter an adult education program, challenges they met with determination and persistence, and accomplishments and achievements they never thought were possible before passing the GED Tests.

In Pennsylvania, Dean, Eisenreich, and Hubbell (1996) produced a study, the purpose of which was “to ascertain if GED graduates in Pennsylvania perceive that obtaining a GED has benefited them, both in terms of their economic status as well as in their personal lives” (p. 11). They found that the GED credential did indeed benefit Pennsylvania’s GED recipients. This was mostly a quantitative study; with short snippets of participants’ quotes scattered throughout the report to support various survey results. Pennsylvania residents who obtained a GED credential between 1975 and 1994 received surveys. Not all participants who received the survey chose to comment on it. Although this was a most informative study, it would have been more enlightening using the students’ own words. This lack of insight deprived the reader of an opportunity to appreciate what these students endured in order to obtain the GED credential.

There was a moderate amount of research surrounding the economic benefits of and life factors associated with pursuing the GED credential. However, there was a limited amount of research in which students spoke to their personal experiences related

to pursuing their GED credential; some had earned their GED credential and others had not. Because I realized a gap in the literature, I decided to interview students from GED programs in southwestern PA. Through face-to-face interviews, they were able to convey what influenced them to drop out of school, what motivated them to pursue their GED credential, the barriers they faced, the support and other factors that encouraged them to persist, their successes, and their plans for the future. This research describes the collective experiences of adult learners pursuing their GED credential in their own words.

Purpose of the Study

After reviewing the literature, I explored numerous topics concerning the GED certificate, but there was difficulty finding research that documented GED students' experiences as told from the GED students' point of view. To acquire a more holistic picture of these students, certain questions began to surface: Why did they drop out of school? What motivated them to return to an adult education program at this time in their lives? What challenges did they face? What barriers did they overcome? What was their motivation for obtaining a GED credential? What goals had they set beyond the credential? Did any positive or negative changes accompany these lived experiences? In general, what did GED students' lived experiences tell us about the GED credential and the adult learners who aspired to the goal of achieving it? The more research that I read, the more it became apparent that little first-hand information about this phenomenon existed in the literature. It was my belief that detailing a study of this nature would add to the literature base. With new research, the relationship between the GED practitioner and the GED student might change. From a practitioners' point of view, reading about

what students experienced as they worked on the GED credential might assist teachers in developing their curricula or reflecting on their teaching techniques. The need for funding and how allocated dollars for adult education were working might provide helpful explanations to funders and legislators. It might also serve as an indication of what a determined person could achieve if given a second chance.

The purpose of this study was primarily to investigate a myriad of questions about the experience of obtaining a GED certificate, starting with dropping out of school and culminating with finally achieving that goal. What did these students experience between the time they dropped out and decided to pursue their GED credential? How did their past experiences determine their decision to return to school? What were the underlying factors that contributed to their decision to return to school? This research included descriptions and explanations of the experiences of the people who lived through it. Stake (1995) stated, “Qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes *thick description*, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey” (p. 39, emphasis in the original). With this research, an empathetic understanding of these students was developed.

An additional purpose of this research was to inform those who are not involved in adult education, like employers, funders, and legislators. In certain circumstances, they needed to understand the obstacles that some students face and the ways in which these students overcame specific situations. Some educators may even have mistaken assumptions about GED students, their goals, motivations, experiences, and perspectives. This study gave a clearer picture of who the GED students were and explained the situations that accompanied their decisions to drop out of and eventually return to adult

education classes. I hoped that the appropriate questions would elicit responses that will clarify what it was that the test taker expected and received from this experience.

Employers' positive impressions of GED students who exhibited dedication and determination to set goals and accomplished them were the subject of more than one conversation I have had with colleagues in the field of adult education. Kaplan and Venezky (1995, 1993) and Murnane and Tyler (2000) also documented this tenacity in research. The extent to which these learners will go to achieve their goals needed more documentation. By giving an account of their experiences, these students' words had the capability of enlightening others who could appreciate what they had endured. In the literature, economic gains made after the GED Tests bore a great deal of importance (Tyler 2004, 1998; Tyler, Murnane, and Willett 2000), but there were many more facets linked to this endeavor. Most GED students were concerned about making a substantial wage. They were interested in attending classes to learn with a teacher who cares about them and their goals. They wanted to not only improve their academic skills but also their social and/or soft skills.

Another reason that emphasized the value of this research involved an event which convinced me that more people need to understand the importance of the GED credential. About five years ago, funding for adult education was facing a 67% cut in federal funding. Programs from across the country knew they had to move quickly to produce success stories to demonstrate their effectiveness in their communities. They all had statistics, but history had shown that legislators like to hear success stories from those who had experienced them. They wanted to hear first hand how the money they allocated to adult education helped to improve their lives. They were interested in

examples that showed how these adults became more involved parents, more engaged workers, and more involved citizens and how they were preparing for the workforce, post-secondary, or training opportunities. Because few documented resources existed, individual adult education programs had to use precious time trying to gather this information. The threat of a 67% funding cut was daunting. Many program administrators in Pennsylvania realized that legislators had scant qualitative evidence of the successes found in adult education classes because resources were sparse. Adult education program directors knew that qualitative documentation would firmly inform the congressmen of the importance of adult education classes, complete with GED success stories. It took some scrambling to get all the information to the legislators before their crucial vote and in the end, adult education funding cuts amounted to 15% instead of 67%. This incident reinforced my conviction about writing more research concerning the importance of the GED credential; there needed to be a synthesis of resources available. Depending on the economy, this funding issue could happen again and if it did, a study like this would provide a useful synthesis of documentation describing successes and challenges, collected in one resource. It was my hope that this study would provide stakeholders and funders the information they would need to make informed decisions about supporting adult education. They would be able to read about what sacrifices some GED recipients must make in order to receive the credential. Although nothing replaces in-person testimonials, through this study, legislators would be able to ascertain where their dollars were going and whom their money helped. If funding became scarce again, I wanted this work to be a resource that could demonstrate the importance and worth of the GED certificate in western Pennsylvania. While this

type of research would not achieve this goal by itself, it would provide a general awareness of what it was like to be a GED student while raising a family and holding down a job. Hopefully it would offer powers-that-be an appreciation for some of the sacrifices that were made and some of the barriers that were overcome by those who desired their GED credential.

Research Problem

As I thought about the main research question, I realized that several other sub-questions also needed attention in order to understand the full scope of the students' experiences. I wanted to discover the students' logic behind their decision to return to class; so many of them had dropped out of school due to negative academic/scholastic experiences. The timing was vital and I was curious as to the determining factor of this major decision. Some students were adamant about never returning to any type of schooling, so I wanted to know the type of jobs they secured without an educational credential. For some students, major changes, (personally, academically, and economically), occurred in their lives as a result of this process and I thought an explanation of their perceptions would be valuable to understanding their experiences. The data source for these questions was the students' perceptions about these topics.

Research Question and Sub-questions

The following questions and sub-questions were the basis for this research:

1. What are the lived experiences of a person who has taken the GED Tests within the last six months?

2. How does the value society puts on educational credentials impact the learner's decision to return to the adult education classroom to prepare for the GED credential?
3. What are students' reasons for wanting a GED certificate when research shows it has limited economic benefits?
4. How do high school dropouts survive in a society that values educational credentials?
5. According to GED students, who or what has helped them persist in their studies?
6. What factors determined their return to education at this time and not several years ago or several years from now?
7. What part, if any, do support from teachers, classmates, and family members play in GED students' studies?
8. What major changes have they experienced as a result of studying for and taking the GED Tests?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework for this research project was functionalism and how the functionalist view pertained to schooling and society. After reading Feinberg and Soltis' book, "School and Society," (2004) I was convinced that functionalism was the theoretical framework for this research because they looked at school as more than just teaching the 3 R's. There was more going on in the school that reflected what was

happening in society than most people thought and that was where I started to make correlations and comparisons. I had learned from social sciences that functionalism referred to an organism that contained various parts and organs that contributed to sustaining that organism. I looked at this statement as a metaphor for the school systems of which these GED students were a part; a larger system, which for various reasons, did not help them to attain success. Whether these reasons were internal or external, once they were without the necessary skills to become what they considered to be productive members of society, they had to make the decision to re-enter that system and embark on a new beginning. Because of its relationship to school and society, this framework helped me examine the research questions through a different lens because I could scrutinize these students' previous feelings about education vs. how they now felt once they were part of an adult education program. The idea of functionalism and being part of a bigger entity in which they played a part, was once unpleasant to them, but now was something they desired and using this framework, I was able to state my questions in such a way as to elicit pertinent information as to how they perceived their experiences. The next chapter explores this framework more in depth.

The methodology used was interviewing. It was the ideal qualitative research method for students to express themselves and for others to hear their voices and opinions. I chose interviewing because several researchers have shown its appropriateness in social science studies. Van Manen (1990) talked about several uses for the interview as it applies to hermeneutic phenomenology and although this is not a phenomenological study, I could not dispute his reasoning. He said the interview, "may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may

serve as a phenomenon” (p. 66). And he talked about taped interviews “as another way of collecting accounts of personal experiences” (p. 67). He stressed that sometimes it is easier to talk than write because the writing “forces the person into a more reflective attitude, which may make it more difficult to stay close to an experience as it is immediately lived” (p. 67). I wanted that raw emotion to come through in the interviews and using the taped interview, these GED students were more easily able to express themselves because they were talking to someone interested in their plight. Both Seidman (1998) and Merriam (1998) talked about using interviewing as a way to interpret the meaning people make from their experiences. Merriam also said interviewing becomes necessary when our goal is to learn about past experiences that are impossible to reproduce. These researchers demonstrated to me that the method of interviewing was ideal because it enabled people to describe their experiences in their own words. These anecdotes were what make them unique as learners and gave them character. Every account was distinctive and every situation had special meaning. Through interviewing, I was able to elicit responses to many questions that shed light on their situations and although there were too few people to generalize, I was able to discover some trends among the students. The next chapter discusses in depth the methodology of qualitative interviewing.

Research Design

Cresswell (1998) stated that in a research design, there is a “traditional research approach of presenting a problem, asking a question, collecting data to answer the question, analyzing the data, and answering the question” (p. 18). In general, I

interviewed the participants and analyzed the data, which became the basis for this research study.

The participants for this study volunteered from 12 individual adult education programs, representing seven counties in the southwestern part of Pennsylvania. (There are 14 GED programs in the region but only 12 chose to participate). I asked each of the 12 program directors to speak to their GED teachers about the impending project. In turn, the GED teachers explained the project to their students. Those interested gave contact information to their GED teachers who shared it with me. I then got in touch with the students so I could establish a rapport and start to build a trusting relationship. Because some urban GED testing centers offered the test every week and some rural sites offered it every month, it was not possible to talk with students before and after they took the tests. I obtained a list of adult learners who had taken their GED Tests and were interested in being part of this research. As the list depleted, I revisited it until I reached a maximum of 30 participants.

This was a heterogeneous population, so I used stratified sampling in order to best represent the population used in this research. I tried to ensure a balanced representation of race, gender, age, and urban and rural test takers by being mindful of who was on the list and by keeping track of who was available, but in the end, the balance was hard to maintain and I eventually talked to those students willing and able to be interviewed regardless of race, gender, or age. The other criteria for participation were: their age—they had to be at least 18 years old, their willingness to meet with me, and their availability to meet for a one hour interview. In order to understand how the complete experience affected all students, I not only interviewed students who passed the tests, but

also those who failed them as well. In the end, 20 students passed the entire battery of tests before they were interviewed and 10 students needed to pass one more test to complete the battery; mostly math.

I struggled with sample size. Patton (2002) said there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. He stated that it depends on what is wanted, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and more importantly, “what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). He also tackled the issue of breadth vs. depth. I decided that for the purposes of this study, breadth took precedence over depth. Considering the number of GED test takers in Pennsylvania, 30 was not a large number, but due to the time constraints of these students, it was impractical to even consider engaging in an in-depth interview process. In advance of talking with the students, I decided that the interviews would be one hour in length. I tried to keep the time short so as not to interrupt their busy schedules. I was aware that 30 participants would certainly not give enough information for generalizations, but possibly this sample would highlight trends, underscore a degree of program effectiveness, draw recurring themes from students who come from both urban and rural programs, and maybe open up discussion for future research.

Using the main research question and sub-questions as the basis for this study, I followed a guide of open-ended questions to ask all of the participants. Seidman (1998), stated, “If the researcher’s goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (pp. 4-5). Merriam (1998) said, “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people

interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 72). In this situation, because I wanted to know about the lived experiences of these GED students, the interview was essential. This mode gave the participants an opportunity to converse about what their lives were like as they worked on achieving this goal. From this communication, I got an emic interpretation of the participants’ lives.

The interviews were open-ended and less structured. According to Merriam (1998), “Less structured formats assume that the individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 74). The interviews were audio taped and I took notes as necessary. I taped the conversations so as not to distract the participants who might find the constant writing disruptive. Immediately after the interviews, I added to my field notes to document any situation I might need to reference later, if necessary. So as to keep the interview spontaneous, participants did not see the questions before they were asked; rather they were given time to think about their answers as they proceeded through the interview.

In order to produce high-quality information-bearing questions, three pilot interviews took place before the formal interviewing process began. Merriam (1998) stated, “Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions” (p. 75). She also described four categories of questions: hypothetical, devil’s advocate, ideal position, and interpretive (p. 76). I hoped that each of these categories would elicit very different and quite telling information. The hypothetical or “what if” questions gave the participants a chance to describe what things were like as they experienced them. The “devil’s advocate” questions gave the participants a chance to think about a situation from another

point of view. The “ideal position” questions let the participants imagine how they would like to see things run if they were in charge or what advice they would give to the next class of GED test takers. Merriam (1998) stated these questions “reveal both the positives and the negatives or shortcomings of a program” (p. 78). The “interpretive” questions gave me a chance to get the information I needed as well as hear some final thoughts from the participants. These questions, according to Merriam, “provide a check on what you think you are understanding, as well as provide an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed” (p. 78). I knew that this might be the only opportunity the GED test takers had to speak out about their situation and this last type of questions ensured as much information as possible was elicited and included. I used the data analysis software package N-Vivo to process the collect data. This software was useful in reviewing the data in different ways, depending on the coding that I chose. After transcribing all the interviews, I contacted each participant for one last data check for accuracy.

Definition of Terms

In this paper, I used the following terms and it was possible to substitute one term for another.

ABE – Adult Basic Education

Adult Education Classroom – the place where the teaching and learning took place. This included but was not limited to a regular classroom, a room in a church, or a tutoring site in a library. In some cases, students also referred to this as “school”.

Adult Learner – the person who enrolled in an adult education class; also called the student.

Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) – the funding source for the adult education programs in Pennsylvania that participated in this study.

GED – General Educational Development; many people think the “D” stands for “diploma,” but it does not.

GED credential – the documentation that students received upon passing the GED; also known as the GED certificate, the GED diploma or GED certification.

GED Tests – the battery of five subtests that included mathematics (which was divided into two parts, one using a calculator and one not using a calculator), science, social studies, language arts reading and language arts writing, which included a written essay.

Participant – the students who were the focal point of this study.

Practitioner – a teacher, tutor, counselor, or administrator who was involved in an adult education program.

Significance of the Study

The research problem was significant because there was a scant amount of literature that addressed the importance of the GED certificate or documented the lived experiences of GED learners as told in their own words. I also believed it would be noteworthy to include information about the GED credential and the students’ idea of its importance in our society today. It was vital to experience their encounters through their

eyes and essential to allow them to explain one of the most crucial decisions of their adult lives. This documentation was significant because it could assist practitioners who, in using or writing a curriculum, might keep in mind the balance between academic skills and the challenges learners face in everyday life situations. This research might also be something to which funders and politicians could refer so they could possess an understanding of how adult education programs used their donations and tax dollars. The central focus of this study was finding the essence of what it was like to be a GED student. Even though the sample did not exceed 30 participants, the accounts of their experiences will resonate with all who read them. The low number did not allow for generalization of the data, but there were recurrent themes that came out of their depictions. I also hoped that eventually this study would be helpful to those about to participate in an adult education GED class.

This study was more practical than theoretical. The expectation was that after I analyzed the data, this study would shed some light on who these students were and what they experienced as they went through the process of studying for the GED Tests. The findings will be of more interest to GED practitioners, adult educators, and GED students than other populations of readers and will have more significance in the adult education classroom than anywhere else.

Assumptions

There were quite a few assumptions that I possessed which guided my study. As a GED teacher, I only knew the students I taught and made generalizations from their behavior and from what they discussed. I knew there must be other students with similar

or completely opposite experiences, and so that was what first directed me to this research. When I first decided to embark upon investigating what GED students experience in relation to taking the tests, I imagined there would be myriad resources available for reading, researching, and reviewing. I was disappointed to learn that there was some literature, but it was not as abundant as I had hoped. I also thought that the reason why these students were not the topic of research was because they did not have much to say. From my personal experience, some students were vocal, but I was curious to find out if this was the case in other programs. I thought about the kind of students GED programs served in general. I was under the impression that most GED students were parents, were not married, and lived on Welfare. I wanted to talk to students from both rural and urban settings to get an idea of who came to these programs for help and dispel these notions.

I thought that students did not have plans for the future; that they came to their programs to learn skills so they could pass the GED Tests, but did not know where their next step was. I also thought they were not trusting of strangers and did not care about others in their classes. All of these assumptions, which were the guiding force for my research, became challenges that I examined as I continued through this process. In Chapters Four and Five, I address many of these assumptions.

As for the interviewees, there were no assumptions on their part as to who I was and what I was doing there. Once they volunteered to be part of this project, I called them before the interview to explain my research, the importance of their input as a GED student, and made arrangements for a meeting place and time. Before the interview began, I reviewed and signed a consent form with each participant. I explained in detail

the purpose of the study, the reason for the interviews, and the intent of the completed study. The student and I then signed two copies of the consent form, one for each of us to keep. Merriam (1998) stated that, “the qualitative research investigator must be a *good communicator*. A good communicator empathizes with respondents, establishes a good rapport, asks good questions, and listens intently” (p. 23, emphasis in original). It was my goal to be a good communicator.

Limitations

This study was limited first, because it only used 30 participants in the sample. The small number of participants made it impossible for generalization to occur beyond this small group, even with participants from the same program; however, I obtained enough information to suggest recurring trends or themes. Due to the small sample size, another limitation was the difficulty in representation of gender, race, or sex. A further limitation was that the students involved came from only seven counties in western Pennsylvania, so they were not representative of the entire state. All participants were part of programs that received funding from the state Bureau of Adult Basic Literacy and Education (ABLE), so people who studied for their GED Tests in other ways, aside from attending an adult education class, were not be represented. The most important limitation was time. Because the students did not have a lot of time, I was only able to interview them for one hour, which led to another limitation, that of in-depth questioning. With such a time constraint, the questions had to be concise. One meeting did not afford the participants a chance to reflect on previous answers given. Even with these

limitations, I believe that the research conveyed information that contributes to the field of literature in adult education.

Summary

There was a large amount of research information pertaining mainly to the economic benefits of earning a GED certificate and there was also other research that detailed certain aspects of an adult learners' life such as persistence, dealing with barriers, and support, to name a few. What was missing in most of these documents was the description of these experiences through the eyes and words of those who lived through it. Most of the literature did not speak directly to the adult learners so we were unable to hear their voices. I made the decision to increase the knowledge base and embark on a qualitative research project concerning the experiences of GED students as seen from their perspective. Through their words, the hope was that there would be a better understanding of the experience of being a GED student. The interviewees represented potential participants who had taken their GED Tests from one to six months before the interviews. Besides being at least 18 years old, the other criterion for participation in this study was their availability to talk with me for one hour. The methodology used was interviewing and the theoretical framework used was functionalism. The software program N-Vivo assisted me in analyzing the data. The findings from the data not only resulted in anecdotes about the experiences of the GED students, but they also allowed the reader to enter the world of the student and realize the internal and external demands that were experienced by some adult learners on their way to achieving this goal.

The next chapter contains an in-depth examination of the literature associated with the topic of the GED credential, its value in our society, and the benefits it provides the students who take it. It will also examine gaps in the literature along with an explanation of both the theoretical framework and the methodology used in this research project.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of the GED student. The aim of this chapter is to review the existing literature relevant to the GED credential. The chapter includes an overview of GED-related literature, the history of the GED Tests, and the economic and academic debate about the outcomes of the GED Tests. This chapter also looks at the issue of whether the GED Tests produce successful results and the future role of the GED credential. It focuses on literature that addresses persistence and support, delves into the qualitative research method of interviewing, addresses the theoretical framework and concludes with what I consider to be weaknesses and gaps in the literature.

The databases explored were ABI/Inform (Abstracted Business Information), Education Abstracts Full Text, Wilson; education databases, including Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC); Periodicals Index Online; and ProQuest Direct. I found the majority of the articles in this review in the education databases, ProQuest Direct, and ABI/Inform databases. I found most of the articles under the descriptors *General Education Development*, *General Educational Development*, *General Educational Development diplomas*, *GED*, or *high school equivalency diploma* in the education databases and ProQuest Direct. When searching in ABI/Inform, I added the terms *economic gains* or *employment gains*. This produced numerous articles that were heavy on statistics. ERIC Digest, Periodicals Index Online, and Education Abstracts Full

Text, Wilson, produced no useable hits within the time frame of 1986-2009. In this review, the terms *General Educational Development (GED) credential*, *GED certificate*, and *GED diploma*, are interchangeable, as are the terms *student* and *adult learner*, and *GED graduate* and *GED recipient*.

Overview of GED-related Literature

The prominent names associated with this topic were Cameron and Heckman (1993), for their landmark study refuting the employment equivalence of high school graduates and GED recipients; Beder (1992), who was the first researcher to follow GED graduates five, 10, and 15 years after they had received their credential; Boesel (1998), a senior analyst at the National Library of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, who produced a great quantity of statistical research; Auchter (1998), then the Executive Director of the GED Testing Service; Baldwin (1997, 1995a, 1995b), a researcher with the GED Testing Service; Tyler, Murnane, and Willett (2000), Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (1999), Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997, 1995), all researchers associated with the Harvard School of Education; and Tyler (2005, 2004, 2003, 2002a, 2002b, 1998), an economics professor from Brown University who reported annually on the economic aspects of the GED credential for Labor and Industry, and who was also a researcher for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL).

History of the GED Tests

In 1942, a special committee of the U.S. Armed Forces recommended the development of some kind of test for assessing the educational achievements of military

personnel. The American Council on Education (ACE) received the responsibility of developing a high school equivalency test which would assess five areas of curriculum taught at non-technical high schools throughout the country. The five areas included English grammar, social studies, natural science, literature, and mathematics. In 1943, these tests used 35,000 high school seniors representing each of the 48 states to obtain standardization. In 1953 state departments of education began to assume the responsibility for administering the test and by 1959 the number of civilians taking the tests outnumbered military personnel (Kaplan and Venezky, 1995, 1993). Over the past 60 years, more than 15 million people have passed the GED Tests (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 83). People taking the tests viewed them as a gateway to getting a better job, entering post-secondary programs, taking advantage of available training programs, and overall, raising their self-esteem. The tests were not without their critics; several issues surrounded them. There had always been controversy about the value of the GED credential, both in terms of academic and economic satisfaction.

In 1947 the GED Tests were first made available to civilians “when the state of New York implemented a program to award its high school diploma to those who passed the tests” (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 83). California became the last state to join in the GED testing program in 1973 (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 83). Until the latest change in 2002, the GED Tests were always multiple-choice with five alternatives for each question. There have always been five subtests, but their names have changed slightly over the years. Presently, the five subtests include mathematics (divided into two parts, one using a calculator and one without the calculator), science, social studies, language arts reading, and language arts writing (which includes a written essay). It takes

a little over seven and one-half hours to complete the entire battery of tests. (GED website, 2006).

The tests have undergone several changes since 1942. In 1978 a separate reading section became a new add-on taking the focus from recalling facts to application of knowledge and evaluation of information. Another addition was the writing sample, added in 1988, which provided an increased emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills (GED Testing Service, 2000). In 2002 the testing series underwent the fourth revision in its 60-year history. These changes reflected the demands of our information-based society.

The 2002 Series GED Tests emphasized critical thinking skills and those higher-level skills from Bloom's Taxonomy. This new version of the tests required candidates to possess good problem solving and decision-making skills. The tests contained more graphs and charts and were 60% more visual than the previous tests. Some parts of the tests required that the tester provide an answer from inferred information, rather than picking from a list of possible answers, which was prevalent in the past. The math section has undergone the most revision. Prior to the administration of the math test, the tester-takers must watch a 10-minute video explaining how to use the scientific calculator, which the testing center provides. The proctor also explains the grid sheet, which the test takers need to record the answers. (The GED Testing Service [GEDTS] realizes that not every GED test-taker has attended an adult education class, which is why they emphasize a need for the video.) Adult learners who have attended an adult education class are already familiar with both the calculator and grid sheet, but are required to view the video nonetheless. The math test consists of two parts. In one part,

candidates can use a scientific calculator if necessary. In the second part, the calculators are collected. One of the major changes associated with the essay is the word count. In the past, word count was extremely important. Essays had to be at least 250 words. With the revision of the tests in 2002, communication became the focus of the essay. Now the test instructs GED candidates to write about their prescribed topic until they feel the intended message has been conveyed (GED website, 2006).

Today, a division of the American Council on Education (ACE) still produces and administers the GED Tests. Although each state department of education can set its own standards, the ACE sets the national requirements. In 2002, during the revision of the tests, the calculation of scores also changed. In order to make this standardized test look more like the SAT, the minimum passing score changed from 225 to 2250. In each of the five subsections, a minimum of 40 points was once required to pass. Now the scale ranges from a minimum of 200 points to a maximum of 800 points for each subject area. In the United States, a candidate can pass the tests with an average of 450 points, with no individual test score dropping below 410. “The median standard score for U.S. graduating high school seniors is 500 for each of the five tests” (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 3). In order to standardize the tests, “the questions are pre-tested on high school seniors before becoming part of final test forms” (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 1).

With statistics like these, one might not think there would be any question about the veracity of the GED tests. But in 1993 a controversy arose that even today continues to attract critics on both sides of the issue.

The Economic and Academic Debate over the GED Tests

According to Cameron and Heckman (1993), a comparison of two groups of 25- and 28-year old male high school dropouts and GED recipients showed that there was very little or no economic advantage to obtaining the GED credential. Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (1999) shared this sentiment to a degree, maintaining that GED credentials do pay off, but only for a select group of dropouts. They acknowledged that getting the GED diploma raised future earnings for dropouts who leave high school with low academic skills, but they believed that regardless of skill levels, most workers with GED certificates still fared worse than their peers who stayed in school. Kaplan and Venezky (1995, 1993) viewed the impact of the GED credential in another light, which went beyond monetary value. They believed that some employers found it significant that the person who studied for and passed the GED Tests might be more determined to get things done. This determination demonstrated a maturity that was not measurable by any test. Also, they acknowledged that an employer who hired a GED graduate would get roughly an equivalent to a high school graduate in literacy skills. They also stressed that there was a big difference between the earning power of the person who received a GED credential and the high school dropout who never went on to get a GED credential.

Tyler (2005, 2004, 2003, 2002a, 1998) alleged that although the GED diploma could lead to important gains in earnings, by itself the credential was not a way out of poverty. He observed young, White dropouts from Connecticut and Florida in a group of GED credential holders, five years after they received their credential and found that their annual earnings were 10 to 20 percent higher than dropouts without the GED certificate.

Baldwin (1995b) stated that GED graduates earn an average of \$2,000 more a year than high school dropouts. The 2004 GED Statistical Report stated that according to “the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, those who have a high school diploma, including those with a GED credential, earn \$158 more a week than those who did not graduate from high school” (p. 3).

In Pennsylvania Dean, et al. (1998, 1996) explained that after students earned their GED credential, their pay increased significantly. They had more job satisfaction and the jobs they held required higher skills which they did not possess prior to receiving the GED credential. His survey conveyed that people had more benefits from work after the GED credential and more people owned their homes after receiving it. Those surveyed deemed the helpfulness of their teachers to be one of the factors that got them through their ABE/GED (Adult Basic Education/General Educational Development) course and helped them to successfully complete the GED Tests. Many people found they had improved self-esteem and enjoyed life more in general. They encouraged their children to finish high school so they could get a better job, and more women than men encouraged other people to take the GED Tests. Dean’s research was the last produced that focused on the GED credential in Pennsylvania.

It would seem with research showing even minimal successes for GED recipients that the tests would be a highly regarded credential, but a new controversy questioned the popularity of the GED certificate. Why did so many people take the tests when there seemed to be rumblings of dissatisfaction among the researchers about the value of a GED certificate?

Thomas Smith (2003) discussed the contradiction between the demand for the GED credential among adult learners and its value in society. He quoted many of the same researchers cited in this study and asked why, with such a diminished hope of succeeding, more people were taking these tests than ever before. Smith talked about the high rate of loan defaults, which is common among GED students. The problem is that they are not prepared for most college courses and wind up using Pell Grant monies to take non-credit remedial courses. When their money runs out, the students have little to show for their efforts, so they quit in disgust. The result is little or no college credit courses on their transcripts but quite an accumulation of debt, which they are ill-prepared to pay back. Smith explained, “Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997) found that attaining a GED within four years of leaving high school was associated with an initial 2 percent increase in the probability of attending college for both male and female dropouts” and continued, “While postsecondary enrollment rates for GED recipients are much higher than the rates of other dropouts, completion rates tend to be far lower than for traditional high school graduates” (2003, pp. 385-386). Unfortunately, “while the GED provides access to postsecondary education, it is associated with a relatively low probability of completing a postsecondary degree” (p. 386).

Smith wondered why the GED credential was so popular if it failed to help the majority of its recipients (p. 376). He also questioned if, since GED recipients had to conform to the norms of a high school graduate, they also had to attend college (p. 394). He concluded that even though the GED certificate may have limited economic returns, students take the tests because it puts them in a class with others who have attained their high school diplomas. He referred to this as the “institutionalized self” (p. 395), which

was advocated by Meyer (1987). Smith concluded that “the GED, as a terminal degree, may have little short-run economic value, but it can provide a bridge for dropouts to reconnect to both the education system and their high school graduate peers” (2003, p. 395).

Baker (2009) addressed how our society views “dropouts”, a term that has come to mean nothing short of a summative measure of the lack of worth of a person. Dropout is the inverse of school graduate, and then taken together they form an educational status that no one in the schooled society can now escape from. One is either a graduate of the normal amount of schooling at a particular time, or is a dropout. (p. 5)

Baker went on to observe an “historical shift in people’s thinking on what was normal about who goes to school and for how long?” (p. 9). Before reading Baker’s research, I had never considered how horribly society perceives dropouts. His insight made me question my own meaning of the word “dropout.” It seems so harsh to describe them as having “lack of worth” (p. 5). Maybe because I am a teacher, I looked for the unfortunate circumstances and did not consider these people the dregs of society. Baker’s insight helped me to look at dropouts more holistically and consider not only their potential but the lack thereof that got them into this predicament. His research informed my study in that it changed the way I look at these adult learners now. It also helped me to realize that many of them were acutely aware that society perceived them as Baker described them. For many, this perception was the catalyst to come to GED classes. The aforementioned researchers cited noteworthy points about our society and what schooling

provides both intrinsically and extrinsically. The next chapter will address this topic more in-depth.

Another group of researchers considered whether the GED credential was a bridge to additional opportunities. Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997) explored the question of whether the GED credential led to more training, post-secondary education, and military service for high school dropouts. They concluded that the GED credential did lead to all of these things. It enabled the recipient to become involved in specialized training and gave them added access to post-secondary education. The researchers found that a higher number of GED recipients obtained non-company training than high school graduates. In their study they found that the male GED recipient got more non-company training before getting the GED certificate than did high school dropouts. The GED recipients took advantage of government training programs. The researchers found that, for minorities, this training was a good way to overcome any discrimination they might encounter in the labor market.

In another study from Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1995), the question explored was whether high school dropouts benefitted from getting a GED credential. This report, although very heavy on statistics, stated that White males did benefit from getting the credential because they worked soon after obtaining it. This report focused on four issues. First, the researchers asked if GED recipients fared as well as high school graduates in the labor market. Here, they agreed with Cameron and Heckman (1993) who said there was no significant gain from the GED credential. Their second question asked if high school dropouts benefitted from acquiring a GED credential. The answer was that they did fare better *if* the reason they took the GED Tests was to advance in their

employment. The next question asked if the GED Tests were the best way to give dropouts a second chance. The researchers reported that dropouts would have more opportunities if they stayed in high school, but the GED Tests helped them focus on test-taking skills. This statement concurred with the Murnane and Tyler (2000) research that said studying for the GED Tests improved basic test-taking skills and impressed employers who respected the process of obtaining a GED credential. Murnane, Willett, and Boudett's (1995) last question asked if it was a desirable social policy to require a person to get a GED credential or high school diploma to acquire access to job related training. They acknowledged that training is less costly for clients who have mastered basic skills. A growing number of cognitive scientists believed that contextualizing job training skills with basic academic skills helped people learn more. They concluded that male dropouts did acquire modest economic benefits from obtaining a GED diploma. So if a GED graduate decided to enter the job market, what did this signal to employers? Tyler's group participated in research on this topic.

Tyler, Murnane, and Willett (2000) briefly explored the signaling value of the GED credential in the labor market. They explained that in the labor market, the GED credential was the "signal" to employers that GED recipients were more highly productive and ready to receive a higher wage offer. From their study they found that the GED credential "signal" increased the earnings of young White male dropouts between 10 percent and 19 percent. They found no significant effects for minority dropouts. Smith (2003) made an interesting observation when he stated, "If employers value other aspects of the high school experience more than just basic skill development, GED recipients may be at a disadvantage relative to other dropouts simply because they spend

less time in school” (p. 385). Some employers realized the determination and persistence it takes to get a GED credential and believed these were desirable qualities in a perspective employee. Smith (2003) stated, “Although taking and passing the GED exam may demonstrate skills and motivation, it may not be sufficient to demonstrate successful internalization of the types of behaviors employers expect of high school graduates” (2003, p. 391). So the signaling value of the GED credential seemed to be another controversial issue. While this controversy persisted, discussion of the economic benefits realized from the GED credential continued to permeate the literature.

In 2004 Tyler presented data from Florida where he compared the economic status of GED test takers six years after they had taken the tests. As in his previous research, he found that those who passed the GED Tests earned more money than those who failed the tests, but he found the earnings to be quite small. There was only about \$1,400 annually that separated the male high school dropouts who passed the tests and those who failed them (p. 579).

In their research project entitled “High School and Beyond”, Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (1999) compared the statistics from one of the cohorts of high school graduates and dropouts who obtained their GED credentials to dropouts that did not pursue the credential. What they found was that while college was worthwhile for both high school graduates and GED recipients, high school graduates completed almost two and one half years more of college than GED recipients (p. 25).

The research Tyler conducted in 2003 showed that dropouts with weak cognitive skills who obtained their GED credentials had “substantial economic gains,” but those who had stronger skills, showed no such benefit. Another result was that it took time for

GED recipients to realize economic gains. This supported Tyler's previous research (2002a) that stated the fifth year after earning a GED credential represented about a 15 percent gain in earnings (p. 3); therefore, research that looked at short-term results may have missed reporting substantial gains. And the last lesson is that GED recipients' ability to earn more money was equal to that of a high school graduate; however, there was evidence that GED recipients did not participate in postsecondary education or company-sponsored training as much as high school graduates (p. 371). Reviewing the research done on the GED credential highlighted the issue of the length of time to accurately report statistics.

Trying to collect data is not an easy job, and Johnson and Valentine (1992) reported that there were common problems inherent in collecting GED statistics. Johnson and Valentine believed that because researchers wanted to demonstrate GED program successes, they inflated the outcomes while ignoring the bias. They reported that studies suffered from low response rates. Most importantly, Johnson and Valentine stated the dilemma that confronted researchers was the best time to collect outcome data. Allowing for a significant time lapse after individuals took the GED Tests to get good follow-up statistics, led to difficulty in locating the GED recipients. They had either moved, leaving no forwarding address, or just did not want to be bothered filling out a survey. Even a year after the tests, GED graduates were difficult to locate. Johnson and Valentine (1992) believed that self-reported data was not research-based and the samples used were too small, so generalizations were out of the question.

The research just reviewed showed the economic benefits of obtaining the GED credential, but it did not explore the people about whom the researchers were talking.

Although it was important to understand the economic worth of this credential, money was not the only benefit achieved by obtaining it. Human beings became statistics to demonstrate the viability of the earning power of the GED diploma, but there were so many variables attached to GED students that earn the credential, it seemed unfair to portray them solely in this light. The void in the literature convinced me that there needs to be more qualitative research focusing on the GED students themselves. In referring to GED recipients who got a job, even if it were a low paying one, there was a social return on investment that these researchers seemed to ignore. The next section focuses on who took the GED Tests and what skills they needed to pass the tests.

Who Takes the GED Tests?

In order to obtain a GED credential, the examinee must surpass the test performance of about 40 percent of graduating high school seniors (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 1). Cameron and Heckman (1993) claimed in their report that the tests were too easy. They gave an example of the kind of question asked on the tests and reported anyone with a fourth grade level of reading could pass them. In their words, GED graduates were “psychometrically inferior” to high school graduates. Test taking skills were a part of preparation for the GED credential. Smith (2003) said that less than a quarter of GED test takers did not spend more than 100 hours preparing for the tests. Boesel (1998) found that while the GED process certified basic cognitive skills, it usually did not generate them. He contended that GED preparation did not teach non-cognitive skills like regular attendance, meeting deadlines, demonstrating competence, and cooperating with others. The high school diploma, on the other hand, Boesel (1998) stated, signified the possession of both kinds of skills at certain levels.

Cameron and Heckman (1993) asserted that GED programs flourished because the government funds training programs, which asked for high school equivalency in order to qualify for benefits. These programs, they believed, did not prepare a student for what an employer was looking for in an employee. They maintained that someone earning the GED credential did not have as necessary a preparation for the working world as a high school graduate, which was in accord with Boesel's (1998) thinking. Hawking (1995), on the other hand, argued that to think that tracking attendance and assignments made one a better employee was absurd. He thought it was more reasonable to test for knowledge and skill. According to Hawking the creation of the GED certificate was not for it to be a substitute for schooling, nor did he think it should have been. Boesel (1998) echoed this same notion when he acknowledged that although the GED certification provided an opportunity for education or training, it was not a substitute for it.

According to Boesel, the GED credential was a starting point and not an end in itself. Tyler (2005) also agreed with this statement, saying the emphasis should be on post-secondary and training opportunities for GED recipients (pp.72-73). In his defense of the cost effectiveness of adult education, Hawking (1995) believed that the student who studied for the GED Tests and did not pass, still got the benefit of increased reading, math, and test taking skills. Murnane and Tyler (2000) concurred on this point as well.

Boesel (1998) stated that the shift from GED recipient to post-secondary student often times was problematic. Between 1995 and 2004, the number of GED candidates who stated that they were taking the test for educational reasons had risen from 50% to 62% (Auchter 1998; Baldwin 1997, 1995a, 1995b; GED Testing Service, 2006, 2005). In their 1986 study, Valentine and Darkenwald wanted to stress to high school teachers and

counselors that GED graduation was not a “panacea” because there were few if any “across the board” benefits. They stated that the substantial benefits from earning a GED diploma fell into four categories: job advancement, increased income, improved self-image, and further education. Beder (1999, 1992) and Dean (1998, 1996) repeatedly confirmed these categories in their research.

In 2003, 62% of the national GED passers stated that they were taking the test for an educational reason which meant going to a four-year or two-year college, technical or trade program, skills certification, or job training. Forty-eight percent said it was for employment, defined as getting a first job, keeping their current job, getting a better job, or as an employer requirement. Only 6.3% took the test for military reasons, and 8.6% took it for social reasons, the definition of which is court order, public assistance requirement, or early release (2003 Statistical Report, p. 48). Personal reasons were why 57% of the passers took the tests. These included being a positive role model and personal satisfaction (p. 48). The statistical report did not specify what the “other reasons” were; 15% gave this as a reason for taking the tests. More people took the test for educational reasons, which supported the research by Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997).

Boesel’s (1998) study showed that those obtaining the GED certificate were more likely to enroll in community colleges and technical schools, rather than two- and four-year colleges. Although GED graduates did enroll in two- and four-year colleges, a low number completed the entire curriculum. He believed the age of the student, coupled with family responsibilities, might have contributed to the GED recipient not wanting to enroll in a long-term course. He thought the shorter time span of post-secondary training

programs was more appealing to GED graduates because these programs emphasized occupational skills.

The aim of the General Educational Development Testing Service (GEDTS) was to administer the tests and keep them reflective of changes taking place in our society today. When we moved from an industrial to an informational age, the necessity arose to revise and change the tests several times, thus insuring there would be no compromise to its integrity.

Both academic and corporate organizations accept the GED credential. In its 2004 Statistical Report, the GED Testing Service published these interesting statistics:

- Ninety-seven percent of colleges and universities accept the GED credential as equivalent to a traditional high school diploma.
- One in 20 undergraduates holds a GED credential.
- More than 90 percent of U.S. employers consider those who earned their GED credential the same as traditional high school graduates with regard to hiring, salary, and opportunity for advancement (2006, p. 3).

Before moving to the next set of statistics, there needs to be a clarification of specific terms. The GED Testing Service distinguished between *GED candidates*, *GED completers*, and *GED passers*. *GED candidates* were adults who had taken at least one test of the five in the battery, regardless of whether they passed. *GED completers* were adults who had taken all five tests regardless of whether or not they passed, and *GED passers* were those adults who had earned a high school diploma or the GED credential by passing all five tests with an average of 450 on each of the tests (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 8).

Each year the number of people taking the GED Tests had grown. In the 1980s there was a decline, but in 2001 there was a huge surge in testers because many people wanted to take the tests before the revision. In 2002 in the United States, 603,019 candidates took the GED Tests (329,515 passed), which was a decline from the year before, but in 2003, more than 100,000 additional people took the tests (GED Testing Service, 2005, p. 1). This meant there were more than 700,000 people who took the tests in 2003, with 387,470 passing. In 2004, once again, over 700,000 people took the tests, with 405,724 adults passing (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. vii).

The number of people who passed the tests in Pennsylvania increased from 2002 to 2003, but slightly decreased in 2004. In 2002, 11,862 people passed the tests (GED Testing Service, 2005, p. 62). Because 2002 was the first year of the new test, numbers were down all over the country. In Pennsylvania they were down ever so slightly. In 2003, 13,269 people passed the test, and in 2004, 13,260 passed (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 58).

In Pennsylvania in 2004, there was a nine-to-one male to female ratio of testers. Half of the candidates were White, and the other half represented a slightly higher number of Hispanic than African-American candidates. About 29 percent of the candidates reported completing 10th grade, and approximately 43 percent of the candidates completed 11th grade or higher in a traditional high school program. In 2004 the average age of the GED test-taker was 25.0 years (GED Testing Service, 2006, p. 3). Even though the GED Tests were standardized, the outcomes differed greatly from state to state. With all of these statistics, the question remained: do the GED Tests actually produce success?

What Kind of Success Does the GED Produce?

GED students experienced success in many forms. Students who entered a preparation course while taking care of a family and holding down a job were successes in their own right (Boesel, 1998). Even students who took but did not pass the GED Tests gained some experience working with other students and improving their reading, math, and test taking skills (Hawking, 1995).

Neuman and Caparelli (1998) found that obtaining the GED credential went far beyond the cognitive thinking process and affected all aspects of a test taker's life. The researchers discovered that parents became more involved with their children, paid more attention to them, and saw them in a different light when they (the parents) were studying for the GED Tests. While parents were taking class, they could share child-rearing techniques and work on perfecting social skills with their classmates. Some parents even became more involved in joining community groups where they lived or worked. One group of students wrote to the mayor to cut down on crimes in their neighborhood. Another small group decided to make a resource manual of available services in the community including perspective employers, legal aid societies, and free health counseling.

Because of these projects, the retention rate was higher and more goals were accomplished (Neuman and Caparelli, 1998). The GED classes made it possible for the students to give a voice to their needs and social practices. These researchers felt this experience enhanced the students' personal growth as well as that of their children.

One of the most encouraging aspects of some GED programs was the positive effect parents had on their children when they (the parents) returned to school. When

parents were more aware of the importance of their own education, they paid more attention to their children's educational opportunities and successes as well. Beder's (1999, 1992), studies reported increased attention to one's family as did the work of Dean, et al. (1998, 1996). In their longitudinal study on Pennsylvania's *Success Stories* winners, Royce and Gacka (2001) reported that

successful adult learners regard the GED as the turning point in their lives: It was the first goal they set for themselves. It provided their first taste of success. From then on, they set out to reshape their lives in accordance with their dreams (p. ix).

Their report went on to state that 49% of those earning their GED credential entered college immediately and half of those participants who enrolled in college but did not earn degrees still took college courses as time and money permitted them to do so (p. ix). With most of the literature reviewed, what seemed to be the future role of the GED credential?

The Future Role of the GED Credential

Murnane and Tyler (2000) realized the importance of and the increasing role in American education that the GED credential possessed. They believed that it was a mistake that GED administrators and K-12 educators had little or no dialogue about this issue. They felt consideration of the growth of the GED credential was essential when talking about improving American education. Their four-part plan for the role of the GED credential in American education focused first on providing second chance opportunities to those with weak skills left over from high school. These weak skills also led to poor employment records. Secondly, they wanted to increase the post-secondary opportunities for those who had passed the GED Tests because without these

opportunities, the chances for furthering one's education became more and more remote, a point that Tyler (2005) reiterated. Third, they wanted to minimize the incentive for high school students to drop out and get their GED credential. Fourth, they believed guidance counselors and other school personnel should be discouraged from encouraging students who did poorly on their exit exams to drop out and get their GED credential. This advice concurred with the philosophy that the GED credential was not a substitute for high school and all it had to offer (Hawking, 1995).

Researchers like Hawking (1995), Valentine and Darkenwald (1986), Boesel (1998), and Kroll (1993) believed that there were tools in place to dictate policy on the GED credential. These included individual states setting the minimum age at which to take the GED Tests and a minimum passing score. Murnane and Tyler (2000) knew that these policies were not enough to attain the aforementioned goals, and they thought there might have to be trade-offs in the future. For instance, they speculated that by allowing the GED credential to serve as a second chance opportunity for dropouts, an increase in the number of people who actually dropped out of high school might occur. They realized that the fate of American education rested in the hands of those educators who needed to contemplate the growing role of the GED credential. Tyler (2005, 2004) voiced the opinion of many when he revealed in his research that he was concerned about the rise in the number of students between the ages of 16-18 who were dropping out of school. There was a fear that public high schools were driving their delinquent students into adult education programs to get them off the school's rolls so they could meet their "No Child Left Behind" commitments (Kozol, COABE Conference, March 2007).

This topic received attention in a *Time Magazine* online exclusive article entitled, “Does a GED Really Do the Job?” by Thornburgh (2006). He addressed the fear of researchers who believed that the GED credential encouraged teenagers who might be experiencing trouble in high school to drop out and take the tests. Thornburgh discussed how, in some states, the minimum age for taking the tests had dropped from 18 to 16 and how, in 1994, 42% of the test-takers were teenagers (2006, ¶ 4). Researchers from the GED Testing Service reported that some teens dropped out of school and never took the tests. They also reported that the number of test-takers took a dip in 2002 as a result of redesigning the tests, but had been steadily rising ever since. Another GED researcher stated that this increase showed the difficulty high schools were experiencing as they tried to keep teens from dropping out (2006, ¶ 7). The topic of whether the GED credential was an enticement for teens to drop out of school is one that persists and should to be the focus of future research. Why students stayed in GED classes is a topic that deals with their persistence and the support they received from their families, their classmates, their friends, and their teachers.

Literature Pertaining to Persistence and Support

The reviewed research revealed that GED retention in adult education classes was high when support from teachers, other students, and family was prevalent. Two keys to retention were persistence and support. The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) study conducted by Comings, Parella, and Soricone (2000) suggested four external supports: “managing positive and negative forces, self-efficacy, setting goals, and making measurable progress” (p. 1) that were essential external supports to persistence in an adult education program. In many adult education

programs, including family literacy, these four external supports, combined with encouragement from family, friends, and teachers, helped students achieve their goals. One set of supports was not exclusive of the other; all needed to be present in some form in order to ensure maximum success for the student. The objective was to have students develop self-efficacy, eventually leading to self-sufficiency.

Self-efficacy

Comings, et al. (2000) stated that “self-efficacy is focused on a specific task and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that task” (p. 5). In this context the task would be successful learning that leads to goal accomplishment. The researchers used Bandura’s social learning theory to list the following experiences that they believed every adult education program should incorporate to build student self-efficacy. Adults should have “mastery experiences” (p. 5), which included situations where they learned how to deal with success as well as failure. Adults should have “vicarious experiences” (p. 5), which meant they needed to speak to students just like themselves who had gone through the same situations and succeeded despite barriers. These past students became mentors and role models for students going through the same process. Adults needed “social persuasion” (p. 5), which was support from their teachers, other classmates, family, and friends. The positive support they acquired from these special people helped them overcome the negative forces they encountered. “Addressing physiological and emotional states” (p. 5), helped teachers acknowledge that negative feelings led to low self-efficacy. Teachers who did not feel comfortable addressing personal concerns could use “dialogue journals and life histories to help students identify any physical and mental states that can affect their learning” (pp. 5-6). Even acknowledging that these feelings

affected learning was helpful to the students. Awareness on the part of the practitioner was the key.

With regard to self-efficacy, Bandura (1977) espoused that those who had high expectations of themselves and believed they could achieve what they set out to do were more successful than those who had low expectations. According to his self-efficacy theory, “Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts” (p. 194). Bandura made it clear that “expectation alone will not produce desired performance if the component capabilities are lacking” (p. 194). He stated that the amount of effort put into a particular activity and the length of time that effort kept up produced the desired effect. He declared “given appropriate skills and adequate incentives, however, efficacy expectations are a major determinant of people’s choice of activities, how much effort they will expend, and of how long they will sustain effort in dealing with stressful situations” (p. 194).

Bandura (1977) talked about the different sources of efficacy expectations: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (p. 195). He said that in performance accomplishments, “successes raise mastery expectations; repeated failures lower them, particularly if the mishaps occur early in the course of events” (p. 195). The next efficacy expectation was vicarious experience. Bandura stated that, “Many expectations are derived from vicarious experience. Seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts” (p. 197). Affirmations from those who succeeded in specific tasks, worked to

encourage those who had yet to experience these tasks. As Bandura stated, “They persuade themselves that if others can do it, they should be able to achieve at least some improvement in performance” (p. 197, cited from Bandura and Barab, 1973).

Verbal persuasion was an interesting efficacy expectation. Bandura (1977) declared that this expectation was widely used “because of its ease and ready availability” (p. 198). Reassurance could come from a teacher, a family member, or another student. Bandura said this kind of suggested experience was not as powerful as if the person had experienced it themselves. “Efficacy expectations induced in this manner are also likely to be weaker than those arising from one’s own accomplishments because they do not provide an authentic experiential base for them” (p. 198). He stated that “social persuasion” could have a greater effect on a person’s efficacy when combined with “provisional aids for effective action” as opposed to just receiving those particular aids (p. 198). In other words, interaction with others, along with personal determination, could provide the impetus for greater success.

The last efficacy expectation was emotional arousal. Bandura (1977) talked about the importance of emotions in stressful, or what he called threatening, situations (p. 198). Bandura’s emotional arousal was positive energy that enabled the person to achieve success. He stated, “Because high arousal usually debilitates performance, individuals are more likely to expect success when they are not beset by aversive arousal than if they are tense and viscerally agitated” (p. 198). Bandura went on to state that fear could be a severe deterrent to success because sometimes the fear of something could be worse than the actual thing itself (p. 199). He continued by stating that this kind of anxiety diminished through modeling and was “more diminished through participant modeling”

(p. 199, cited from Bandura and Barab, 1973). Bandura (1977) said that people who believed they had the ability to do something were less likely to have fears about their abilities or “frightening thoughts in threatening situations” (p. 200). He went on to say, “Performance successes, in turn, strengthen self-efficacy” (1977, p. 200). In an experiment he performed where he examined self-efficacy and behavioral change, he concluded, “Experiences based on performance accomplishments produced higher, more generalized, and stronger efficacy expectation than did vicarious experience” (p. 205). This showed that although behaviors could change without actually experiencing something, it was better to have actually experienced it.

How did GED classes differ from the “regular” classroom? Belzer (1999) interviewed five students in a non-traditional GED program and realized that the women he interviewed believed what made their class different was personal attention. In no other educational situation did they ever receive so much encouragement. The attention they garnered made them feel successful, and with this support they were able to continue on toward their goals. That quality was one that set the GED class apart from traditional classrooms.

Yaffee and Williams (1998) confirmed that their staff believed that women joined their Even Start program because of the support it offered (p. 12). They concluded that a trusting and supportive environment was appealing to women learners. When women enrolled in a family literacy program, their children got at least two meals a day and in some programs, transportation was provided. These were two major obstacles for women to overcome when entering an adult education program. In this particular program, the support women received from the other women in the class and their teachers made all

the difference. The women in the class enjoyed the positive benefits of a female support system. Why did this particular program succeed? Several factors like lack of competition and individual attention from instructors were mentioned as reasons why women not only attended the classes, but also enjoyed them as well (p. 14). They also liked the fact that the curriculum was more relevant to their lives (p. 15). Key to the success was the emotional support the women enjoyed from both the staff and the other women in the class. The mutual rapport they shared with the staff contributed to their feelings of comfort and safety in the classroom. Often, the staff provided activities in which the students could be successful, which helped them improve their self-esteem and self-image (p. 17).

The previous examples of literature demonstrated the huge role socialization played in an adult education classroom. This research displayed the need for adults to learn not only academic skills but also social skills as well. Incorporating these two types of skills in the curriculum helped to produce students who felt they were part of a successful classroom experience, and supported them in becoming well-rounded individuals. The ability to socialize was a transferable skill that went beyond the classroom and transcended into the home and the world of work.

Even in a setting far from the American GED classroom, while observing a Salvadoran literacy program, Prins (2006) suggested that, “serving the human longing for affiliation is a legitimate, essential role of adult education” (p. 5). Prins found that both men and women attended classes for social purposes such as avoiding certain vices and escaping isolation, respectively. According to Prins (2006) in El Salvador, “men built a network of supportive friends who encouraged them to focus on learning and desist from

behaviors that harmed many of their friends and neighbors” (p. 19), whereas women enjoyed a break from housework and other routines.

Some of our American students experienced the same situations; in their classes, they were able to discuss life choice issues and influence one another’s opinions and behaviors (Belzer, 1999; Yaffee & Williams, 1998). They learned to encourage positive behaviors and discouraged negative or harmful ones. Prins (2006) stated, “Participation in adult education, then, is an inherently social act and human reaction makes education intrinsically rewarding (Hill, 2000; Jarvis, 1995)...However, participation in adult education could still help satisfy the human need for communication, recognition, and affection” (p. 20). What this demonstrated is that people used classes for social purposes as well as for becoming a part of a learning community and those learning communities can be formed anywhere in the world.

It seemed that no matter where in the world adult education was taking place, learners shared one basic trait: they wanted to belong. They wanted to be part of a group and accepted by others. This literature suggested that GED students may simultaneously accomplish social and instrumental purposes in adult education programs.

Feinberg and Soltis’ (2004) *School and Society*, was the text used to reference the theoretical framework of functionalism included in this research project. Some of this thought-provoking text addressed how society regards education. It asked the reader to “think about what schools do besides teach the three Rs and the other school subjects” (p. 3). The theoretical framework section that follows later in this chapter will highlight one of the concepts, socialization, through functionalism.

Literature Pertaining to Qualitative Research

Throughout this study, I also reviewed and referenced the invaluable resources of Patton (2002), Geertz (2000), Merriam (1998), Cresswell (1998), Stake (1995), Van Manen (1960) and Schram (2006) as I followed their discussions about qualitative research. In the previous chapter, I referred to Van Manen's characterization of experience. He stated that

the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

While phenomenology was not the choice for my research methodology, I believed Van Manen's definition succinctly expressed the emotions I wanted to elicit with this research project.

The last resource proved to be invaluable when the theoretical framework for this study became a challenge for me. Written by a college professor who taught doctoral students, Schram's (2006) *Conceptualizing and Proposing Qualitative Research* gave practical advice on how to formulate a research topic, how to clarify the purpose and the problem, what to consider in terms of qualitative or quantitative research, how to frame the subsequent questions, and what needed consideration for inclusion in a theoretical framework. In general, he challenged the reader to consider a myriad of possible aspects when undertaking a task of this magnitude. Throughout the book, Schram used several of his students' real-life scenarios, from their first inkling of what they wanted to explore to

the draft of the finished product. By showing their trial and error methods, he demonstrated their “ah-ha” moments as they proceeded through the entire thesis writing process. He used his students to exemplify the struggles faced by doctoral candidates so if the reader is indeed a post-graduate student or a doctoral candidate, she could readily relate to what was detailed in the book. Schram documented and used feedback and reflection from his 1st edition to enhance certain sections of the book, which made the 2nd edition more user-friendly. Using examples of his students’ work made the writing process real.

The Methodology of Qualitative Interviewing

This research document used qualitative interviewing as the qualitative research methodology. The main text used for this methodology was Seidman’s (1998) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*. He stated, “We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. We learn from hearing and studying what the participants say” (p. 102). He added, “Interviewing, then, is a basic mode of inquiry” (p. 2). Seidman stated, “The most important personal characteristic interviewers must have is a genuine interest in other people” (p. 78). He continued, “The story is both the participant’s and the interviewer’s. It is the participant’s words, but it is crafted by the interviewer from what the participant has said” (p. 102).

In Seidman’s review of Judi Marshall’s (1981) “Making Sense as a Personal Process,” he stated that it was “the best description I have read of this aspect of the winnowing process” (p. 100). In the review, Seidman talked about Marshall’s reference to “being able to respond to meaningful ‘chunks’ of transcript” (p. 100). This reference

was helpful to me as I began the process of restructuring the transcribed interviews. He also referred to Marshall as she talked about the “dark side of this process” (p. 100),

That time when, while working with interview data, you lose confidence in your ability to sort out what is important, you wonder if you are making it all up, and you feel considerable doubt about what you are doing. You become worried that you are falling into the trap of self-delusion, which Miles and Huberman (1984) caution is the bane of those who analyze qualitative data. Marshall (1985) calls it an anxiety that you learn to live with. (p. 100)

Apparently this phenomenon was not a unique experience among qualitative researchers. Seidman also said it is the researcher’s judgment and experience that determined what was used and in what manner (pp. 100-101).

Seidman talked about profiles and themes in interviewing and how they emerged from the data. He said, “I have marked individual passages, grouped these in categories, and then studied the categories for thematic connections within and among them” (p.102). He stated that in the process, “the transcripts were copied, noteworthy passages were selected for inclusion, and what transpired was a new transcript, in which the new version was significantly reduced from the original” (p. 103). He gave the writer permission to enhance the passages when he suggested, “Sometimes, to make transitions between passages, you may wish to add your own words” (p. 104).

His advice about eliminating certain hesitations in speech was thought-provoking. He stated,

I delete from the profile certain characteristics of oral speech that a participant would not use in writing—for example, repetitious “uhms,” “ahs,” “you knows,”

and other such idiosyncrasies that do not do the participant justice in a written version of what he or she has said. (p. 104)

He continued that when interviewing, anonymity was paramount to reassuring the interviewees that their personal information was confidential. Seidman suggested that one should, “select a pseudonym that does justice to the participant” (p. 104). He also said, “When choosing a pseudonym, take into consideration issues of ethnicity, age, and the context of the participant’s life” (p. 104).

Seidman cautioned early on that “the researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text” (p. 100). He also suggested that the researcher “organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories” and “find connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts” (p. 108) which he called themes. As Seidman put it, “Categories that seemed separate and distinct will fold into each other” (p. 108). He cautioned not to “force the excerpts into categories” (p. 110), which might be easy to do. In addressing the topic of immersion, Seidman said there was no substitute for it (p. 110). For the interviewer to be part of the text, he believed there was a need to read and reread and work and rework the material.

He stated, “Some passages stand out because they are contradictory and seem decisively inconsistent with others. It is tempting to put those aside” (p. 109). When Seidman spoke about how a researcher should decide the importance of one topic or passage over another, he asked the researcher to use his or her judgment (p. 110). Here Seidman talked about the chosen material having “public credibility” and how one must stand up for the decision to include certain things due to the fact that immersion in the material has taken place. He noted,

It is also important to affirm your judgment as a researcher. You have done the interviewing, studied the transcripts, and read the related literature; you have mentally lived with and wrestled with the data, and now you need to analyze them. As Judi Marshall (1985) says, your feeling of rightness and coherence about the process of working with the data is important. It is your contribution as the researcher. (p. 110)

All of Seidman's recommendations became an excellent resource of how to use interviewing as a means to elicit first-hand information and experiences. I will discuss the theoretical framework used in the research project in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

As I dealt with the situations that adult learners experience, many questions emerged about their academic intentions. Why did students drop out of school? Did our public school systems fail them? Were they victims of their environment? Were they just immature at the time they were in high school? And if the schools failed them, why did these students want to enter another educational system that may or may not supply them with the tools they needed to achieve that elusive GED credential? Several chapters of *School and Society* by Feinberg and Soltis (2004) served as the basis for the theoretical framework of this research project.

According to Feinberg and Soltis (2004), "The *functionalist* generally sees schools as serving to socialize students to adapt to the economic, political, and social institutions of that society" (p. 6, emphasis in original). I believed that the adult education system was certainly preparing adult learners to be a viable part of society. Once they obtained their GED certificate and were able to find employment, they were

then able to contribute economically to society. Many of the classes were certain to make students aware of their political obligations, whether that meant getting out to vote or to taking part in a citizens' group to improve their living conditions. And many classes, especially in family literacy programs, focused on good parenting skills. They referred to the functionalist who "also sees schools serving as a 'latent' or not so visible function of producing people who share the basic economic, political, and cultural practices and norms of the society" (p. 6). They also referred to social "institutions as analogous to parts of the body" (p. 6), where each body part functioned in conjunction with another part to produce a seamless system. Using this analogy enabled me to make the connection between functionalism and adult education classes. The information taken from classes enabled the students to fit in with a purpose, thus preparing them to be a functional part of society.

Feinberg and Soltis referred to three reasons for the occurrence of the functionalist movement. "First, it is thought that the ever-expanding skills required by industrial society often render obsolete the skills passed on by the family or the local community" (p. 21). According to the researchers the second reason was "the expanding need for new skills requires that opportunities be opened to talented people from groups that have traditionally been denied them" (p. 21). Over the years, as Welfare Reform became the norm, more and more adults had to enter the employment ranks. They soon found that they needed to learn new skills in order to survive in the working world. They also found themselves having to enter adult education programs to earn their GED certificates in order to obtain or retain employment or enter post-secondary education. The third reason is that "political stability requires that those who have not been

rewarded, as well as those who have, believe that they competed under a fair system of rules” (p. 21). When Feinberg and Soltis referred to the “hidden curriculum,” they said it was a concept “that has been used to explain the school’s role in making possible the transition from life in the family to a life of work and citizenship” (p. 22).

In the adult education classrooms, the “hidden curriculum,” which is referred to as “soft skills,” included, but was not limited to, time management, note taking skills, test anxiety, writing resumes and cover letters, filling out applications and interviewing, stress management, decision making, conflict resolution, and communication skills, to name a few. The purpose of the content of these courses was to give adult learners more than academic skills in order to prepare them for success in the world of work and transitioning to post-secondary education. This “hidden curriculum” was important not only to the students in this study, but also to all GED students in general. Learning the “hidden curriculum” played as important a role to the success of the GED students as any academic subject that they encountered. When exposed to the aforementioned topics, these students were learning how to supplement their academic skills with skills they had not yet perfected because they had little or no experience using them previously. These topics were most effective when combined with academic skills that enabled students to role play or practice how they might use these skills in home, academic, or work situations. Exposure to these topics meant that they were also practicing the subtleties related to the world of work that come with experience. These skills would not only ensure students obtained a job, but more importantly, retained the job as well. The “hidden curriculum” was relevant to this study because it demonstrated how functionalism has a place in adult education and how, when used correctly, can become a

necessary component for enabling people to become productive, vital members of society.

Feinberg and Soltis also discussed reforms in education: “Much of educational reform has been built on the functionalist view that schools serve to help people adapt to the changing life of modern society” (p. 22). This statement represented another way society views schools.

The discussion about modernization theory was an interesting one in light of school, society, and how adult learners and their goals fit into these two entities. Feinberg and Soltis explain that

modernization is both an economic and a social concept. It refers to the development of the meritocratic, bureaucratic, and individualistic form of life that is associated with modern society and is viewed as a prerequisite for technological and economic development. (p. 25, emphasis in original)

They continued, “Modernization theory has also emphasized the importance of development of ‘human capital’” (p. 27). This emphasis was of special significance to educators. The idea was that if the movement toward industrialization was to be effective, then there must be not only an investment in machinery and capital equipment, but there must also be a similar investment in the development of human skills. In other words, “education has an *economic* value for the society at large, and a large part of the process of modernization involved identifying and training new talent so that it is able to make effective use of innovative technologies” (p. 27, emphasis in original).

The concept of human capital became significant in terms of adult education, equating the “whys” and “whats” with adult learners’ determination to obtain their GED

credential. So, under this circumstance, there was an economic value to education and it not only benefitted the students, but also society in general. Feinberg and Soltis went on to say, “Indeed, in some instances human capital theorists have argued that the greatest value may be reaped by investing more educational resources in groups that have previously been left behind in the educational process” (p. 27).

In functional theory there was an “ideal of equality of *educational* opportunity” (p. 29, emphasis in original). Feinberg and Soltis differentiated this principle from one of equality of opportunity, which stated that people received rewards according to their talents (p. 29). Conversely, “the principle of equal educational opportunity directs that individuals should have an equal chance to develop their talents” (p. 29). This statement epitomized the “second chance” these students searched for when they entered an adult education program. Feinberg and Soltis stated, “In other words, equality of opportunity requires equality of *educational* opportunity” (p. 31).

Feinberg and Soltis also addressed compensatory education, where one makes certain adjustments to accommodate deficiencies found in those who need to be educated. Compensatory education perfectly defined the ideals of the adult education classroom. As Feinberg and Soltis put it, “In other words, by striving to compensate for certain handicaps, we are not just improving the lot of individuals; we are benefiting the society as a whole. Thus, two goods, the individual’s and the society’s are being pursued simultaneously” (p. 31).

There was also discussion of cultural impediments in reference to school and society. Feinberg and Soltis referred to Edward Banfield, who they said was “one of the staunchest advocates of the cultural impediments model” (p. 33), and his notion that

“motivation is the primary factor in achievement” (p. 33). Banfield referred to high and low levels of motivation and said that they “are best understood in terms of an individual’s ability to conceptualize space and time, to project himself or herself into a distant future and a wider community, and to discipline present resources toward future ends” (p. 33).

Feinberg and Soltis stated there are some problems with functionalism, the first of which was an “issue of political bias” (p. 36). They referred to Robert K. Merton, who developed a criticism of functionalism, describing him as “an important contemporary advocate of functionalism” (p. 36). Merton

acknowledges the fact that because many functionalists have assumed that every social practice and institution must be understood in terms of its adaptive function for the society as a whole, they have tended to give a primary value to existing social forms. (p. 36)

In interpreting Merton’s view, Feinberg and Soltis said that “functionalist scholarship often has had a conservative tone” (p. 36). Merton went on to dispute the idea that “specific custom, practice, or belief system must fulfill some vital function for the society in which it is found” (p. 37). He referred to “*a net balance of functional consequences*” (p. 37, emphasis in original), where he explained that functions “are those observed consequences which make for the adaption or adjustment of a given system” (p. 37). Merton concluded by defining functions as referring “to adaptive social consequences, while reasons and motives are presumably associated only with individual wants” (p. 37). Because of these examples of functionalism, I found this theoretical framework to be most compatible with adult education.

Rationale for Theoretical Framework

By observing how the adult education classroom worked in relation to the tenets of functionalism, I was able to interpret and analyze the data in this research study. I realized that the adult education classroom represented the society of which these students were a part and the academic subjects and soft skills topics they pursued were the tools they used to make themselves more acceptable for the positions they desired. As I prepared the wording for their interview questions, I reminded myself to include issues that might be universal and yet have a bearing on how functionalism might work in their particular classroom or program. When I analyzed the data, I looked for themes that stood out as being common among the programs and the participants, and in further analyzation, I compared these commonalities to the views of functionalism so I could observe how they measured up to each other.

I believed that parts of functionalism represented a perfect analogy for the education the GED candidates received. If, as according to Feinberg and Soltis (2004), the functionalist believed that schools were responsible for socializing students (p. 6), then the adult education classroom was where this second chance opportunity took place for adult learners who had not traditionally been able to fit into society's expectations of a high school graduate. Starting with the functionalist notion that society prepared everybody to have a place and a purpose, adult education classrooms made accommodations for those who had not been able to fit into whatever was the expected norm.

GED classrooms practiced socialization so that students might transition to other opportunities after they received their GED credential. If students did not attend school then they missed out on that structure, which was where adult education classes filled in the gap. Not only had they fallen behind academically, these adult learners also had a void in their social and soft skills. While adult education classes helped to improve literacy skills, teachers did their best to help students work in small and large groups, something they might have to do when they transition to work, training, or post-secondary opportunities. The teachers combined both social and academic skills and sometimes they had to undo or correct some of the skills the students brought with them because their circumstances made them more attuned to the street than to the classroom or workplace.

The “hidden curriculum” in adult education classrooms was somewhat the same as the concept to which Feinberg and Soltis (2004) refer. They talked about the school helping to transition from life in the family to a life of work and citizenship (p. 22). In adult education classes, the transition was from classroom academics to transitioning to work, post-secondary, or training program opportunities. The concept of transitioning was the same; it was just transitioning to different phases of life. In society, school played the role as the catalyst that helped initiate the move from being part of a small unit to adapting to a much larger environment where more was expected and asked of a person. In the adult education classroom, students came for the purpose of learning to adapt to outside demands, so they could acquire a job, raise and support a family, or become a more productive citizen. Sometimes the skills they needed were those they missed out on when they dropped out of school. So, a formal “school” system, in the form of an adult

education classroom, did help these adult learners in all phases of their lives. For the students in this study and perhaps many GED students in general, they might have felt left behind in the educational process, but between the hidden and academic curricula, they found they were better equipped than most to face life's diverse scenarios, both academically and personally.

The adult education classroom searched for opportunities to offer to talented people who had not previously had the chance to display their talents (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004, p. 21). When working with this group of students, teachers found hidden talents that bloomed in the classroom. Maybe the time was not right for some to come to class in years past, but once they stepped foot into a supportive environment, they were ready to learn and willing to absorb as much knowledge as they could to make their goals become their reality. With the support of their teachers, families, and classmates, many students thrived in these surroundings because they could monitor their growth and practice self-efficacy.

Another tenet of functionalism was that everyone competed under a fair set of rules (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004, p. 21). When Feinberg and Soltis's (2004) discussion of modernization theory and the importance of "human capital" (p. 27), showed that adult education has an economic value for society at large. The educational opportunity (p. 31) that adult education classrooms afforded the adult learners has an impact on our society, the learners' lives, and the lives of their families. When adult learners earned their GED credentials and got a job, they were contributing to society by supporting the tax base and spending money on various services to keep themselves and the economy going. The

adult education teachers hoped that students would go on to post-secondary or training opportunities, but the reality was that most needed jobs immediately.

Feinberg and Soltis (2004) also discussed “education having an economic value for society at large” (p. 27). By this they referred to people having an equal chance to develop their talents. This is yet another way functionalism defined adult education. The researchers also referred to making accommodations for those who were handicapped (p. 31). While these students might not be physically handicapped, many of them were academically and socially handicapped. When classrooms were accommodating and sensitive to the students’ needs, both retention and successful outcomes improve. Adult education classrooms compensate their students for a myriad of reasons in order to accommodate them. This is just one more way functionalism works in the adult education classroom.

So much of functionalism was applicable to adult learning and adult learners. It was the logical choice for a theoretical framework that demonstrated its relevance in referring to adult learners in our society, in our schools, and in our adult education classrooms. While I believed that the strengths of functionalism far outweighed the weaknesses as expressed by Feinberg and Soltis, I will describe the weaknesses in the next section and subsequent chapters will address more on how it applied to the adult learners interviewed for this research.

Weaknesses and Gaps in the Reviewed Literature

I found several weaknesses and gaps in the reviewed literature, but also found a couple of bright spots. The first weakness was that for many years, Murnane and Tyler;

Murnane, Tyler, and Willett; Murnane, Willett, and Boudett; or just Tyler himself researched the same topic. Although these are reliable and credible research teams, it seemed that the research revisited and updated the same statistics yearly and mainly focused on the economic gains associated with the GED credential. This annual review emphasized the gap in any new, qualitative research about GED students in general and their experiences as GED students specifically.

This research produced few new topics within the last ten years. Tyler (2005, 2003) introduced the idea that the GED credential was enticing high school students to drop out and take the tests instead. He declared that more research needed to be done in this area because even economists were questioning whether the GED credential was prompting dropout rates to increase (2005, p. 79). Tyler introduced this idea because it had affected the “economic outcome through suppression of education levels” (2003, p. 370). The second point Tyler made in his 2003 report was that economic outcome information on GED recipients seemed to show more progress when the aggregation took place five years after earning the GED credential. Tyler contended that reporting statistics earlier than this resulted in skewed information. More qualitative research might lead to the discovery of new trends and perhaps more venues would present themselves through interviews that would supply more current data.

Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997) revealed that GED recipients did not take advantage of training opportunities after receiving their diploma. Tyler’s research synthesis (2005, 2002b) reviewed some basic findings such as only low-skilled dropouts benefitted economically from the GED credential; economic benefits could be seen over a period of time; GED recipients did not usually pursue post-secondary education

opportunities or on-the-job training opportunities (even though when entering the GED program, more schooling and better jobs via more training were the first two reasons why the GED credential was being pursued); and those earning their GED credentials while incarcerated showed no economic benefits for their efforts.

Another weakness was that the majority of the research conducted used mostly White males as the sample. The studies that focused on women were few and far between; there was, however, one such study done by Boudett, Murnane, and Willett (2000) that looked at four economic opportunities for women who had dropped out of school. This study examined women pursuing their GED credentials, obtaining what was called off the job training (not associated with their current job), participating in on the job training, and going on to college. In reference to the GED credential, the study concluded that “the impact of a GED on a woman’s earnings, while initially modest, grows over time” (p. 29). This statement explained that women had to wait three to seven years after taking the GED Tests to realize their full potential of earning power. The caveat here was that, “for the average woman, then, obtaining a GED, with or without further education, does not bring economic independence” (p. 29). Reading this study accentuated the need for more research about women who take their GED Tests. More research could emphasize other benefits besides those pertaining to economic issues.

In other research studies, Murnane, Willett, and Boudette (1997, 1995) suggested that earnings do increase over longer periods of time and there was no research conducted until well after the completion of an adult education program, perhaps five years after. Although these statistics were interesting, it was impossible to generalize because the

figures were not representative of the GED population. Again, these studies showed the need for further longitudinal research that could delve into issues other than those of an economic nature. But according to Johnson and Valentine (1992), time is of the essence. Talking to GED recipients too soon produced few generalizable statistics, but waiting too long produced too few students to interview. Tyler (2002a) talked about a 15% gain in earnings the fifth year after the GED credential had been earned. When one considers this statement in conjunction with what Johnson and Valentine state about timeliness, how does one keep track of GED recipients for five years?

Heckman and Rubinstein (2001) introduced a new piece of information when they looked at the non-cognitive skills of GED recipients. They said there was difficulty in identifying categories of non-cognitive skills because so many “different personality and motivational traits are lumped into the category” (p. 145). They continued by stating that when there were controls for measured ability, GED recipients earned less, not more, and had lower hourly wages than other high school dropouts (p. 146). This was contrary to what Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (1999) had found. Heckman and Rubinstein’s (2001) work examined all the variables that the other researchers explored, but they took into account what happened when certain factors were controlled, which was something that set their research apart from the others. It seemed to be one of only two bright spots in the existing literature because it shed light on a new focus. They concluded that the “GED is a mixed signal and conveys information about both cognitive and non-cognitive skills,” (p. 149) which is why they suggested more qualitative research needed to be done in this area. When Cameron and Heckman wrote their landmark piece in 1993, researchers took sides, wrote papers, and expressed their opinions. It was an exciting

time. Recently, there have been few new names in the GED research field. I reviewed Smith's research (2003) earlier in the chapter, and he is a new voice on the research horizon, another bright spot in the literature because of his addition to the field of adult education.

More qualitative research, like that of Dean, Eisenreich, and Hubbell (1996) needs to be done. Tyler (2003) stated this notion precisely when he talked about the "dearth of research examining the impact of the GED on outcomes that are not directly related to the labor market" (p. 370). He went on to say that outcomes such as "parenting skills, health, citizenship, and involvement in crime are critical questions that have, unfortunately, not been addressed by the research community" (p. 370). Tyler repeated this statement in his later research and concluded that even if economic benefits did not exist in association with the GED Tests, answers to the above mentioned issues "could affirm the importance of America's 'second chance' credential" (2005, p. 80). These observations coming from the leading researcher in economic benefits of the GED credential clearly demonstrated a need for more qualitative research about the effect of the GED Tests on the people who take them.

This was where the literature had a gap and where I believed my study would provide some of this much-needed information. A comprehensive qualitative research project was the solution for getting some answers from the GED candidates themselves as to how they measured and defined success. Those not involved in the GED process may be surprised to find out that there might be a misconception between the meaning adult educators and adult learners attach to these words. It is certainly a concept that is worth investigating through more qualitative research projects.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature that was relevant to this research project. It presented a broad overview and general history of the GED Tests, the economic and academic debate over the GED credential, the people who took the GED Tests, whether the GED Tests produced success, and the future of the GED credential. It reviewed the theme of self-efficacy, as researched by both Comings, et al. (2000) and Bandura (1977). There was also a discussion about using interviewing as a method of qualitative research. In addition, the chapter included a review of Feinberg and Soltis' interpretation of functionalism, which served as the theoretical framework for this research project. The chapter concluded with weaknesses and gaps and even a couple of bright spots in the reviewed literature. A review of the methodology of this research project appears in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the research procedures and methodology used in this study. Topics discussed are the rationale for qualitative research and the rationale for the type of design used, unit of analysis, criteria for appropriate ethics, credibility, and validity, and sampling and sampling size. This is followed by data collection procedures, which includes a description of the pilot study, how interviews were conducted, the research question and subquestions, how member checks were used, how the data was recorded and stored, dealing with resolving field issues, and what data analysis and analytic software were used for this research project.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

After reviewing the literature on this subject, and reading both qualitative and quantitative materials, I decided that a qualitative design would be the best fit for the information that I wanted to collect. This study focused on the descriptions and explanations from people who experienced an adult education class that prepared them to study for and take the GED Tests. Rossman and Rallis (2003) stated that “qualitative research represents a very different epistemology—a way of knowing the world—that does not test hypotheses or believe researchers can control all aspects of the worlds they are exploring” (p. 8).

According to Cresswell (1998) a qualitative topic “needs to be *explored*” (p. 17, emphasis in original). He explained that this meant that theories are not available and need to be developed and “variables cannot be easily identified” (p. 17). Additional justification for the use of qualitative research inhered in “the need to present a *detailed view* of the topic” (p. 17, emphasis in original). This is true when, as Cresswell put it, the close-up view did not exist (p. 17). All of his comments described my rationalization for using qualitative research. What set my study apart from the other resources in the literature was that little else existed that documented the experiences of the GED student, experiences that were reported by the students themselves during an interview process.

Because I wanted the reader to identify with the information presented, I believed Merriam (1998) summed up my thoughts when she stated, “readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (p. 211). I wanted to use the interview because it helped to elicit the details and descriptions that paint a vivid picture of the phenomenon I wanted to explore.

Rationale for Type of Design Used

This research used qualitative interviewing as the method for eliciting the students’ stories. I pursued a qualitative study of this nature because the literature review revealed that a scarcity of research involving interviews with GED students about their experiences existed. I chose qualitative interviewing for several reasons. First, my prior experience with GED students suggested that due to frequent address changes, a survey may never arrive, and if it did reach that person, he or she would be unlikely to take the time to complete and return it. Second, some students attended their programs in

confidentiality so communicating via the postal system would be out of the question.

Third, these people had a story to tell, and the best way to hear their voices was through interviewing. They did not want to write; they wanted to talk.

According to Seidman (1998) the interview provides a setting for understanding “the meaning people involved in education make of their experience” (pp. 4-5).

Interviews offered me the opportunity to share students’ experiences with a wider audience. This qualitative research method was a great fit for this research project, affording me the opportunity to inquire about how and when lessons were learned, what behaviors did or did not change, the amount of support students received from family, friends, and teachers, what motivated them to continue until they completed their goals, and their plans for the future. I established how the community of classroom learning helped the students to persist, contributing to their eventual successes with the GED Tests.

The theoretical framework of functionalism helped me to understand and put into perspective the importance of schools in our society and how our adult learners fit into that structure. It was important to comprehend why so many students wanted the GED credential even though at times it seemed like an unobtainable goal. Because they realized how much emphasis our society puts on education, the students returned to adult education classes, even though at times many obstacles were in their way. This desire to better themselves by fitting into society via a job or post-secondary opportunities fueled their fire. They not only told me that they perceived adult education differently, but also those students who were parents were adamant that their children would not make the same academic mistakes they made. Their collective attitude was that this was the first

step to a better life for themselves and their families. Since functionalism stated that every person in a society had his or her role in order to make that society function at its best, this theoretical framework enabled me to explore some of the questions stated above. Functionalism also addressed the topic of the value our society puts on schooling, which was another area that piqued my interest.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual. Rossman and Rallis (2003) referred to the “locus of action” or unit of analysis as a concept that “draws attention to the level or layer of some social phenomenon that is of compelling interest to the researcher” (p. 91). In this research project, the individuals were adult learners who prepared to take the GED Tests. They were all part of an Adult Basic Literacy and Education (ABLE) funded program in Pennsylvania and they all lived in the Southwestern region of the state. This study included 19 Caucasians, nine African Americans, one Puerto Rican, and one Mexican American student. This population consisted of 21 females and nine males whose ages ranged from 18 to 69 years old. The average age was 32.

Criteria for Appropriate Ethics, Credibility, and Validity

A major concern with researchers was the issue regarding ethics, credibility, and validity. Rossman and Rallis (2003) approached the subject under the topic of trustworthiness. They cited Delamont (1992, p. 8) as saying, “As long as qualitative researchers are reflexive, making all their purposes explicit, then issues of reliability and validity are served” (p. 51). In short they said, “For a study to be trustworthy, it must be more than reliable and valid; it must be ethical” (p. 63). It was my intention to interpret

the participants' descriptions as clearly and honestly as possible. After the interviews were complete, I sent each student my analysis of the transcript data to have him/her verify that the interpretations represented his/her thoughts and words. In this way, I was able to verify if my interpretations aligned with theirs. This member check strengthened the internal validity of the study.

The issue of ethical behavior in relation to the interviews was something I approached in a most responsible manner. I was acquainted with every teacher with whom these students studied, and since I felt they might equate my behavior with that of their teachers, I made certain that I was polite, respectful, and professional at all times. I did not talk about their teachers, nor did I agree with them if they had negative things to say; I remained passive. I did not want to lose their confidence as someone they could trust. I was particularly concerned about keeping their identities confidential, so I spent a great deal of time giving them pseudonyms that would not expose any personal information. I was also worried about the students' emotional reactions to some of the stories they told. Several of the students began to cry while recalling past personal and academic events in their lives. I was sensitive that their emotions were raw at times and I was anxious not to upset anyone. Although this happened only twice, with two different people during the entire interview process, I stopped the tape recorder, made sure they were calm enough to continue, and gave them as much time as they needed to regain their composure. Because I was aware that some of the questions might be upsetting, I made sure the interviewees were aware of the statement in the consent form that maintained participants could stop answering questions at any time during the interview. Although I wanted to elicit past memories with vivid descriptions, it was not my intention to

disrespect their feelings or reactions to the questions or unnecessarily upset them in any way. I reminded each of them of their option to stop the interview whenever they felt it was necessary, but once they composed themselves, they were eager to carry on. It was my hope that my ethical behavior would show the respect I had for the interview process and those whom I interviewed.

Merriam (1998) said that “an investigator can use six basic strategies to enhance internal validity:

1. *Triangulation*—using multiple investigators, multiple sources or data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings.
2. *Member checks*—taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible.
3. *Long-term observation* at the research site or repeated observations of the same phenomenon—gathering data over a period of time in order to increase the validity of the findings.
4. *Peer examination*—asking colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerge.
5. *Participatory or collaborative modes of research*—involving participants in all phases of research from conceptualizing the study to writing up the findings.
6. *Researcher’s biases*—clarifying the researcher’s assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study. (pp. 204-205, emphasis in original)

Merriam also referred to the fact that the traditional definition of reliability (“the extent to which research findings can be replicated” [p. 205]) was not compatible with qualitative research, and she made the following statement: “The question then is not whether findings will be found again but *whether the results are consistent with the data collected*” (p. 206, emphasis in original). For this project, I made every effort to explain biases, assumptions, and the theory behind the study, as explained by Merriam (p. 206).

Yin (2003) maintained, “The general way of approaching the reliability problem is to make as many steps as operational as possible and to conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (p. 38). As the research process began, I was mindful of all of these concepts. Stake (1995) also weighed in on the validation issue. He stated, “We have high ethical obligations to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding” (pp. 108-109) in the work we do as qualitative researchers. Like Merriam (1995), Stake suggested triangulation and member checking as two methods that would ensure research work was valid. Cresswell (1990) said that a qualitative researcher “does not engage in deception about the nature of the study” (p. 132). This statement has meaning to both the participant and the readers of the finished product because a researcher should never manipulate the data to document presuppositions or biases.

Sampling and Sampling Size

I used purposeful sampling in this study. My plan was as follows: I contacted the program administrators who offered GED classes and told them about my research project. I asked if they would be interested in having students from their program participate in my research. I discussed the interview process, how much time it would

take, and asked them to talk to their GED teachers to ascertain if there was interest among their students. They then shared this information with their GED teachers. Approximately two to three weeks prior to taking the test, the learners heard about the project from their GED teacher. Once they met the age specification of being at least 18 years old and the criteria of taking all of the GED Tests but not necessarily passing all of them, they declared their interest to participate in the study to their teachers. I then contacted them to make arrangements for their hour-long interview. From the southwestern part of the state, 14 programs had eligible students, but some students were unable to participate, so there was representation of only 12 programs. I wanted to have an even representation of sex, gender, age, and race within the sample but that was not possible because of the students' availability for the interview.

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) and Creswell (1998) stated that in qualitative research the sampling is purposeful, which is different from random sampling done in quantitative research. Merriam (1998) maintained, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). In this research study, the transient nature of most GED students compelled me to talk to people from one to six months after they took their GED Tests. I also believed that this time period provided more vivid recollections than if there were more of a time lapse between taking the tests and the interviews.

Merriam (1998) stressed that before purposeful sampling can take place, the participant selection criteria needed to be established:

the criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases. You not only spell out the criteria you will use, but you say why the criteria are important. (pp. 61-62)

In this study, the main criterion was that of necessity. I wanted to interview 30 participants for about an hour each as soon as possible after they took their GED Tests. Because many adult learners change phone numbers and addresses frequently, it was essential to locate the participants and set aside a time for interviews that was convenient for them. I was flexible and available whenever the participants could participate in the interviewing process. Yin (2003) supported this statement when he said, “For interviewing key persons, you must cater to the interviewee’s schedule and availability, not your own” (p. 72). I was fully aware of this issue and arranged the interviewing schedule around the participants’ availability.

Purposeful sampling is a form of non-probability sampling. I used a combination of typical and snowball or network sampling. The typical sample “would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 1998, p. 62). For this study, the sample used included the student who went through the process of studying for and taking the GED Tests in an adult education program. “*Snowball, chain, or network...sampling is a strategy that involves asking each participant or group of participants to refer you to other participants*” (Merriam, 1998, p. 63, emphasis in original). At one point, I asked participants from the typical sample if they knew of others in their class who took the GED Tests and were

willing to talk to me about their experiences. Only two programs took advantage of the snowball sampling.

Data Collection Procedures

Pilot study.

About one month before the actual study started, a small pilot study took place using three participants who represented three of the programs that participated in the research study. It included the same questions intended for use in the actual study. After the pilot I reviewed the questions to make sure they elicited the essential information from the participants and to insure that the wording enabled the participants to respond in an honest and frank manner.

Because adult learners' schedules were busy, it was essential that I asked the most succinct questions. Once I reviewed and rewrote some of the questions, I was ready to go into the field to do the research study.

Interviews.

I talked to the GED test takers for approximately one hour each, usually at their adult education site at a time that was convenient for them. In order use my time more efficiently, I scheduled two or three interviews consecutively at the same site.

Stake (1998) stated, "The interview is the main road to multiple realities" (p. 64). He suggested that the researcher have a good plan for interviewing, so that if circumstances out of the ordinary occurred, the interviewer was prepared. Using a pilot form of the research questions was a way to work out any potential difficulties or

uncomfortable situations (p. 65). Stake recommended that the researcher conduct the interviews and that the interviewer concentrate on listening rather than taking notes. He also believed that going back to the interviewee, as soon as possible after the completion of transcription, was a more realistic way to capture the essence of the interview since rather than relying on one's own interpretations. I did exactly as Stake suggested and decided not to write but listen to the students' words. After each interview, in order to insure accuracy, I transcribed the interviews as quickly as possible and either mailed or emailed the completed interview to the student for review and comments. I believed it was important to continue the communication after the interview, so I asked each student to reply to me even if they saw no need for change; I wanted to get their reaction to reading their own words in print.

Merriam (1998) addressed the different types of interview questions that are part of a qualitative research study. She also suggested that these questions were part of a pilot. She stated that through this method, "you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions, suggested by your respondents, you should have thought to include in the first place" (pp. 75-76). While conducting previous interviews, I found this advice to be quite beneficial in order to maximize the time spent with the participants. After the pilot interviews, I was able to get feedback from the students and thus refine the questions that would elicit the most information.

Cresswell (1990) suggested using an interview protocol. This consisted of a form with at least five open-ended questions (p. 124). This form was helpful in keeping me on task as the interviews preceded. The main question and subquestions were on this form

as well as other well-chosen, well-worded questions that enabled the participants to describe their experiences.

Member checks.

I made every effort to transcribe the interviews within one week so that the participants could give their input and comment on the interview. Because I was interpreting the stories they told, I was anxious to have the participants read the written interview to insure that it accurately depicted their experiences. Most GED recipients move around a lot, so I was determined to correspond with the participants within one week after the interview to ensure validity of the project.

Recording information and storing data.

Once a mutual site for the interviews was established, I had the participants complete a consent form that gave me permission to tape the responses to the questions that I asked. I read the consent form aloud so as not to skip any vital information. After reading it, both the student and I signed two copies; the student kept one and I kept the other. This gave me a chance to explain the purpose of the study more in depth and answer any questions the participants had. After the interviews I transcribed the audiotapes into documents that were transferable to qualitative research analysis software. I duplicated the tapes in case the originals were lost or destroyed. As per the consent form from the human subjects' research department, the tapes and the backup copies were and are still stored in a secure area. I keep all of the information on the tapes strictly confidential and locked in a desk drawer.

Resolving field issues.

Cresswell (1998) spoke to an important and viable point about addressing field issues. He used his past experiences with interviewing and that of colleagues and students when he talked about the researcher preparing for certain eventualities that might unexpectedly impinge on a smooth interviewing opportunity. Some of the issues he dealt with included changing or adjusting the form of data collection, time needed for extensive data collection, and issues of time, “energy and focus required to establish a substantial database” (p. 128). Reading about these possibilities convinced me to prepare a list of field issues that might help the interviewing experience run smoothly. When the pilot study was ready to be executed, I produced such a list and made adjustments where and when necessary. Merriam (1998) referred to the ethnographer’s “*fieldwork journal*,” which “includes his or her ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience and can include thoughts about the research methodology itself” (p. 110, emphasis in original). She stated that this journal, along with other notes and memos, “becomes a data source, and the researcher sometimes uses it when writing about the methodology” (p. 110). Even though she said ethnographers use this document, it appeared to be a tool that every qualitative researcher ought to possess. With the amount of work involved in qualitative research, any instrument like this would seem to be beneficial to the process. I used such a journal which proved to be an excellent tool for compiling and reviewing data. This device helped the data analysis process run smoothly and assisted me in arranging information in an organized manner.

Data Analysis

Data analysis really starts at the beginning of a study. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), “The conceptual framework of the study, the research questions, the strategy for research and design, and the genre to which your study links—all these provide preliminary foreshadowing of the analysis” (p. 270). In the minds of these researchers, the process, put quite simply, “fully knowing the data (immersion), organizing these data into chunks (analysis) and bringing meaning to those chunks (interpretation)” (p. 270). Merriam (1998) concurred that “the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it *simultaneously* with data collection” (p. 162, emphasis in original). She said, “Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 162). I was aware of the enormity of this research project, and I was in agreement with Merriam. Continual data analysis kept me on task. It was easier to rewrite small chunks of the study than it was to tackle massive quantities of research at one time. Merriam claimed, “Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating” (p. 162). I believed that this ongoing check fit in very well with Cresswell’s (1998) interview protocol and Merriam’s (1998) fieldwork journal. These were all tools that made the research process more efficient and uncluttered. Adding this element to the mix ensured that I had control of the focus of the research at all times and was aware of any impending or pertinent changes as they occurred.

Merriam (1998) claimed, “Simultaneous data collection and analysis occurs both in and out of the field” (p. 162). I took this statement into advisement and found it to be advantageous when analyzing the data as I collected it, even while interviews were still

ongoing. Once again, this enabled me to make adjustments as I went along instead of facing a monumental task at the end of the data collection process. According to Merriam, “Categories and subcategories (or properties) are most commonly constructed through the constant comparative method of data analysis” (p. 179). This constant comparison would not be possible if I had not simultaneously collected and analyzed the data.

The repeated exercise of reading, coding, describing, classifying, interpreting, and seeking patterns and themes became the mainstay of the data analysis process for the study. As Rossman and Rallis (2003) explained, “Analysis is pattern identification over awareness of detail” (p. 274). They stated, “Thick description makes analysis and interpretation possible” (p. 275). It was my intent to use some or all of the above mentioned methods in order to produce a study that was significant in research material for educators and that also contained beneficial information for other GED practitioners and their students.

Qualitative data analysis software.

The qualitative data analysis software N-Vivo helped me with data analysis. This software was an important tool in assisting me and enabling me to classify the data in various ways so as to open it up to several forms of interpretation, which gave me the ability to see the data from different perspectives.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the rationale for qualitative design, the rationale for the type of methodology used, the unit of analysis, criteria for appropriate ethics, credibility, and reliability, sampling and sampling size, the pilot study, interviews, research questions and subquestions, member checks, recording information, storing data, resolving issues, data analysis, and qualitative analysis software for this research study. The next chapter explores the findings from the study.

Chapter 4

Findings

In order to better understand what events took place in the life of a GED student, I decided to interview 30 students from 12 different adult education programs in southwestern Pennsylvania. As these adult learners reflected, they began to search for the pieces of their lives that led them to where they were today. While they made no excuses for their past lives, they would not let their circumstances define them. Many of them believed that everything happened for a reason, and they were pleased where their lives had taken them.

The main themes that emerged were in response to the questions I asked in the interview. They dealt with dropping out of school, employment without a diploma, finding an adult education program, initial barriers to getting the GED credential, support from family, friends, and teachers, motivation and persistence, frustration with disrespectful classmates, the experience of taking the GED Tests, major life changes, GED Wisdom (the attitude of assurance and experience and their words of wisdom for other students when they spoke about their experiences of studying for the GED Tests), advice to current GED students, advice to their children, and plans for the future.

Preparation for the Interviews

All participants came from one of 12 individual GED programs located in the southwestern part of Pennsylvania. Each of these programs received state funding from

the Pennsylvania Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE). Students had to be at least 18 years old and had to have already taken all five parts of the GED Tests, but not necessarily passed all five parts. For this research only 20 students had passed the entire battery of tests. The other 10 had various tests to retake, but mostly math.

The procedure for obtaining volunteers to participate in this research proceeded in this manner: After I detailed plans for the study to the program administrators, all those who wanted to participate sent me an email stating they were willing to support and promote the project within their individual programs. They then talked to their GED teachers about the project, who in turn spoke to their GED students about participation in the research project. Those students who showed interest in participating in the interviews gave their phone numbers and times of availability to their teachers. The teachers either called or emailed me, and I then contacted each student to arrange a time for the interview. All of the program directors gave me permission to come to their programs whenever it was convenient to interview their students. This made it easier for the students because they did not have to travel to another site for the interview. Each program recommended between one and four students to be part of the research. To expedite travel I arranged for students from the same programs to have consecutive interviews. There was no compensation offered to the students, and none of them asked for anything in return for their time.

The population broke down in the following manner: there were nine (9) males and twenty-one (21) females. The age range spanned from 18 to 69 years. The average age was 32. There were nineteen (19) Caucasian interviewees, nine (9) African

Americans, one (1) Puerto Rican, and one (1) Mexican American. There were six (6) urban and six (6) rural programs represented.

The one-hour interviews took place in a quiet, secluded room at the GED site where the students attended classes. The interviews started the second week of May 2008 and continued through the third week of June 2008. Even though they did not have to be present, at least one administrator or GED teacher in each program greeted me and took me to the interview site. These teachers and administrators were not present during the interview; they merely wanted to make both me and the student feel comfortable. Because I work with all of the program administrators and am familiar with most of the practitioners in the region, the interviewees found we had an immediate common bond, which made the atmosphere quite amicable.

Each interview started with me introducing myself, reviewing the reason for the research, and thanking the students for their willingness to share their stories. Before the interview began, the interviewee and I each had the consent form which I reviewed line by line. I was especially aware and careful to make sure the students felt comfortable with the confidentiality aspect of the interview. I let them know that I would not mention their real names or refer to their programs in the research. Once we reviewed the form, and the interviewees either asked questions or indicated they understood everything, both of us signed and exchanged copies of the form. I asked the student to keep one copy and I kept the other to write down a current home or email address so that I could contact the students after the interview. All interviews were audio taped. A member check is the process where the interviewees have an opportunity to read the transcription of the interview and make corrections or comments on what they have read. They received the

transcribed interview within one week of the original interview. I explained that when they read over the interview, they should understand that transcribed dialogue would not be the same as sentences they were used to reading in their GED studies. During transcription, I decided to minimize the extraneous pauses in speech so as not to make the students too conscientious about how they spoke. I did this because I did not want to embarrass the students, but Seidman (1998) had a justification for deleting this kind of speech. He said,

I delete from the profile certain characteristics of oral speech that a participant would not use in writing—for example, repetitious “uhms,” “ahs,” “you knows,” and other such idiosyncrasies that do not do the participant justice in a written version of what he or she has said. (p. 104)

I believed this was an interview about discovering GED experiences and not about embarrassing the students. The following represents student responses to each of the themes that emerged in response to the interview questions.

Reflections on Reasons for Dropping Out of School

This section discussed the many reasons why students dropped out of school. Four prominent themes emerged from this topic. They included students not doing well in or not liking school; getting married and for five women, getting pregnant; having to help support the family (financially, physically, and emotionally); and family problems. There were seven students who did not like school. Two of the women got married at age 16. Five of the students said they needed to drop out of school to help support their families and two women said they had to drop out to take care of their siblings.

Several lesser topics surfaced, which included some students who felt that moving around many times contributed to their dropping out, and several students who reported that others bullied them while in school. And finally, a couple of students stated that repeating the same year in high school or not having enough credits contributed to their decision to drop out of high school.

For this research all of these interviewees were forthcoming with the information that explained how they came to be high school dropouts. As they reflected, some students realized there were signs in their childhood that contributed to their decision to drop out. Others discovered negative circumstances surrounding their early years in elementary and junior high school which continued into their high school years. While the experiences varied, for the women, getting pregnant was the prevalent reason for dropping out. The anecdotes transcended both rural and urban settings; they shared a common experience no matter where they started. For one person, an incident in elementary school was just the beginning of many negative educational experiences.

Mary, the mother of a now 16-year-old son, recalled these instances as if they had happened yesterday. Her eyes welled up as she recounted the following story:

I remember one year...I was in third grade. I had a teacher who put like a times table chart in the hallway with horses, like a racing thing. Each time the students got a times table they would move their horses forward. And it was for everyone to see. And they had everybody's name. And it was just horrible, because I was behind and everybody would point and laugh and I never learned my times tables. I still don't know them. I mean, I know some and I know a little bit more now thanks to my teacher, but I never learned them. I just gave up.

This same woman later stated that in high school,

I got pregnant. And the school told me I was a disgrace to the school. So they told me that I should leave (laughing), which I didn't care at the time, because I just hated it. You know what I mean? I had given up. I had totally given up.

Another student, Dawne, said,

I ended up 17 and got pregnant. And the school wouldn't allow me to come back actually. They told me I couldn't because I would miss too much school so I ended up just working factory jobs up until recently.

While the women felt their schools forced them to leave, one man who realized he was too far behind to catch up, took his life in another direction: "I was behind everybody in school. I just felt out of place. So when this happened, I thought this was my chance to get out of school and go into the military."

Along with negative educational experiences, some of the younger students seemed to have faced the tough emotional realities of the killing of some of their friends and family members. Timothy declared,

I had bad experiences, bad relationship with my parents. I had friends die around that time. I got kicked out of school. I was going through a lot of depression and I just didn't want to be there. I didn't want to stay in school.

Betsy experienced a similar kind of hardship when she was 16:

Well, I was going through a lot of problems. I had just had my son and that was no excuse to drop out of school, but my brother got killed in 2001 and I was on my maternity leave. I was out for six weeks and then he got killed, and it was just really hard trying to concentrate on school without, without thinking about it.

Table 4.1 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section briefly explores how these students sustained their lives once they were out of school and how they coped with not having a high school diploma or a GED certificate while in the workforce.

Table 4.1

Reasons for dropping out of school

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Did not like school (7)	16% F; 6% M	18-25 (1%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	3% AA; 20% C
Pregnancy (5)	17% F	18-25 (13%); 26-40 (3%)	13% AA; 3% C
Needed to help family (5)	6% F; 10% M	26-40 (13%); 41-46 (3%)	6% AA; 10% C
Family problems (7)	16% F; 3% M	18-25 (16%); 26-40 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	20% C; 3% PR

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA= Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Employment Without a Diploma

Only six students talked about their working without a GED certificate or high school diploma, and not one employer asked to see any educational credentials. Several of the women reported that although the question of credentials came up on their applications for employment, nobody asked them to produce a copy of the credential. When applying for jobs, a couple of the men decided to tell their employers they did not have a diploma but were working on obtaining the GED certificate. They both stated that their employers were appreciative for their honesty and were willing to hire them because they were aware these students would soon obtain their GED certificates.

I was anxious to hear how people who clearly had no graduation credentials obtained and retained employment. I wondered what the students' thoughts were concerning this situation. Were they scared to apply for a job without a high school

diploma or GED certificate? Did they fear someone asking them to produce that piece of paper that identified them as graduating from high school or receiving their GED credential? Michelle said,

I was very worried. I was like, what if somebody finds out that I don't have it?

Well then, you know. But I needed a job so what was I supposed to do? It was on the application, but I lied. I've been lying about it because I needed the jobs.

You know what I mean?

And Mary stated, "They asked me if I had one, if I got my GED regarding the application, but no, they didn't require it. I already had experience in cashiering." Carol echoed Mary's sentiments, "Like I said where I worked before, they didn't check for the GED. They didn't ask you for it."

Matthew knew he needed a job and did not have the credentials his employer needed, so he decided to mention his dilemma to his employer. He stated,

I was in school and I had asked them if I would I lose this job if I had dropped out of school but would eventually get my GED. They said no, as long as I got my GED within a reasonable amount of time. And they know I'm working on it.

Students worked without the credential but while some were scared, none of the interviewees were let go for not having it. During Julie's work experience, she wanted to go back to school but it took her a while. She explained,

When I went to work at a grocery store, they never asked for a diploma. I worked there eight years. I'm thinking, while I'm working, what am I doing? It took me a while to get my GED, but I did it.

One theme surfaced from this topic: although none of the students who obtained

jobs had high school credentials or a GED certificate, at no time during their employment did they have to produce proof of their educational background. None of the students were let go for not producing or having a high school diploma or GED credential. What does this say about our society? If schooling is so important, why not check the credentials? Are employers so desperate that they just need bodies without checking backgrounds? According to one of the tenants of functionalism, these students were filling a particular role in society. Someone has to work the minimum wage jobs, but when those wages become burdensome and fall short of being life-sustaining, adult learners start to look for another way to fit in and for some, it becomes a means to go “back to school” to get the GED credential. Perhaps they feel that society will be more accepting of them if they possess these documents, or if they say they do. Chapter 5 will focus more in-depth on these points. Table 4.2 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section deals with how the students discovered their respective adult education programs.

Table 4.2

Employed without proof of high school diploma or GED certificate

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Honest on employment application (6)	13% F; 6% M	18-25 (6%); 26 -40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	20% C
Scared but never questioned while employed (6)	13% F; 6% M	18-25 (6%); 26 -40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	20% C
Told employer working on GED certificate (6)	6% M	18-25 (6%)	20% C
Terminated due to lack of high school diploma or GED certificate (6)	0% F; 0% M	18-25 (6%); 26 -40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	20% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Finding an Adult Education Program

From the 30 students interviewed, four major themes emerged on how they discovered their adult education programs: students found their programs via the PA CareerLink[®], as a result of their factory downsizing and moving out of the United States, via word of mouth, and as a result of other institutions sending them to their current programs. Ten of the students found their way to an adult education program via the Pennsylvania CareerLink[®] (PA CL). Three others came to their programs because their factories moved out of the United States. The rest heard about their program from friends or they went to agencies that referred them to their current program.

When factories in rural locations close or when jobs transfer overseas, representatives from the PA CareerLink[®] come in to help employees with their job pursuits. About.com states, “PA CareerLink is Pennsylvania’s one-stop service for job seekers. PA CareerLink resources include job listings, directory of local offices, unemployment information, social services, and training resources” (retrieved November 23, 2008). PA CareerLink[®] offices operate under the PA Department of Labor and Industry and access points are located in each of the 67 PA counties; most services are offered free of charge. Clients register with the CL, and if it is determined that they need to improve their basic academic skills or if they need a GED credential, they are then referred to a local adult education program that collaborates with the CL to provide reciprocal services. Some students do not use the PA CareerLink[®], but rather check out other educational options themselves.

Nine of the students found their programs via word of mouth; four of the students found their programs as a result of a referral from other programs; and two students

came to their program after seeing an ad on TV. Four other students each have a different experience that led them to their programs. One studied for his GED certificate because he was in a work-study program for troubled youth and it was mandatory for the students to work on obtaining their GED credentials. Another person attended his program because it was close to his home. And finally, one student actually called around to several programs until she settled on her current program. The following conversations delved a bit deeper into the topic of finding an adult education program.

Kathleen took the initiative to find her program herself. She stated,

After I got laid off, then I feel if I start to look for a job now, they are going to ask me if I have my high school diploma or GED. I just left one day when my husband went to work. I didn't even tell him. I came to downtown and went to another educational program and I thought okay let me go and do something for myself.

Melissa attended her current program for a brief period of time, left for employment, and returned several years later to study again for her GED certificate, which she now was determined to receive. She stated, "I just wanted to better my education. I always wanted to be in the health field, so I knew I needed to get my GED in order to pursue that."

Dawne explained,

I always wanted to get out of the factory. But when I worked, they told me that our jobs were going out of the country. It was crushing at first, but it actually turned out good, because otherwise I don't think I would ever have gotten a chance to go back to school. And it gave me the motivation because I thought I

needed to make a better life for my kids and me. And with jobs going overseas, this was my only chance to make it better.

Shantelle also recalled how she came to be in her program: “At first I didn’t really think, I didn’t think GED, wow! I didn’t think it was important, honestly. You know what I mean? But then I just decided one day just to go.”

The one overarching theme seemed to be the students’ determination to make a better life for themselves through achieving their goal of obtaining the GED credential. They realized their lives had to change from what they used to be, but they also realized if they wanted a better life for themselves and their children, they had to make the sacrifice to get their education now and move on. Are their reasons for entering an adult education program linked to what Feinberg and Solits (2004) refer to as the schools’ purpose of socializing students to adapt to society? Does attending an adult education program ensure students are finding their place in society? I will focus on this topic in the next chapter. Table 4.3 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section explores the many barriers these students had to overcome to become part of and stay in their respective adult education programs.

Table 4.3

How students found adult education program

<u>How found</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
PA CareerLink® (10)	27% F; 6% M	18-25 (10%); 26-40 (17%); 41-69 (6%)	3% AA; 30% C
Factory downsized (3)	10% F	26-40 (6%); 41-69 (3%)	10% C
Word of mouth (9)	23% F; 6% M	18-25 (17%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	10% AA; 20% C
Referral by other programs (4)	10% F; 3% M	18-25 (.3%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (3%)	10% AA; 3% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Initial Barriers to Getting the GED Credential

For this part of the research, there were nine different barriers that emerged, but no one barrier was overwhelmingly in the majority. The barriers included financial problems, work schedules, negative family reactions to attending an adult education program, trouble remembering math, being one's "own worst enemy", and being overwhelmed at the prospect of going back to classes as an adult.

My experience in adult education showed that barriers are common among students. When practitioners enter the field of adult education, more often than not, they realize that the two main barriers their students might face are child care and transportation. Out of the thirty students, only one student stated that she had both transportation and babysitting issues. Two women stated that they had transportation problems only, but they both made the effort to find a program that was closer to where they lived so they could continue their classes. Two men had financial problems that were barriers to them. Two other males stated that their work schedules were burdensome, but they eventually worked out a schedule with their employers that accommodated their class time. Two men had families that did not support their decision to get a GED certificate. These men came to their classes despite those negative reactions, and they were determined to show those same family members that the negative opinions were not going to affect their decision to make the most of this educational opportunity. Eight students said they had no barriers at all.

Two women believed that returning to the classroom was overwhelming but they decided to persevere and did the best they could. Two other women stated they had trouble remembering math, but with the help of their teachers, they soon felt comfortable

enough to apply what they remembered. Two students believed they were their own worst enemies. And one last student suggested her anxiety became a burden to her. It was something she learned to handle as she continued to study for and eventually pass her GED Tests.

One student said her ex-husband was threatening not to pick her up or to pick her up late so she was constantly tardy for classes. Melissa put it this way:

It was more so, just dealing with their dad trying to get here. My children go to child care, yet here and there he would try to discourage me, not giving me rides and, you know, it would just be crazy to just try and get here but even if I was late, I was going. He would call and say that's not even school you're going to why do you call it school? He was just trying to, trying to down me, but I wouldn't have it (laughing).

She made other arrangements and continued on with the program until she passed her GED Tests.

In the end these students showed the determination they needed to overcome many obstacles in their way. They were all aware of the consequences they faced if they did not persist and continue with their studies. Some of them were all too well aware of the circumstances they had experienced with the fear of someone finding out they had no high school diploma or GED credential, low paying jobs, and little if any promise for doing better without some sort of formal academic documentation. Again, they wanted to feel like they fit into society and going back to school was certainly a step in the right direction. Table 4.4 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section looks at the role of support from family and

friends, which is a vital link between success and achieving the goal of earning the GED certificate.

Table 4.4

Barriers encountered

<u>Barrier</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Transportation & childcare (1)	10% F	18-25 (100%)	10% AA
Transportation only (2)	20% F	41-69 (100%)	20% C
Financial difficulties (2)	20% M	26-40 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	20% C
Work schedules (2)	20% M	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (3%)	3% AA; 3% C
Negative family support to return to school (2)	20% M	18-25 (100%)	20% AA
Trouble remembering math (2)	20% F	18-25 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	3% AA; 3% C
Students own worst enemy (2)	20% M	18-25 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	3% AA; 3% C
Overwhelmed to return to school (2)	20% F	26-40 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	3% AA; 3% C
No barriers at all (8)	27% F	18-25 (6%); 26-40 (13%); 41-69 (6%)	3% AA; 20% C; 3% MA

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Support From Family and Friends

The overwhelming theme from 25 of the 30 students interviewed showed that support from their families and friends was one of the most important factors that helped these learners not only enter an adult education program, but also encouraged them to continue on in the program until they achieved their goal of obtaining a GED certificate.

Two students received more support from their friends than their families. One student expressed gratitude to other students who helped her in her quest to pursue her GED certificate. And finally, a couple of students stated that they no longer spoke to their families because of their decision to go back to school. These students relied on the support from friends to get them through their studies. Those students who received support from their families expressed gratitude to those who encouraged them when they

became discouraged and who filled in for them by taking over chores, household duties, and general every day responsibilities so that they, the students, had extra time to study.

When I asked the students what part support played in their decision to either enter or stay in their adult education program, there were numerous stories to illustrate how their families and friends helped them on the road to success. Kathleen talked about the support her church friends and husband showed her and how sharing her encounters with her husband made the experience that much more fulfilling for both of them.

It means so much because they gave me enough time. If we have something doing at church, if I say oh I need to study and they say don't worry, we understand. And my husband will tell me you better do your work. Don't worry I'll do whatever. Quit cooking. I'll eat out whenever I can. Go to the library. And sometimes I would show him my homework when I first started and I would say can you please help me to do this? And he didn't even remember because it was a long time since he did this. When I started doing this, then I remembered and I showed him and he remembered it.

Rebecca gave this example of how her family supports her efforts, which in turn, helps her to persist:

I wanted to get the GED, but I thought to myself I was too dumb. I wasn't going to do it. I kept thinking I'm stupid. I can't do it. If I can't do math, I'm stupid. And every time I failed the test, it kept getting worse. It pretty [much] depressed me. And then I kept thinking, nah, I went too far. I can't give up. And then my daughter said no mom, you're not going to quit. She said you never quit in your life, why would you want to quit now? I said, because I can't do the math. She

said you can do it. She said you will do it. And my daughter and my grandchild who's in junior high think it's great. And he's doing the same work I'm doing right now. And he comes over and I watch him all the time, and he sits and he likes to do work with me. And he can do some of them. When my kids and my grandson had faith in me, that's when I said I can't have my grandson thinking I'm a quitter.

And Bill stated,

My wife, she stood by me. She'd sit beside me, in front of me, behind me (smiling). I mean, she was really, she was really supportive. She supports me 110%. When I have questions, she's always there to help me out, show me what to do and how to do it, where I made my mistake. And my daughter was the same way. When she was here she would always come down and say, let me check your work, Dad. And she would go over it and it was nice to have both of them there to help me.

Carol had the support of her fiancée,

Like I said, my fiancée was my big motivation on that, you know, he was like, do it, you know you can do it. You're smart. So basically he, he didn't push me, but you know, he helped me out to better my life.

Shaylene, a very young mother of four young children, appreciated the support she received from her family when she stated,

I have a lot of support. They just tell me to keep going no matter what. Just keep trying. Don't give up. You got four kids to raise and even if you didn't have kids, how would you feel if you were just by yourself? Would you just not want

to do anything? You'd want to move on.

Both Melissa and Julie talked about the encouragement they received from their families. This was vital especially when both felt like they wanted to give up at some point. When asked about the role her family played in her decision to stay in the program, Melissa reflected,

Just encouragement, you know, just when I would get discouraged as far as things I went through at home, just being tired, just getting that one-on-one time with myself. They would always tell me, you know, you're going to get your GED, you don't need him. You got the medical stuff like you want to do. So my sister and my mother were definitely there for me.

And Julie added,

When I did my last GED, the one before I passed, I told myself, I said, if I don't pass this, I'm not coming back. And then I thought no, I'm not. I'm going to go back. My husband is really pushing me. He wants me to do something better.

Shantelle said,

Well, nobody in my family has a GED. Everybody graduated from high school even so far as to go with honors and things like that. It's like how can I compete with that? But everybody wanted me to get it. Everybody was trying to help me.

This encouragement from family members carried each student through when at different times, each wanted to give it all up and quit. The importance of support from family members seemed to play a vital role when students experienced the ebb and flow of their GED experience.

And finally, there was Amanda, who experienced the support of two families. Not only was her family proud of her, but her boyfriend's family was also just as excited about her accomplishments.

I live with my boyfriend and his family, and they were just so excited, I mean, his family did so much for me since I've taken the test. When I prepared for my GED, his mom went out and got me a gift. Taking my test, she went out and got me a gift. Completing my tests, she got me two gifts. I mean, they did so much and they made it feel worth it, not to say that I look for approval in people, but it just felt so good that they cared so much and they were so happy like I was. I thought I did a very good thing.

All students who responded found the support of their families and friends to be an underlying factor in their continuing success to study for the GED Tests. Here was an example of students committing themselves to being productive parts of society via the attainment of a credential that would act as proof for those in authority and those in their families that they were capable of achieving this credential. Their determination and fortitude helped others support their efforts. The next section briefly explores the support of fellow learners.

Reflections on Support of Fellow Learners

Several students spoke about their ability to ask others in the classroom for help and, about how they, in turn, were willing to offer assistance to others who might need help with specific areas of the GED Tests. Support comes in many venues. For some students it took time to create friendships and partnerships. Some teachers found it beneficial to form small groups so that those who were knowledgeable in one subject area

could help others in their group. This improved the self-esteem of students and allowed them to demonstrate their talents in certain subject areas. Kathleen found the advantage of working with a group of her peers. She explained,

Yes, we had some groups or they put us in groups, worked with each other to help you. She might be good with English, I'm good with math, and the other one is good with science, so we all work together to help each other.

And Benjamin was surprised that he had something to contribute to the classroom. In the interview he shared that he was very good in math, so he tried to help out whenever he could.

It was a good experience. It was fun. I had a good time actually learning something I should've done in the past (laughing). And it helps people out. I helped people out. When the teacher was teaching, I tried to help if I could.

Receiving words of encouragement from others was inspirational to Amy. Before coming to the program, she revealed she never heard the encouraging words she wanted to hear from her parents. When she entered this program, she was pleasantly surprised to learn that not only were the teachers supportive, but also her classmates were. She said, "All of the students were supportive. Every time I wanted to quit, they'd come pat me on the back and say Amy, don't do this. You can do it. We have faith in you."

The next section speaks to the support that the teachers provide.

Reflections on Support of Teachers

All 30 students interviewed had positive comments about the support they received from their teachers. To a person each comment referred to the selflessness of their teachers and how their flexibility, encouragement, support, assistance, and

dedication were a constant inspiration to these students. The adult learners marveled at how determined their teachers were to see them succeed. They remarked that these teachers never gave up on them and encouraged them not to give up on themselves. They commented that they have never had any teacher care so much about them, which seemed strange at first but became quite comforting as they continued through the process of passing the GED Tests. The teachers also helped to set up networks of support from outside sources, such as information about the PA CareerLink[®] and social service agencies that would provide information about the many services of which the students could take advantage.

The interviews demonstrated that the “can do” attitude allays any fears about whether the students could accomplish this task. Several students commented that if their high school teachers had been so caring and encouraging, they might not have dropped out in the first place. Some students spoke about their skepticism upon entering the classroom, but Mary expressed a different feeling when she said,

I guess the first day I walked into my teacher’s class, I already felt very comfortable. Everyone automatically said you can do this. You know, they have a lot of confidence in me. Well, I just answered that pretty much. They’re all phenomenal. They have patience and you know if you didn’t pick up the first way they explained it, then they would do it again.

Linda glowingly talked about her teachers in this manner:

I love them. They’re very nice. They, you know, if you think you can’t do it they build you up. They’d say come on, you can do it. I know you can do it. They’re great. I love them. (Laughter) They didn’t teach us like that in school.

And Dawne said,

Two teachers taught my prep class and I thought they were both great. The instructors for the LPN course up here, they were wonderful. They pushed me too. And it seemed it felt like, when I went to take my GED, it felt like they were all sitting there behind me. And they were all excited when the scores came in. It wasn't just me being excited myself. They were all in it. So it felt good, because it felt like I had my own support team. You know, I think the teachers were great with keeping me with materials and when I didn't understand something, they were good at explaining it, so it's really good.

Kathleen echoed the same sentiment of support. When asked what part support played in her efforts to complete her GED certificate, she stated,

It played so much because they all encouraged me. Make sure you come to class. Make sure you do your homework. Make sure you go to a library. I have been encouraged to get a library card, so I go to the library to do some studying and do my homework. And sometimes the teacher, my teacher, she has a one-on-one class set up.

Matthew seemed surprised at the level of concern shown to him. In other circumstances if he did not show up, nobody would have known he was gone, but in his case, his teacher not only missed him, but she also pursued him! "She wouldn't let me... if I stopped coming, she would call to see where I was at," Matthew said. "She'd be ringing my phone, her or my other teacher. They would call and wonder where I'm at."

Josh expressed his concern that he not become a statistic since he was a young black Puerto Rican, so he was not only appreciative of the way he and his classmates

were treated, but he also felt gratitude for the respect he had been shown. He said of his teachers,

I thank them all. They were all encouraging. They were all nice. I've never seen a group of people be so generous like that. Like I said, I really do appreciate the program. I really do appreciate the fact that people can have a second chance. And with this program, I can't speak for other programs, but this program, people get treated right. I mean, they do. They get treated the way I wish I would've gotten treated when I was in high school. They respect you. They will let you know that you can do it. I just love the whole program.

Another young man told of the impression his male teacher made on him. Not having a father figure in his life, this teacher seemed to fulfill that role. He stated,

Some of the students, they come from hard places, so it's not like they were really influenced, or influencing others, but the teacher, the teacher had a lot to do. Like whenever you had a problem that you couldn't overcome, he'd go up to you and say like a really cool phrase and it would stick with you for a whole month or two (laughs). It's like everything he says to me is just so important, so he plays that role.

Susan added,

When I was feeling, I don't know, I don't understand, she was kind to me saying you are doing good [sic]. She was kind of encouraging. And I feel good then because if she didn't tell me that, I really was feeling like no, I never will do it. I cannot do it. She kind of encouraged me saying, you can do it. And I know it and I like that feeling.

One student, Amy, told of her troubled life before moving back to Pennsylvania and entering her current program. Her self-esteem was practically non-existent and she did not have much regard for school, those who attended it, or those who taught it. But when she came to this particular program, she fit right in and could not say enough about the support she received. She expressed her sentiments this way:

I would like to thank them because they've given me a better outlook on life.

And I'm not much of a quitter anymore. I love school now. I can't say it's for fools or for sissies so...I mean, it was really scary. I wasn't at all confident when I came back to school. I'm like I'm never going to do this. I can't do this. I'm going to fail. My teachers, they're all like Amy, you're not going to fail. You're going to do all right. They're like, we have faith in you. And I said, that's nice, you know (laughs). It's nice to have people have faith in me that I can do well when I put my mind to it. I just wanted to quit a couple of times and my teacher wouldn't let me. They kept on telling me not to worry about the test; just to go in and do my best. And if I failed it, I can always come back and re-study what I've missed.

These teachers not only conveyed to students the feeling that they had a second chance, but they also made it acceptable for students to forgive themselves if they did not pass one of their tests. The students were encouraged to try to do their best and if it happened that their best was not good enough, the teachers told them not to be discouraged and to retake any part of the tests they needed. Students going into the tests with that mindset felt that failing was not the worst thing that could happen. This attitude boosted their confidence and gave them a different perspective about the tests. One

positive aspect of the teachers' encouragement was that it communicated a "can do" attitude to the students, which made all the difference.

Students like Shaylene seemed to be impressed with the individual attention she got in the classroom. Teachers were flexible enough that they could work with both large and small groups to help all students achieve their goals. Shaylene said,

I like how the teachers teach you things. As soon as you say you need help with a problem, they go straight to the board you know what I mean? And, mind you, everyone is doing something different in the classroom, so they go to the board and they show you your problems step-by-step, even if you have to ask them twenty times, they still do it over and over again for you.

And Dawne expressed her gratitude this way:

I couldn't have asked for better teachers. Honestly, I was happy with them from the start. I thought, you know; when you think of a teacher you always think of, I don't know, someone with the beehive hairdo (laughs) and a ruler in her hand saying you're going to do this. And they were wonderful. They called me. They kept in touch over the phone. When I took a test they called me with scores. I called and asked them questions and they were sure to get right back to me. It was just nice, I mean, I couldn't have asked for a better group of teachers.

Thus, it was clear that under this theme, one overwhelming sentiment emerged which was gratitude from all of the students to all of their teachers. The compassion shown did not adhere to any boundaries, and all teachers from every program that was part of this research possessed a great deal of compassion. One message came across loud and clear: without the determination, flexibility, continuous support, mutual respect,

and positive attitudes of the teachers these students might not have developed the confidence to succeed and might not have stayed in the program long enough to experience success in passing the GED Tests. The relation between this support and the literature will be a topic for discussion in the next chapter. Table 4.5 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section examines the motivation and persistence shown by these students.

Table 4.5

Three main support systems

Support from	Gender	Age	Race
Family/friends (25)	57% F; 27% M	18-25 (20%); 26-40 (40%); 41-69 (24%)	27% AA; 50% C; 3% MA; 3% PR
Classmates (3)	6% F; 3% M	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	3% AA; 3% C; 3% PR
Teachers (30)	70% F; 30% M	18-25 (27%); 26-40 (60%); 41-69 (13%)	30% AA; 63% C; 3% MA; 3% PR

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Motivation and Persistence

It is not easy to determine what motivates someone to stay in a GED program. As has been shown, there were many variables that could account for the reasons why students dropped out, but these particular interviewees chose to stay in their respective programs. Six themes emerged from this question: persisting to get a better job or attend further schooling; proving to themselves that they could follow something through to fruition despite lack of support from family; making up their minds to tackle the task at hand; teacher and family support; being a role model for their children; and the desire to earn that valuable piece of paper; and seven students said they persisted in order to get a better job or go on to post-secondary opportunities.

Another theme that emerged was students wanted to test themselves to see if they could actually follow through with their desire to get the GED credential despite the feeling that others did not believe in them. On the contrary, there were many students who persisted because of the encouragement they received from their family members and teachers. Four students responded that they persisted because they just made up their minds to do it. Another theme that emerged is that students wanted to be role models for their children. Three students wanted to get “that piece of paper.”

I asked the students if they ever felt like quitting and what motivated them to stay in the program. Naomi said,

Before, I wasn't ready. Maybe I was a little scared because I heard the test was hard. I didn't want to take it and fail. You know, it was just the fear of not passing. It was time now. It was time.

Carol stated,

I'm more motivated. I want to better myself and just become a better person. It's hard...being my age is hard. I think, you know, anybody can get your GED at any age, but I regret a lot not getting it back then before. I just let things go. But it's hard to say really but I think my attitude is just a lot better. I'm more motivated. I want to go out and do things. I want to have a better life.

Bob, who dropped out of school at a very young age, speculated on his educational experiences, saying,

I just set my mind on going back to school. It's something that I missed when I was younger and it's something that I wanted to do. Going back to school for me was very overwhelming. I had a lot of obstacles. When I went to school, they

didn't have computers. I don't know the first thing about a computer. Thirty years ago there wasn't even a computer even thought of in school. It was a typewriter. That was quite an obstacle, the computer deal, which still is today. As I'm going to school, I'm learning more and more about the computer every day. But yes, there was more than one obstacle.

Shaylene, one of the youngest students stated,

I'm like I've got to pass this. I kept getting frustrated. And it seemed like I was having more kids. I have four kids now. I kept getting frustrated. I said I need to pass this test so I can move on. I don't want to be stuck doing this when I'm like 23 or 24.

And Rebecca stated,

I haven't been in school close to 37 years. And for me to go and open up a new algebra book or math book...the new algebra that I don't even know what that means. The problems I was familiar with, those weren't even in the books with this algebra stuff. If you come here, you come with the incentive to want to get a GED; the teachers can't go and do it for you. You've got to want it for yourself and you've got to want it real bad and for me, that's my main incentive.

While the reasons for motivation vary, these interviews demonstrated the importance of timing. The time to take and pass the tests had come at a point in the students' lives when they needed to move on, so they were motivated to continue. They were hopeful that by pursuing the GED credential they were preparing for a better life for themselves and their families. This hopeful feeling along with the support they received from family, friends, and mainly teachers was what kept them coming back until they

reached their goal of passing the GED Tests. Students realized that support and motivation were major factors in their aspiration to complete the tests. Table 4.6 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section deals with a topic that was not initially part of the interview, but several of the students felt such frustration with the disrespect they witnessed in their programs that they had to comment on it.

Table 4.6

Reasons for motivation and persistence

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Get a better job/go to school (7)	13% F; 10% M	18-25 (10%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 13% C; 3% MA
Prove to themselves they could complete program (5)	10% F; 6% M	18-25 (10%); 26-40 (6%)	3% AA; 10% C; 3% MA
Decided it was time to get credential (4)	10% F; 3% M	18-25 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	3% AA; 10% C
Teacher/family support (4)	13% F	18-25 (6%); 26-40 (3%); 41-69 (3%)	6% AA; 6% C
Role model for children (3)	10% F	26-40 (6%); 41-69 (3%)	3% AA; 6% C
Want that piece of paper (3)	3% F; 6% M	26-40 (3%); 41-69 (6%)	3% AA; 6% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican;

Frustration with Disrespectful Classmates

Unexpectedly, the issue of frustration emerged among five females from different programs. The women ranged in ages from 24-69, so it was not just the older students who spoke up about these feelings. The significance of this frustration was evident as they spoke about how they were appalled at what they saw and experienced in their classrooms. They felt the need to express this dissatisfaction and frustration concerning those students who did not appreciate the services they received. Instead of sympathizing with the plight of their classmates, these women were unhappy and disgusted by any

displays of bad behavior and disrespect to the teachers or the process. All students were upset with younger counterparts, who they felt neither understood nor appreciated the opportunities that were offered to them in these free programs.

Linda explained how she worked with her teacher while others were not being as studious or courteous:

So I basically did my English and stuff with her, while they were yack, yack, yacking in the background. It's kind of hard (laughter). And then I went at night...I liked the night classes better because everybody that was in those classes was motivated. They wanted to "getter done." There was no talking. There was no yapping. It was just the people in the class. They just...it was basically social hour for them. It's what they were there for. That's all they do. You can't help but hear them talking in the background and they were always whining about needing something.

Dawne stated,

And I felt like they disrespected the teacher, because she takes her job serious [sic]. And there they were making a joke out of it and you more or less; you might as well say they're adults. So they should've known better, and she shouldn't have to correct them, but I felt like it was disrespecting her too. And she's going out of her way. And I'm sitting there thinking, how can you sit and joke about this when I'm sitting over here knowing that I have to do this? I don't have a choice. I have to do this. And it did frustrate me because I thought if you think it's a joke you shouldn't be here. You're not ready for it. I'm sitting there working my butt off, trying to get it so that I can go somewhere and do something

with myself. And it just...it made me want to tell them, you know, I think you need to, to just leave. (Laughing) But then they sit there making a joke out of it and it just irritated me. Yeah, she's up there trying to do work of her own. And they are distracting her too. So I don't see your whole purpose in being there to distract people. I think they just want the attention. Text messaging...And then it hurts because you're messing up everybody else's time. Like me, I'm here to do what I got to do and leave. I don't have time to play, make friends, or whatever. And if they're like that in class, I thought what are they going to be like when it comes time to take the test because it's a very long test (laughs)? You have to take it serious [sic]. I mean, the questions are, some of them aren't very easy. And I thought how are they going to take the test if they don't take the studying for it serious [sic]?

These women made it clear that the distractions provided by students who acted like they did not want to be there annoyed them. This kind of situation was not unique to only one program or specific area; it happened all around the region.

Kathleen began to state her frustrations when she started to think about the value of the education she was receiving. She described her observations in the classroom in the following manner:

When the teacher is teaching sometimes like yesterday when my teacher was teaching us, there was fun...I always like to sit in the front so I can see. In the back they're talking and making noise. They turn on their phone, and it's written [on the board] no cell phones, no phone in the class, no nothing. They'll sit there and when my teacher says something, they might get angry. She has to be patient

with them. So I, I feel so sorry for her sometimes, when I look at the way they behave; they are so nasty.

Another person with an opinion on this topic was Melissa, who stated,

You walk around here and you do your work, but there are some people I think who are here just to be here. So you get a lot of people who, you know, they want to hang out, they want to interrupt class, you know like they're in middle school or whatever.

And finally, Rebecca, said,

If they only understood they need to stay here because they're younger than I am and they could comprehend this much faster than I could. The teachers are there. But I mean, I mean, you got to want to. They didn't.

While this section was not a planned part of the research, I believed it was important enough to include. These five women were dissatisfied with the antics of some of their classmates and their comments highlighted the passion with which they approached their studies and their second chance to change their lives for the better. Several other students were not as verbal, but they also mentioned their disappointment at those students who were not as serious about this opportunity to better themselves. Table 4.7 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section explores how the students felt as they reflected on their experiences of taking the tests.

Table 4.7

Reasons for frustration			
<u>Reason</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Other students show disrespect to teachers(5)	17% F	26-40 (10%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 10% C
Others students do not use class time wisely (5)	17% F	26-40 (10%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 10% C
Other students do not appreciate educational opportunity given them (5)	17% F	26-40 (10%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 10% C
Other students talk on cell phones (5)	17% F	26-40 (10%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 10% C
Clear disrespect and disregard for educational system (5)	17% F	26-40 (10%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 10% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican;

Reflections on the Experience of Taking the GED Tests

Three major themes emerged from this question. Students felt they were prepared to take the GED Tests; some thought it was harder and some thought it was easier than they had anticipated. Twenty-one students expressed satisfaction with themselves because they felt they were prepared to take the tests. Fifteen students believed the test was easier than they thought it was going to be, and six students thought the test was harder than they had anticipated. Many students spent hours and hours preparing for the test and found it to be the most nerve-racking experience of their lives. Some students even had feared taking their first test, but once it was over, most of them realized they were prepared after all.

Eight students commented on the math test. Since nationally and statewide, most students fail the math portion of the test, it was surprising to hear two of the students comment on how easy the math was for them. Four students, all females, stated the math was much harder than they expected. Two students had failed the math portion of the test and were studying for a test retake. Two students thought the math was much easier than

they anticipated. Lesser themes included two people who believed they were not fully prepared for the test; one student said she believed she could have done better; and one student felt she needed more time on the tests.

One of the criteria for taking part in the interview was that students had to take all five parts of the GED Tests, but did not necessarily have to pass the entire battery. Of the thirty students, 20 had passed all five parts. Ten of the students had failed some of the other sections and were studying to retake those tests. The students who had passed all the tests might have felt differently about the test taking process as they reflected on their experiences because it was over, while those who were still trying to pass the last test might have seen the entire process through different eyes because they never were away from the process. Several of the students used adjectives like nerve-racking, exciting, and stressful to describe their experiences.

One of the students was convinced that reading played a major role in her test. Cyndi explained that she needed to brush up on her reading skills since this was a weak point. She needed to get a score of 410 on her test in order to pass. Here is what she divulged:

I read more. I thought I was going to fail my reading GED test. And when I got the score and she said you got 460, I thought she was joking. And I was happy that I did that good [sic].

Amanda told me that her anxiety got to be such a problem that she experienced panic attacks. She described her experience this way:

It was pretty nerve-racking. I had to leave a couple times and get water and calm myself down. My nerves, my anxiety, I just feel like I can't breathe. It was a lot

better because my brother and my friend were there. It was a lot better, but like during our 15 minute break, I would get the stomach butterflies, but it was a good experience. My anxiety made me feel like I wasn't [going to pass], but I knew that I was. I knew I was when I first started reading the questions. I'm like I know this. I know this. I pretty much knew it. I knew I could do this and I should get through it.

Once she realized she was familiar with the questions, her anxiety calmed down enough for her to finish the tests, which she successfully passed on the first attempt.

Rebecca attended a large rural program and even though many of her friends thought she was a bit old to take the test (age 69); she persisted because her family and teachers encouraged her to do so. She recounted the following story about her test taking days where she had to take several parts of the tests multiple times. She said,

It's exciting to me. I'm really excited now because I know what I'm doing. I know when I go in now what I'm going to face. But I literally got scared before. With my teacher working with me, I'm more confident. They said don't ever get upset when you go into that classroom. Get yourself calmed down. And remember, he said, if you get upset on one question, go to the next one and then come back. He said don't get yourself worked up before the test. And that's what I done [sic] on that last test. I believe that's why I scored 100 more points on that reading...they need a couple more teachers like him.

While some students felt ready, others were scared, excited, and even second guessing their answers days after the tests, but on the whole most felt prepared, which was a testament to not only their self-confidence but also to the faith they had as a result

of the encouragement they had been getting from their teachers. By preparing for and taking the GED Tests, these students were one step closer to the educational credential that will act as the catalyst to opening new doors in the world of work and post-secondary opportunities. Table 4.8 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section focuses on major life changes as a result of taking the GED Tests.

Table 4.8

Test preparation

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Believed they were prepared for the tests (21)	43% F; 27% M	18-25 (17%); 26-40 (40%); 41-69 (13%)	20% AA; 43% C; 3% MA; 3% PR
Easier than they thought it would be (15)	40% F; 10% M	18-25 (13%); 26-40 (30%); 41-69 (6%)	13% AA; 33% C; 3% PR
Harder than they thought it would be (6)	10% F; 10% M	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (10%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 13% C
Twenty who already had passed (20)	40% F; 27% M	18-25 (20%); 26-40 (33%); 41-69 (13%)	23% AA; 37% C; 3% MA; 3% PR

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Major Life Changes

Five major themes emerged from this topic. Students were proud of their decision to get their GED credential; some students had become more confident as a result of studying for and taking the tests, some felt they had not experienced any changes at all, some felt they were thinking more clearly and were more focused in their everyday lives, and a couple of students realized they were reading and comprehending more.

Twenty-one students said they are proud of their decision to study for and take the GED Tests. All the students believed they made the right decision and were pleased with that decision in spite of any hurdles they had to overcome.

While nine students felt more confident, six students felt they had not experienced

any noticeable major changes in their lives as yet. These students were some of the youngest interviewed. Perhaps they had not experienced as hard a time as some of their older classmates, and, therefore, they did not notice significant changes in their lives. Four students discussed the fact that they were thinking more clearly and focused better as a result of studying for and taking the tests. Two of the females believed they were reading and comprehending more than when they started their programs. One of the students declared she had more faith in God. One of the young men noticed he received more respect from his parents, and another student said he experienced a positive emotion inside when he attended the program.

The students were anxious to talk about the changes that they felt were a major force in their lives. Their answers were varied and quite personal to each respondent. In response to the question, Mary stated,

More confidence, yeah in myself. I was so ridiculed the majority of my life. Now it's like see? I told you I can do this! (Laughing really hard!). I'm not a dumb person (laughing again). I felt stupid. I really did. Now I am just amazed. I am absolutely amazed at what I have learned; what I've picked up. I still have issues with, you know, sometimes I'll forget even the following day what we did, but I'll just have to review it again, you know, but other than that, it's good. And like I said, seeing what I could actually do was my encouragement. You know what I mean? I just wanted to do more. It just encouraged me to do more. I want more information now that I know I can have it. I'm picking up on it so I guess in a way I want to show those people back then that look, you know, look I can do this (laughing).

Timothy realized that his program had brought him something he thought he would have to work at for a long time. The change, he said, was “respect, trust from my parents. I gained a lot of it back. From things I used to do in my past, they didn’t trust me at all. Now I’ve gained a lot of it back.” He told me that by deciding to do something positive with his life, he realized that his parents looked at him in a different way and this action made him believe in himself again.

Timothy’s comments paralleled the feelings shared by many students like Amy. She came from a troubled childhood where she believed she could not make her parents proud of her, but as she talked here, she realized that this program had shown her she could be successful. She even had advice for others as she expressed her feelings this way:

People are always telling me how proud they are of me and those words aren’t part of my vocabulary. No one has ever told me that they’re proud of me for doing, for accomplishing so much. Yeah, I could get good grades in school, but that wasn’t enough to make my parents proud of me. And now that I’m away from my parents, and not really on my own, I live with my cousin, it’s like I don’t care how they feel if they’re proud or if they’re disappointed in me. I’m not doing this for them. I’m doing it for me. And that’s what a lot of people have been telling me to do. Don’t do it for your family, do it for you. That’s what I’m doing.

Josh explained,

I have more confidence. If I can make it through all this stuff that I went through, aside from getting my GED, up to the point in leading to get my GED, you know

at the end, they say, as you get older life will get harder? All of this was a good time for me. And I feel like if I can get through this, I can get through anything else. So bring it all on (laughs).

Then there is Dawne who realized the benefits of attending the GED program in her everyday life. She stated,

I'm more organized in the past five months than I was for my whole life before that. I'm always on time for appointments. I'm always on time for classes. I was always late. I never had my appointments in order. Now I have a little, you know, desk planner that I mark everything in. I said it's, you know, it's the idea of growing up. And really I didn't realize it, but being a mom all them [sic] years, I wasn't growing up till now.

Shantelle said a time when she felt proud was "when I got my GED. Like I actually got it in the mail and I saw my scores and stuff. That was a proud moment."

Just as reading is an important component of the GED Tests, reading is also a benefit derived from being in a GED program. Kathleen talked about her education in positive terms, saying,

Yes, yes I value it even more now because I am able to read more. Newspapers, books, I love reading books. I pay attention to things now, but before I didn't pay no mind [sic], but now I pay more attention because I value what I have about education.

After being in an adult education program for some time, both Tracey and Nathaniel realized the importance of their education. They also were aware that their thinking had changed since their younger days. Tracey stated, "I am more involved now

than I probably was in school. Back then, I wasn't thinking about school, but now I have a goal and I want to move on and further my education and better myself." And Nathaniel said, "Yes, actually, around in the seventh grade, it was like education wasn't that important. But now, as I'm going through the GED classes, I'm really realizing that education means a lot."

When asked what had changed for him, Kevin responded,

Only the attitude of wanting to learn more; it's grown immensely from when I first came in. It's like oh golly, I got to do this, but I'm forcing myself. Now I feel like I don't have to force myself. Now I have a positive emotional feeling I have inside.

And finally, Shaylene stated,

I felt more like I wanted to further my education. I didn't want to stop. I kept thinking, don't stop. Once you pass your GED just keep on going. That's the only attitude I have ever had. I've got to keep going.

This part of the research showed that when they had a chance to reflect, the students believed they definitely made the right decision to get their GED certificate. Table 4.9 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next section reviews the responses from the students when they replied to the question about what advice they would give to someone who had dropped out of school and was considering becoming a GED student.

Table 4.9
Major life changes

<u>Changes</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Proud of decision to get GED credential (21)	53% F; 17% M	18-25 (13%); 26-40 (40%); 41-69 (17%)	17% AA; 47% C; 3% MA; 3% PR
More confident (9)	23% F; 6% M	18-25 (6%); 26-40 (20%); 41-69 (3%)	6% AA; 17% C; 3% MA; 3% PR
Not experienced any changes yet (6)	10% F; 10% M	18-25 (6%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (6%)	20% C
Thinking more clearly; more focused (4)	13% F	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (3%)	6% AA; 6% C
Reading and comprehending more (2)	6% F	41-69 (6%)	3% AA; 3% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

GED Wisdom

Toward the end of the interview, I asked the students to share any advice they might have learned as a result of going through the experience of studying for and taking the GED Tests. As they became serious and reflective, I discovered what I called “GED Wisdom,” which I believed was akin to being in a secret society. All of the students had something they wanted to share about their experience, whether it was a sentiment such as wishing they had started the process of studying for the GED credential several years ago or imparting a nugget of knowledge that they had attained only as a result of being in an adult education class. Their goal was to inspire and motivate future GED students.

From the question of what advice they would give to undecided students about entering a GED program, five topics emerged. These themes were: do not give up, stay focused and pay attention, be prepared, be determined, and take your time. Sixteen interviewees wanted future students to not give up and to come to class every day. Four other students believed that future GED enrollees should prepare themselves for classes. Four students thought staying focused and paying attention would be the most helpful

advice for new GED students. Two students recommended others be determined and serious and two others suggested that future students take their time throughout the program and do things the right way.

Dawne declared,

I don't think anything worth having is easy to get, so it does take time and patience to sit down and read and study, but if you're going to go anywhere, really, you need it. I mean, there's nowhere really you can go without it. So it's nice you don't have to hide not having it because that's what I was doing. I tried to hide it. And now I can finally say, you know, I did graduate so now I feel better because I'm not, not living a lie. I felt like I was living a lie.

Mary Ann summed up her feelings concisely when she stated, "Your education is important because you need your diploma or GED to do pretty much anything." Timothy realized that his GED credential was the ticket he needed to better himself in life. He said, "You're not going to get nothing [sic] in life these days without any kind of education whether you have a high school diploma or GED. That's better than not having neither [sic]."

Betsy agreed with Timothy that having a GED certificate was a good thing. Her advice to those who might want to enter a GED program was

to stay focused. Don't let anyone tell you the GED is not important. It's basically the same thing as your diploma. Just get up in the morning, get yourself prepared, that's what you need to do. That's all I would basically tell them. Don't quit.

That's all.

She also stated that getting a job was good, but eventually having a career was much

better. She added,

Well, I needed to better myself, I couldn't do anything. Anybody can get a job anywhere, but when it comes to fall back on, you don't have a career as something that you want. You're just going to be getting job after job after job. That's fine too, but you need a career to back it up.

Shantelle agreed that one needed a GED credential or high school diploma to get a job.

As she talked she realized this message was not only for others, but also for herself. She shared a profound message:

It seems like anymore, you can't get anywhere without it. It makes it a lot harder to find a job now. Yeah, like everything else just took a front burner and education was pretty much on the back burner and then when I started getting older, I guess I realized that was stupid of me. I guess I could have stuck in there, you know, tried harder, but you know what I mean...everything else was just more important, so much more important. Stick with it because getting your education is the best thing you could possibly do. You may not actually be lucky as I have in getting a decent paying job, and you don't want to get yourself stuck in a rut. The money may be okay at the beginning, but as you get older, the little bit that you are making is not going to be enough. Times are getting harder.

Working for minimum wage became a central theme for several of the interviewees. Most of them were aware that without their GED credential, their future might consist of a lifetime of minimum wage jobs and that was not their desire.

Benjamin talked about working in different jobs and realizing he needed that piece of paper in order to earn a sustainable wage. He reasoned that he wanted his GED

certificate “because I didn’t want to work for minimum-wage the rest of my life. I saw that and I said no, this is not going to happen.”

Another person concerned about minimum wage jobs was Michelle. Using herself as an example, she stated, “So I thought I would just slide through life, you know and it’s not working so...I’ve been married for 30 years so (sighs) yeah, I’m doing this now because I don’t want work for minimum-wage anymore.”

With this question the students took a chapter from their own experiential textbooks to help others achieve success in their GED endeavors. Their “GED Wisdom” also included advice to students already in a GED program who felt like they wanted to drop out. Upon reflection the students spoke confidently about their advice and they wanted to share that information with prospective students as well.

Reflections on Advice to Current GED Students Who Might Want to Drop Out

Three major themes emerged from this question. These students were adamant that their fellow classmates and other current GED students not give up, realize the importance of education, and realize the wealth of opportunities they had through an adult education program. Twenty-two students advised those whose interest might be waning not to drop out and not to give up. Four students advised others to consider the opportunities they had in their classes. Three students shared opinions that education was important and students needed their GED certificate for every career they want to pursue. One student remembered when adult education funding was in jeopardy so her advice was to get the education now because the program may disappear someday. Emphasizing their advice to stay focused and motivated and never give up, the students spoke from their experiences as they recounted their circumstances.

Mary was still in shock when she spoke to me. She had recently passed her GED Tests and was waiting for acceptance into a program that would train her to work with medical records. She seldom experienced success in school as a teen and never really thought she was going to pass the GED Tests either. She felt worthy of her accomplishments and stated,

You can't do anything unless you try. You will never succeed if you don't try. You'll be amazed at what you can accomplish if you just put some effort towards it. But you do have to work hard. You do have to put effort into it if you want anything, you know? Whatever you do, don't give up. Don't give up. I didn't (laughing). I wanted it and I got it. I went after this. I tried hard and I did it. Go to school every day. Study. Just study. That's how I did it. Just study. Read a lot.

Another person who knew the benefits from being in a GED program was Gayle. She had been coming to her program for a while and she had failed several of the tests but she was determined to pass all of them the next time she took them. She had learned that it was okay to fail and her advice showed that she lived by her words. She said, "Just be positive. Go ahead and do it and if you fail, just keep trying." Naomi also talked about the prospect of failing and being comfortable with retaking the tests if necessary. She stated, "Just study as much as you can. Just do it and get it over with because you never know if you're going to pass it or not. And if you do fail, you can always take it again."

Linda said, "Study, study, study. (Laughter). You need a support network, definitely, you know, 'cause [sic] you're going to have highs and lows." And Dawne had this advice about staying in a GED program:

Oh definitely do it. And be determined. Sometimes I think everything we do we lose our motivation sometimes. It's easier to walk away, but in the end, it pays off. Just like when they called me with my scores, all those months of sitting and reading and writing...it all paid off. I just felt so much better.

Kathleen had a lot of good advice to share. She had passed all of her GED Tests except the math. She advised,

Just stay motivated. I just say stay motivated. Come every day, even when you're tired because it pays off in the long run, you know. Take all the time you have and study. Do your homework. Go to the library. Work with your teacher. Ask questions. Whenever you don't understand it's better to ask the teacher, can you please explain to me how you got that answer? You have to, yes. It's good for you too because you are learning. The only way you can enjoy the benefit is by coming to class, do your homework, and then you can set aside a couple of hours to do some revisions.

Melissa felt that the GED certificate was something she had earned and even though she did not give suggestions on how to stay motivated, maybe the prospect of getting that piece of paper was motivation enough. She said,

People just don't understand like I just...at least just get your GED. Get it. It's something that you've earned and nobody can ever take away. Just do it. You gotta [sic] want that much for yourself so...just stay motivated.

Julie had trouble asking for help in high school. She informed me that she told her child to ask questions because one of the things she had learned in her program was that there were no stupid questions. Her advice was to

stick with it. Come every day. Don't drop out. Come to class every day. And listen to what the teacher says, and if you have questions, don't be ashamed. Raise your hand. Just raise it and ask questions. Don't drop out. You need it. Don't drop out. You can do it. Anybody can do this. Anybody...

Michelle knew she needed her GED certificate so she could obtain a job that would help her contribute to her household economic situation. Her advice follows:

Stay focused. Focus on and have interest in everything you want to do in the future because this is like a really big step. You can just gradually go if you just stay focused on what you have to do. I would tell them just go in there with an open mind and plug away at it. Focus. And go every day. Don't let nobody say a GED is not going to matter in your life, so don't even bother, because some people did try telling me that. What are you bothering for? You're almost 50 years old. And they're like why do you even need it? I said, because I want a better job. And I want to help my husband. Who knows with this economy? What am I going to do when I'm 80 years old? Who knows what's going to happen? Oh, I would tell them definitely follow through with it and be proud of yourself. Don't let anybody put you down. That's what I'd say.

Amy gave this advice about not dropping out of an adult education program:

I would tell them not to because life would be so much better. You can get a better paying job if you have some kind of a diploma, whether it's your high school diploma or your GED. Life's always better when you're working for something that is special.

Bob gave the following advice to students who felt like they needed to drop out

for one reason or another. He said,

The advice I would give them is they can do it. Do not drop out. There's a lot out there. The GED is just a start to your education, just like my school that's just the start for me. The advice I would give them is they can do it. If I can do it, anybody can do it. I'm a hands-on person. I used to work with my hands in the factory for all those years. I'm not a study person. I read the paper everyday and I love to read, but as far as education, I'm not that person. I'm not that bookworm. Anybody can do it if I can do it.

Amanda had a lot of problems with her family. She was living with her boyfriend's family and got the support she needed. Through persistence, she had to teach herself that if she wanted the GED more than anything, she had to let those family problems go until she achieved her goal. She wanted other students to benefit from her experiences and not let any bumps in the road deter them from their goal of getting the GED certificate. She said,

Don't be scared. Do as much as you possibly can. Don't short yourself in anything. Take homework home. Nothing is more important than getting your life started; no movie or any other activity, but school, that's what's most important. Put your head in there as much as you can. It's the best thing for you. No problem that you have can come between your education and you. Problems at home, I've had that. I've dealt with it. I'm still dealing with it, but those can be solved later. This comes first. Your life and the start of your life, this is what's going to make something of yourself. That should be the number one priority. You should be the number one priority, not anything else.

Kevin had much the same advice. He wanted people to know that they had to look toward their future but that now was the time to act so their future could be a secure one.

He said,

You've got to look at your future, what you're going to be doing to your future. The best advice I can tell you is really consider that. When you leave here, you may not get another chance to come back in. You should really stick it out while you can because down the road, you may not have that opportunity to have a stable home or not have to worry about a job or anything. You can go do anything. Get into school. Get your schooling done. Just stick through it and try to dwell on the positive energy that is around you through the teachers and import that into your learning abilities.

Shaylene remembered the time a couple of years ago when the federal government threatened to cut a massive amount of adult education money. She dropped out of adult education classes around that time and when she was ready to reenter her program this time, she was thrilled to know her program was still there for her. She said,

I would tell them the last couple weeks I was in the GED program [a few years ago]; I was hearing they were trying to shut it down, so if you drop out now then there might be a chance that you'll never get it. So you have to stay in.

Mary made one last point:

Don't give up whatever you do. If I can do it (laughing) anybody can do it (laughing harder!). Really, I really think that, you know, it's just a great feeling when you do succeed and you do actually take the test. Like I said I never in my life thought I would get to that point.

The main theme from the majority of the students was not to give up. There was also a declaration that if failure occurred, it was not the end of the world. This seemed to be a lesson learned by many. The students realized they could retake parts of the GED Tests and not feel like a complete failure. They seemed to want to convey that message to those who might be struggling with staying in a GED program. They had learned from their own experiences by suggesting that others be positive, have a support system, avoid being scared, and realize life will be better once they obtain their GED certificate. These students seemed to have benefited from their own advice as they prepared for the next step in their lives.

Table 4.10 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. In the next section, the parents talk about the advice they give to their children.

Table 4.10
GED Wisdom

<u>Advice</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Do not give up/come to class every day (16)	43% F; 10% M	18-25 (13%); 26-40 (20%); 41-69 (20%)	17% AA; 37% C
Stay focused/pay attention (4)	6% F; 6% M	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (3%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 6% C
Be prepared (4)	6% F; 6% M	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (6%); 41-69 (3%)	3% AA; 10% C
Be determined (2)	6% F	26-40 (6%)	3% AA; 3% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Advice to Their Children

Only one theme emerged from this topic: education is valued. Of the 30 students, 21 did not have children, but the nine who were parents were adamant that their children not drop out of school, and they wanted their children to understand the value of

education.

An interesting point was that even though it had been several years since many of these students had experienced some of these painful events in their lives, when they reflected, they vividly remembered the pain they went through or the shame they felt when they were younger. Because of their insistence that their children stay in school, it seemed that they frequently spoke these admonitions to their children. It became clear that they wanted better lives for their children and the pitfalls that their children experienced were ones with which they were all too familiar. They were vigilant in their pursuit to recognize any problems their children might experience. They looked for the proverbial signs from their children that they were bored with school or disliked school, and they felt compelled to change their children's attitudes as early as possible.

An example of this was Mary who has a 16-year-old son. She stated, I wanted him to succeed. I drummed into his head you have questions, ask. Nowadays, the teachers will stay; make them stay. Go back to them and say I didn't understand. Ask them to please explain it again. You know, because I didn't and I wasn't able to. So yeah he does pretty good [sic] and I keep telling him you know, you're so smart. Don't waste it.

She explained that her feelings of inadequacy and fear of appearing stupid held her back from making pertinent inquiries. She now realized, as a result of being in her adult education classes, that asking questions was the best way to make herself knowledgeable and comfortable with the subject matter at hand.

Dawne relayed a touching and profound moment that happened when she explained to her 10-year old son that she dropped out of school because she was pregnant

with him. This incident took place right at the start of her adult education experience.

I was sitting there when I first decided to do it [enter the program]. I was sitting there, and my oldest son was sitting, and he said, why are you doing this? So I had to explain it to him and he said, so I'm the reason you didn't graduate? Well, I don't see that as regret, I said, because it worked out better now. And he sat and watched me and he said, don't you get tired of trying? (Because he'd seen me erasing and redoing all the problems.) He said, don't you ever get tired of doing that? I said you have to do it until you get it right. And when I get aggravated he'd watch me. I'd get up and walk around or do something else, and he kind of picked up on that. And he started doing that himself. When he gets aggravated with something, he'll get up and walk away from it and come back. And that makes it easier. My biggest fear is him not graduating. I told him, I said, I don't care what it takes, I don't care if you're 35, you are graduating (laughing). I don't care. I don't want to see him make the same mistakes. And he sits back and he watches me, and he sees how hard it is. And I think he realizes that even though he respects me for it, he doesn't want it that hard. He wants to have it easier. So he is really starting to get into what he wants to do with his life and where he wants to go with it. And I'm really proud of him. He knew I didn't graduate. I never hid that from him. And I think now he sees. It is important. If she's going back years later to do it, it is important.

Melissa also wanted to show her children how valuable a good education was.

When asked why she came to the program, she said, "Just not being happy." But when asked why she stayed in the program and what advice she gave her children, Melissa

stated,

Just being a good role model for my children. I always try to think about them and I don't know. I was more encouraged by my children just believing in me and I figured that once they got older I wanted them to know that mommy could do it. I just thought of them and I wanted to do it. Like I was trying to encourage my daughter, you know. She said she wants to be a doctor. She hates school. And I said you can't hate school if you want to be a doctor. You don't want to be like mommy going to school now. You know, you want to be finished by the time you have your children. So yes, I definitely encourage schooling.

Julie had teenagers and although they suspected she was up to something, it was not until they confronted her that the following story ensued:

My kids didn't know until they said Mom what are you really going to school for? I told them I was going to school for nursing or something like that. I'm freshening up on algebra. That's what I said to them. Then they see all these papers, and they said Mom, that's like seventh grade work. Then my son's girlfriend said that's grade school work. I said I had to know this. And they finally go; we know what you're going for. You might as well not hide it. I said okay. I sat them all down and I say here's what it is. I don't want you to drop out of school. Your mother will never sign papers to drop you out of school so you might as well forget it. Oh my god it's the greatest feeling. It's the greatest feeling in the world. When my son graduated I was so proud of him. I didn't have my GED then and when I seen [sic] him I was like, I'm going to do this. I'm going to do it. Because I cried the whole time he...I was like oh thank god he

graduated.

There were many similar values among these students whether they came from rural or urban programs, big or small. This section made it clear that the universal message was that the value of education was immeasurable and without a substantial education, one could not make a good life, one that was satisfying to both the individual and the family. These students were and are living examples for their children. They wanted their children to embrace the joy of education and all the rewards that came with it. These were the people who school and society left behind and now they had a chance to catch up. They understood that education was the key to survival and betterment. Table 4.11 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The last part of the research reviews the students' plans for the future.

Table 4.11

Students' advice to their children

<u>Advice</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Never drop out of school (9)	30% F	18-25 (6%); 26-40 (17%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 23% C
Understand the value of a good education (9)	30% F	18-25 (6%); 26-40 (17%); 41-69 (6%)	6% AA; 23% C

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Reflections on Plans for the Future

Even though there were some students who had not passed all five parts of the GED Tests and were waiting for retakes, everybody had some sort of plan for the future, even if it was going to be a while before the plan came to fruition. The five topics that emerged were many students wanted to be part of the field of health care, some wanted to go on to some kind of technical school, some wanted to keep their current jobs, and a

couple of students were investigating the possibility of joining the Armed Forces, and couple had applied to college. Most students were interested in a future in the health field because that was where the jobs were plentiful. This was also a field that allowed a student to make a sustainable wage, and many jobs had a career ladder where advancements allowed students to make more money in the future as they advanced in the field. Gayle stated,

I would like to go to nursing school or some kind of business school. You can't get in without that (the GED certificate). You need that. Well, now that I'm older and I never...I don't know, I'd like to do something better with my life than just a menial job. I'd like to be some kind of professional or have a business; something I can leave my kids. I like to learn. I wanted to get this behind me. It's something I always wanted to get because you can't do anything without it. You can't go to college and you're limited in what jobs you have. People don't want to hire you if you don't have a diploma.

Melissa added,

I wanted to do forensic science. I knew I had to have some type of diploma to do that so that's what led me here. Right now I'm waiting for a nursing school to get my transcripts from here and from my GED, so I'll be attending their LPN program.

Bill had his plans for the future mapped out already. He was waiting to pass the math portion of the GED Tests. With the support of his wife and daughter, he had tremendous success with his GED program and here he stated his plans for the future:

I wanted to get my GED, because my long-term goal is I would like to go to

community college, just for myself, not to get a degree, but to be able to go over there and take some classes. I want that little piece of paper saying that I finished high school. And it's not because I want to get a better job. I have a real good job with the government. It's not to get a better job. It's for me. It's for me.

Naomi had already decided on her future. She said, "My next step is to start school in the fall. I want to get my associates degree in business. I can't get in without my GED. I tried (laughing). I definitely tried." And Bob already attended a school that would train him to be a medical technician. He stated, "I plan on going a long way in the medical field. This is not like take one crash course. I plan to keep going to medical school, where will it end? I don't know but, this is a start."

Josh additionally stated,

I want to go to college, get a career, and ultimately have a career. First I need to stay in my job and get my finances in order and then I'm going to apply to college. I need to get through college and get a career and stuff like that. The GED isn't going to hold me back. If I would have dropped out of high school and not done anything after that, that would be stopping me from doing that. So I can still get the same thing that I always wished and hoped for through a GED.

This section highlighted several options the students had for the future. They might change their minds several times before they finally meet their goals, but at least they were determined to make sure the GED credential was a springboard to the next step in their lives and not the end of their long journey.

This chapter provided a glimpse of what these adult learners experienced as they went through the process of obtaining their GED credential. Their accounts

demonstrated their determination, motivation, and persistence. They talked about their support networks via family, friends, and teachers, and they shared the best advice they believed would benefit others. They were full of excitement and hope for the future as they spoke about what they had endured and what they had yet to experience. They all seemed to be more positive about what lay ahead as they realized they had prepared themselves the best way they knew how by working toward and eventually earning their GED certificate. The students' words were a testament to hope and optimism for their future. These individuals had come a long way, and while they were cognizant that they still had a long way to go, they now felt like they were prepared and had the tools they needed to accomplish all of their goals. They exuded a strength that came as a result of the roads they had taken. Because of what they had previously experienced in their lives, they were stronger, more confident, hopeful, and ready for whatever the future might bring. The majority realized that it was during difficult times that they had grown the most and now their work must exceed their words.

Table 4.12 demonstrates the percentage of the responses I received most frequently for this question. The next chapter will discuss how the interviews answered my research questions.

Table 4.12

Students' plans for the future

<u>Plans</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>
Work in field of health care (10)	27% F; 6% M	18-25 (10%); 26-40 (17%); 41-69 (6%)	13% AA; 20% C
Go to technical school (9)	20% F; 10% M	18-25 (20%); 26-40 (10%)	3% AA; 27% C
Keep current job (3)	6% F; 3% M	41-69 (10%)	6% C
Join Armed Forces (2)	3% F; 3% M	18-25 (6%)	3% AA; 3% C
Apply to college (2)	3% F; 3% M	18-25 (3%); 26-40 (3%)	6% AA

F=female; M=male; C=Caucasian; AA=African American; MA=Mexican American; PR=Puerto Rican

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the GED students as they reflected upon them and shared their stories in their own words. It was my hope that the research question asking, “What do the lived experiences of a person who has taken the GED Tests within the last six months tell us about that person?” would reveal more detailed information through an interview than if the students were given a survey to fill out. I wanted to evoke reflection and emotion through the questions that I asked. The study reveals how students drop out of school, find their adult education programs, overcome barriers, persist through challenges, receive support from family, friends, and teachers, share advice about education with their children, develop “GED Wisdom” (which is advice to those just starting or already in a GED program), and plan for the future. It also shows determination, persistence, and respect for the system that will afford them new academic and economic opportunities in the future. Using the theoretical framework of functionalism, this study explains how our society views schools, their place in our society, and the value our society puts on educational credentials.

Key Findings and Their Importance

Several key findings emerged from this research. These findings or themes included:

Why students drop out of school.

Students drop out for a variety of reasons, but those dealing with family seemed to dominate. They include the need to help with siblings because of parents' illness or inability to manage the family alone, families moving multiple times, and family problems in general (students chose not to elaborate). Several of the women found themselves pregnant and had to drop out of school, quite a few of the students do not like school, and some fall academically behind their classmates and believe it was a hopeless situation. These findings demonstrate that not all dropouts have a dislike for education; some wanted to stay in school, but circumstances within their families made it impossible for them to do so. For those students whose families moved frequently, they disliked school because they were always starting over again, which can be a difficult situation for children of any age. In these circumstances, the inconsistency of an educational setting contributed to the decision to drop out as well. Some students were too shy or embarrassed to ask for the help they so desperately needed.

Barriers.

There are a variety of barriers that the students experience. These include adjusting work schedules, financial problems, and receiving negative feedback from the family about their attending an adult education program. Some of the students decided

not to talk to certain members of their families because they were not in agreement with the student getting more education. One of the young men told me he no longer speaks to his mother because nobody in his family has ever graduated high school and she thinks that is just fine. He said his desire for a GED credential outweighed the sour relationship with his mother. As long as he attended GED classes, he decided not to speak to her because he recognized her as a deterrent to his success. Other students have the same experience with a family member or a significant other. The students' determination is much too powerful to engage in any negative discourse. While this is a reality for some students, it is important to recognize their resolve to continue to pursue their GED credential, which is a testament to how seriously they embrace this second chance opportunity. This information was supported by Cross's description of the situational and dispositional barriers that adult learners experience (1981, p. 99). Even though this is a small group, they did match some of the universal characteristics of adult learners.

Support.

Support from friends, classmates, and especially teachers is one theme that overwhelmingly affected every student interviewed. When family members show support for the students' decision to get their GED credential, it is an extremely important opportunity they do not want to pass up. Having friends support each other in the classroom is a huge step and demonstrates the trust the students have among themselves. When talking about their teachers, they express the most gracious remarks. Several of the students state they never got so much attention and caring from any teacher ever. Most of these students have a history of negative educational experiences so they come

into the adult education classroom with preconceived notions about how the teachers might treat them. There is an outpouring of kind words because the students believe their respectful and fair treatment in class is equitable and they are amazed at how their teachers demonstrate compassion and patience when they make mistakes. These teachers make the classroom a safe environment in which to work, to learn, to fail, and to succeed. The teachers also believe in the students long before the students believe in themselves, which helps students to create more positive attitudes and work on improving their self-image. When students feel comfortable with failure because they know it is a learning process, the teacher is preparing them for the world of work, post-secondary, or vocational training situations and how to react to disappointments whenever and wherever they encounter them. A supportive network of family, friends, teachers, and social and human services encourage the students to persist until they achieve their goals. Support is vitally important because it teaches the students to be supportive of their own children and families as well.

This research shows that support is motivating. Because of the supportive environment in the classroom, students are encouraged by their successes. What their responses convey is that getting a better job is not the only reason they attend classes. Some want to go on to post-secondary or vocational training opportunities, but the motivating factor for quite a few is that they decided the time is right to do something positive with their lives. Those students who have children want to be good role models in their children's lives. Their philosophy seems to be that you have to be what you want to see. These themes are significant because the key to success in the GED classroom is

consistency. When students attend on a consistent basis and focus on their goals, they allow few things to deter them from getting that GED certificate.

Major life changes.

Some of the students experience what they consider to be major life changes as a result of studying for their GED credential; they say they seem more confident; they are thinking more clearly and make better decisions; and are reading and comprehending more. The students seem to experience the self-efficacy to which Bandura referred (1977, p. 199). Once many of them get over the fear of the tests, they are able to become more confident in their abilities and capabilities. These feelings are significant because they demonstrate that what they are learning in the classroom is being transferred to their daily life situations, a primary goal of many GED classrooms. The teachers do not want students to learn something just for the tests, but rather to make it applicable to their lives so they can use what they learn in many different situations.

GED Wisdom.

Another theme that stands out is what I call GED Wisdom. I gave this name to the knowledge and experiences that students wanted to share so that others would not make the same mistakes they did. One of the main messages is not to give up and to stay focused on the outcomes. The importance of sharing this advice is that the students feel so comfortable and pleased with their decision to continue with their education that they want to communicate those feelings of accomplishment with others. This question gave them the opportunity to reflect on where they started on this journey and how far they had

come. The other part of that GED wisdom is the realization that this opportunity is one to take seriously. Several of the women strongly verbalized their dislike for younger students who did not seem to appreciate the second chance they were given. This wisdom demonstrates an attitude that displays the seriousness with which these students take their responsibility to learn and better their lives.

Future plans.

Their reinforced feelings of self-confidence led to the last theme which pertains to future plans. Everybody has some sort of plan for their lives after the GED Tests. Some students are already taking classes to prepare for employment in the health field, while others have plans to enroll in some kind of post-secondary or technical/training school. Some want to keep their current jobs and take time to plan the next phase of their lives. The importance of this theme is that students understand that they do not stop learning once they get their GED credential; on the contrary, the certificate is just the beginning of many opportunities.

All of these themes support one major category, and that is self-efficacy. Some of these students enter their perspective programs without any idea of what to do or where to go. Once they realize their potential, they start to grow. Their successes support the literature of Bandura (1977) and Comings et al. (2000) who spoke to the importance of self-efficacy for students in order to be successful. The students not only believe they could accomplish a task, but they also actually achieve it! These actions are the catalysts to additional successes, which assist them in growing and transforming.

Summary of findings.

As a way of review, Table 5.1 illustrates the prominent themes found in the previous chapter. While these are only a representation of the themes that resulted from the interviews, they are the ones that pertain to a majority of the participants. All themes transcend race, gender, age, and location of program.

Table 5.1

Prominent themes/trends	Supporting Statements
Themes/Trends	Supporting Statements
Why dropped out of school	Did not like school Pregnancy Needed to help family Family problems
Barriers	Financial problems Work schedules Negative family reactions
Support	From family From friends/classmates From teachers
Motivation/persistence	Better job/go on to post-secondary/training Made up mind to do it Role model for children Support from family/teachers
Major life changes	More confident Thinking clearer/more focused Reading more/comprehending more
GED wisdom/advice	Do not give up Stay focused/pay attention Be prepared/determined
Future plans	Technical/training school/post-secondary Keep current job or go to Armed forces

Reflections on Related Literature and Findings

Economic benefits.

One of the issues I wanted to explore posed quite an ambiguity: why do so many adults want the GED credential when current research shows its economic benefits are not good? What makes the GED credential so appealing when its economic feasibility is in question? Tyler (2005, 2004, 2003, 2002a, 1998) contended that although the GED can lead to important earning gains, by itself the credential was not a way out of poverty. Many of the students believe that when they receive their GED certificate, they will no longer have to work for minimum wage. They understand that the GED certificate is a key that opens the door to many opportunities and without it, they would not be able to reach their goal. I included the research on the GED certificate and the economy because I believe one of the main reasons why students go back to school is to better themselves financially, but bettering themselves economically is not the only factor. The literature makes it clear that while the GED credential has its merits; the recommendation is that students should still stay in high school and graduate (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986; Beder, 1999, 1992; Dean, 1998, 1996). However, it is better to get a GED credential than to drop out of school without future educational prospects. The research showed that GED graduates make more money than high school dropouts and they obtained more positive experience with testing as well (Murnane & Tyler, 2000).

Functionalism.

For some of the students I interviewed, staying in school was not a viable option, but their return to adult education was something they could not pass up; they believed they had to take advantage of it. In the literature and in relation to the theoretical framework of this research, Feinberg and Soltis (2004) stated that in functionalism, “equality of opportunity requires equality of *educational* opportunity” (p. 31, emphasis in original). The chance to attend adult education classes and eventually pass the GED Tests is a second chance opportunity these students could not ignore, and this educational opportunity is one many of them had not experienced previously. It is noteworthy that presently all ABLE-funded programs are focusing on transitioning students to either work, post-secondary, or vocational training opportunities. The majority of GED students want to get a job quickly, so the curriculum focuses on contextualizing the instruction so students can concentrate on what they need and accomplish their goals in the shortest amount of time. Feinberg and Soltis stated, “Whatever the specific arrangement may be, the basic idea here is that the development of the educational system should be guided by and be functionally related to the overall requirements of the workforce” (p. 28). This demonstrates that workforce education has its place in the educational system for all learners.

Thomas Smith (2003) also questioned why so many students took the GED Tests when society questioned its value. He said that the GED diploma can “provide a bridge for dropouts to reconnect to both the education system and their high school graduate peers” (2003, p. 395). Even when Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1997) explored the question of whether the GED diploma led to more opportunities whether in training, post-

secondary education, or military service, they concluded that the GED credential did indeed provide the recipient opportunities for specialized training and it also gave them better access to post-secondary opportunities. Both of these examples supported my data, and as I spoke to the students I found they were excited about the plethora of opportunities that awaited them once they received their GED credential. They were moving forward with the realization that they were as fully prepared as they could be for this next step. Many of these students were able to take advantage of the classes that prepared them for post-secondary or vocational training opportunities and they were acutely aware of what requirements they had to meet in order to attain their goals. The courses offered by these ABLE-funded programs are a solid interpretation of the research done by Boesel, Alsalam, and Smith (1998) who looked at labor market statistics and found that the combination of the GED certificate along with vocational training and/or an occupational license had a large effect on wage production, as well as Tyler (2005) who stated that the emphasis needed to be on post-secondary and training opportunities for GED recipients (pp. 72-73). So, even though the research probed the validity of the GED credential in terms of economic gains, the students view this opportunity through a different lens. They take pride in their accomplishments and know any step they take after the GED Tests is a positive and lucrative one for them personally and academically, as well as economically.

Feinberg and Soltis (2004) and Baker (2009) agreed that people like these adult education students possessed the capability to do the work all along; but many times they did not receive the appropriate opportunities. As functionalism showed when one made accommodations for handicaps, both parties benefit. The inability to learn in an

uncomfortable and unsupportive environment actually handicapped these adult learners. They deserve the right to be in a learning situation that enables them to be confident, determined, and prepared for work, post-secondary, or vocational training opportunities. Baker (2009) said, “Not only is everybody educable, but an educated population, as an aggregation of schooled individuals, adds to the collective economic and social good of society” (p. 12). By attending a GED preparation class these students are able to prepare themselves for the biggest tests of their lives. They can receive their GED credential and show society that they are capable of achieving such a goal. This becomes a situation where both the student and society benefits.

In the literature Baker (2009) quotes Voss as he discussed the abilities of those who dropped out of high school, and he stated, “Estimates at the time found anywhere from one-half to three fourths of all dropouts were judged to have the ability to finish high school” (Voss, et al. 1966). With this statement I question whether a little support in former educational settings might not have gone a long way with these students.

Feinberg and Soltis (2004), in reference to the functionalist movement, talked about opportunities that were available to people who were talented, and how in the past these same people had those opportunities denied to them (p. 21). When GED students bloom under the guidance of their teachers, I wonder if they do not already possess these talents; but for one reason or another, no other teachers are able to reach them or maybe it just is not the most appropriate time in their lives to learn. The schools they formerly attended did not bring out the best in them; in fact, quite the opposite happened. Maturity plays a huge part in the students’ acceptance of help and several students did tell me that when they were in high school and even before they came to their programs, they were

not ready to concentrate on academics. In a few cases, some of the students felt like nobody really cared if they stayed in school or quit. Some students shared that right before they dropped out of school, the school personnel strongly suggested to them that the best thing they could do was to leave school. Receiving a GED credential gives them the feeling that they are part of a society that values education and their certificates are proof that they are ready to take their place in that society.

Major changes.

I also wanted to know what major changes had taken place in the students' lives as a result of being part of a GED classroom. Of the 30 students interviewed, nine feel more confident and four said they have clearer thoughts and focus better in their everyday tasks. Once again, even though this is a small sample, the research of Murnane and Tyler (2000) supported the students' responses. Their answers even add a new dimension to the research because no researchers referred to more clear and focused thinking as a benefit of studying for the GED Tests. Murnane and Tyler (2000) believed that the student who studied for the GED test but did not pass still got the benefit of increased reading, math, and test taking skills. Again the data supported these interviews because when I spoke with several students, they admitted they had initial fears of taking the tests, but once they took them, they were not intimidated any more. In fact, several of those students expressed the sentiment that if after taking the next tests they should fail again, they would be ready to retake them as many times as they were permitted in order to pass. What were not present in the literature were the feelings the students experience as they became more confident in themselves. It also shows how determined they are to

focus on test preparation. When students enter a GED test room with the attitude of doing their best, they show the valiant effort they are willing to make in order to pass a difficult test. They possess the knowledge that test retakes are acceptable, so they focus on the task at hand with clear thinking and a confidence they may not have had previously.

Another major change in their lives is the new attitude they have about education and how they convey their opinions to their children. All of the students who have children express the regret that they dropped out of high school and are emphatic about their warnings to their children not to do the same thing. Several of the students talked about their education as being on the back burner years ago but now, as a result of their involvement in an adult education program, they cherish every moment they spend in class. They are determined to have their children appreciate and even enjoy their educational experiences because these parents, who are now students, have learned the value and importance of an education. Neuman and Caparelli (1998) found that obtaining the GED went far beyond the cognitive thinking process and right into the everyday lives of those who took and passed it. They discovered that parents became more involved with their children; paid them more attention; and realized their children notice them in a different light when they (the parents) were studying for the GED credential. Baker (2009) commented on how, even in poor nations, the need for education for children was prevalent all around the world. The students who participated in this research exhibit all of these traits and add a personal passion about education that was lacking in their lives in years past.

Support.

Another topic I pursued was the support these individuals experienced. Comings et al. (2000) conducted research on the effects of external support on adult learners and suggested ways adult educators might help their students. I found that because of the support these students receive, they are encouraged to attend classes on a more frequent basis and, as a result, they are able to accomplish more. Time and again these students praised family, friends, classmates, and especially their teachers for giving them the support they needed. This network of support is essential to success. In this vein Feinberg and Soltis (2004) referred to the human capital theorists who argued “that the greatest value may be reaped by investing more educational resources in groups that have been left behind in the educational process” (p. 27). The teachers who support these students seem to exemplify this statement. Their supportive ways, the sharing of materials and resources, and the flexibility of time enables these students to receive the resources they need in order to study for and pass the GED Tests.

Belzer (1999) and Yaffee and Williams (1998) stated that women in non-traditional and family literacy GED programs felt special because of the support they received. The women referenced in the literature experienced a feeling of camaraderie and closeness to the other students because they did not believe they were in competition. They perceived this environment as trusting and supportive. While I did not interview any students from a family literacy program, I had a chance to talk with several women from non-traditional GED classrooms who echoed the same responses. They like being in the company of people who are non-threatening, who challenge their knowledge, but who also provide mutual respect and support.

Many of the students tell me how much this support means to them and how without it, they may never have achieved the goals they set for themselves. They add that through the example of their teachers, they are able to display more solid support to their classmates and families. I cannot emphasize enough that support is paramount to the accomplishments they experienced.

Reflections on Assumptions

Though I had not been in a GED classroom for many years, I still had assumptions about the students. I remembered that some of these assumptions were the impetus to engage in this research project. Even though I only interviewed 30 students, I challenged many of my assumptions and discovered that some were absolutely unfounded.

One assumption was my belief that all of the barriers adult learners faced were situational. I soon found out that this thinking was limited. After talking with these students, it became evident that their barriers, as described by Cross (1981, p. 99), fell into three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Although the majority of the barriers were in the first category, which included time, home and job responsibilities, and the ever-present child care and transportation, there were many other reasons for these adults not to participate in adult education classes. The dispositional barriers, like fearing they could not keep up or not liking school, ranked second of the three. Having been in adult education for close to 15 years, I was always under the impression that child care and transportation were the main reasons and sometimes the only things that kept students away from the classroom. I certainly had this assumption

shattered, but being cognizant of the range of difficulties these learners faced taught me to be more open-minded and made me realize there were myriad reasons for non-participation.

Several other assumptions involved the way I perceived how GED students viewed their educational situations. I believed that since their parents might not have cared about education, they did not care either. I was also under the mistaken impression that GED students just did not like school. I knew many of them had negative experiences, and I thought that this dislike for education, which led them to drop out of school, would never lead them back to an adult education program. After talking with them, I quickly learned my error in judgment. First, some students really did like school, but circumstances like family problems, which may have involved taking care of siblings or continuously moving, forced them to fall behind in their studies, which eventually resulted in their leaving school. Second, I believed that dropping out meant giving up, but through some of their negative experiences, many of these students learned the value our society puts on an education and decided that it was wiser to pursue a good education so they could provide a better life for themselves and their families. And third, I misunderstood the high regard that students, who were also parents, had for the educational system. It was because of their previous educational circumstances that they felt so strongly about the importance of schooling. They wanted their children to embrace the opportunities ahead of them, and when the children started to show signs of disinterest in school, the GED students quickly recognized the situation and made changes immediately. These parents would not be content with their own children following in their footsteps. They were acutely aware of the multitude of opportunities

that were achievable with a good education. It was enlightening to hear them talk about their attitude adjustment because they realized that our society did value education and that this GED credential meant they were successful at something; for some, this would be the first success they would experience in their lives.

When Knowles (1998) defined andragogy, one of the assumptions he addressed, and one that I always believed was true, was the role of learners' experiences. He said, "By virtue of simply having lived longer, they have accumulated more experience than they had as youth" (p. 66). The adult learners I interviewed accumulated many varied experiences and they were not that much removed from their youth. Given the number of interviewees who were in their late teens and early twenties, I believed their rich experiences definitely played a significant part in their young lives. Some students may have been young, but each person had experiences that affected his or her life in different ways; so while the number of experiences may vary, the intensity of those experiences did not. These same experiences assisted many of them in making life-changing decisions about school, family, and future employment. After meeting this particular group of adult learners, I was convinced that age really had nothing to do with how many or what kind of experiences a person encountered. What did matter was what he or she did with those experiences; how a person decided to use them to make informed decisions seemed to matter more than his or her age. In the group I spoke with, younger learners had much richer and varied experiences than the older learners. I was in error when I assumed experience always came with age.

Recommendations for Future Research

These recommendations represent the weaknesses in this study. Additional research needs to continue and in some cases start, in regard to learning more about not only GED students, but also adult education students in general. It is my firm belief that the following proposed studies would be of interest to all adult education practitioners, contribute to the literature available, and improve practice in the field of adult education.

1. Replication of this study using a larger, more geographically diverse population to enable a better focus on trends and experiences and to ascertain if there is indeed a difference between what happens in rural and urban programs.
2. Replication of this study using a more in-depth approach to interviewing or case studies to allow for much thicker and richer descriptions of student lives and to give more insight into student experiences.
3. Replication of this study using a longitudinal approach where the researcher checks in with GED students from the time they enter the program until they take their GED Tests. This kind of study could produce a massive amount of data, and the longitudinal information it elicits would be valuable for GED programs, teachers, and students alike.
4. Replication of this study using different questions that focus on economic issues. Future research could use Tyler's reports for Labor and Industry and apply them specifically to the group of interviewees. With the economy in turmoil, this type of study might show how the GED passers fare compared to their high school graduate counterparts.

5. Replication of this study using Beder's model from 1992 when he followed up on GED students at the two, five, and 10 year marks. The number of dwindling participants over a period of time and the uncertain economy might be two tremendous variables that could skew the data, but it would be interesting to see this kind of research take place in Pennsylvania since a research project of this magnitude would elicit much-needed information.
6. Further research on the topic of whether the GED is an enticement for teens to drop out of school. Teachers and administrators alike were complaining about the number of younger students appearing in their classrooms. Where programs used to accept students at the minimum age of 16, they are now accepting students at least 18 years of age because teachers complained they were turning into babysitters. Murnane and Tyler (2000) even commented in their research that this dialogue between K-12 educators and GED administrators needed to take place soon. This type of research project investigating what is actually happening in the high school classroom would be relevant and provide valuable information for adult education programs across the nation.
7. Further research on how the children of GED students fare in life. This would be a continuation of the research done by Royce and Gacka (2001) in Pennsylvania, but it would include GED students from many programs and not just those featured in the publication *Success Stories* (p. 39).
8. Further research involving Murnane, Willett, and Boudett's (1997) research about GED recipients who took advantage of training opportunities, post-

secondary education, or military service. This would have to be another longitudinal study, but it could elicit information about what the students were doing as a “next step” in their lives. With the changing economy this might prove to be a challenging research project, but one that would provide vital information with implications for both national and local programs.

9. Further research using only women as the research subjects in order to ascertain what other variables and outcomes pertain to taking the GED Tests, passing it, and going on to other opportunities; compared with data already collected on men.
10. Further research carrying on that of Heckman and Rubinstein’s (2001) about non-cognitive skills and how these skills figure into what happens to the GED student after receiving the GED diploma.
11. Further research that is in line with Tyler (2003) when he said there is a “dearth of research examining the impact of the GED on outcomes that are not directly related to the labor market” such as “parenting skills, health, citizenship, and involvement in crime” (p. 370). This seemed like an outline for another study that could reveal more about the GED recipient and give a more comprehensive picture of the characteristics of these students.
12. Further research investigating how the K-12 system and our society’s opinion about the value of educational credentials impact adult learners as they enter adult education classrooms. Several students alluded to the fact that despite negative previous educational experiences, they felt it was imperative to

receive a GED credential to demonstrate their educational and economic worth in our society.

13. Further research investigating the relationship between students who mentor/tutor each other in class; how the relationship among these students prospers and strengthens and how mentoring/tutoring contributes to persistence and goal attainment.
14. Further research investigating the benefits of the networking system among the teachers, social and human services, and students and how this system helps students prepare for their GED credential and future employment or education/training.

Reflections on Final Thoughts About This Research Project

This research project demonstrates the importance of a second chance to many students who previously had few second chances in their lives. Little can compare with the delight and excitement of someone who has just passed his or her GED Tests. Unless researchers can sit face to face with a student, they cannot understand the intensity of the enthusiasm and optimism these adult learners express. There is no substitute for the one-on-one interview that conveys the extreme gratitude these students possess for this opportunity and for the people who helped to make it possible. They know they had made some ill-advised choices in their lives, but they are ready to make amends and do whatever they need to get themselves and their families back on the path to a better life.

This research demonstrates the personal and academic investments these students make to better themselves for their future. During their educational endeavors, they do

not mind making friends, but it is not their main focus. They take this experience seriously and cannot understand why others do not share that same sentiment. Their resolve to better themselves overshadows their feelings about those disrespectful students. They have experienced a variety of barriers in their lives, but they will not let obstacles they encounter hinder their determination. Their persistence confirms to educators, administrators, academics, and policy makers that their time, talent, and funding are not being wasted. They appreciate the opportunity to learn and prosper. They are grateful for dedicated and caring teachers, materials with which they can study for their tests, and programs that focus on their successes while helping them with their challenges. Once this second chance opportunity comes along, they are determined not to let anything get in their way to the completion of their goals, even if that means being vocal about people who are not as invested in the process as they are.

This research confirms that these students want others to learn from their mistakes and experiences which is why they are willing to give advice to those who may want to consider joining a GED class. They are even more determined when speaking to those already enrolled in a GED classes who want to quit. They know attaining the GED credential is a realistic task and they want everyone else to know that if they can do it, anybody can take and pass the tests. Some seem surprised that they have come this far while others always knew they could do it; they just needed the right opportunities to get to this point in their lives.

This research shows that even with so few students participating, it seems that adult education programs operate using similar methods in both rural and urban settings. The clientele is the same, just the geography is different. Students come for the same

reasons and they are grateful for the mutual respect and fair treatment they share with their classmates and teachers. Feinberg and Soltis' (2004) reference to equality of educational opportunities (p. 29) stated that everyone has an equal chance to develop his/her talents (p. 26). The purpose of adult education classes is just that: to give all who attend an equal opportunity to improve or develop him or herself. My research illustrates that the GED credential is a confirmation that the students matter and that these students seem to be stronger for the experiences that led them to this point in their lives. One student mentioned that she wanted to go back to her third grade teacher and tell her that she made it after all and no, she wasn't a failure. The experiences many of these students live through are humbling to say the least. For some, the negative memories are prominent and in some cases take a crippling toll on their self-perception and their achievements in education. They have seen ugly, horrific things like friends being shot or overdosing right before their eyes; things we only read about or see on television. These tragedies do not define their lives, but rather fuel their desires to do the best they can in any situation. Their determination to retake a test, pass the battery of GED Tests, get a job, enter a post-secondary situation or training is evident as they outline their plans for the future.

Why does this research matter? It matters because the students matter and because the only way to appreciate their contribution to adult education is to read their interviews and try to understand their experiences. Hearing the accounts of their experiences helps the reader to appreciate what these adult learners have endured. The GED Tests, once thought to be an end point for many, proves to be a spring-board for multiple possibilities.

My goal was to interview GED students so others could learn about their experiences. This study achieves that goal. This research shows the connection between the GED students' desire to earn their credentials and also feel accepted in society. Schools in our society have doors that both keep in and keep out certain individuals; as such, adult education programs serve as that second chance opportunity for adults to feel like they are finishing "school" in order to move on with their lives. This study proposes that students believe they will be able to do more with their lives and be more acceptable in and to society once they earn the GED credential. The academic literature, for the most part, supports the students' claims in relation to dropping out, barriers, support, and future plans. The students' accounts in my study help to supplement the surveys found in the literature by adding a more human touch to their experiences. The students demonstrate the notion that quitting is not an option and once they achieve their goals they are introduced to limitless academic, social, and economic opportunities.

Personal Reflections

I know from teaching these students that they are tough, courageous people who have overcome many obstacles in their lives. From my experience I understood that some GED students never gave their opinions on issues because it was rare when someone asked them, and if, or when they had the opportunity to speak, some reserved their opinions for fear of sounding less knowledgeable than they would have liked. I was not astonished at how articulate they all became when they were in the spotlight; even when they were reliving sad and sometimes horrible experiences, they always found the

right words. They told stories of failure, courage, second chances, hope, optimism, and ultimately success.

As I began my research project nine years ago, I thought that I would empower these adult learners by letting them speak, but in the process, they showed me that they were already empowered because people believed in them and when that happened, they started to believe in themselves. These students taught me the meaning of persistence. Working on a research project of this magnitude, which spanned almost a decade, there were many instances when I believed I would not be able to see this project to fruition. Their words and positive, optimistic attitudes about the future inspired me to continue no matter how long it would take to complete my journey. Now that I have reached this point, I am delighted that I did not give up. They taught me not to quit no matter how defeated I felt. I can only imagine this is how these students felt when they took their GED Tests and experienced the sense of accomplishment when they found out they successfully passed all five tests.

Seidman (1998) said, “Most important and almost always, interviewing continues to lead me to respect the participants, to relish the understanding that I gain from them, and to take pleasure in sharing their stories” (p. 112). While I have the utmost respect for all adult education students, these 30 students hold a special place in my heart. They were straightforward and hopeful people who did not come from privilege, but it was certainly a privilege and an honor to interview each of them. They have changed my perceptions about GED students on many levels and have given me a new and exciting way of discovering how GED students experience the world. After reading this research, I hope that the reader will feel the same way.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Please state your name and age – **How can I get a copy of this interview to you?**

1. What experiences led you to drop out of school?
2. When did you drop out? How old were you?
3. What experiences led you to re-enter an adult education program?
4. Upon entering the program, what did you think you would do once you received your GED diploma?
5. Were there any barriers you had to overcome to remain in the program?
6. What made you persevere? Why did you want to stay?
7. What motivated you?
8. Did you have a timeline?
9. Tell me about a time when you felt like quitting.
10. What role did support from your teachers and other students play in your preparation for the GED?
11. What role did support from your family and friends play in your preparation for the GED?
12. Did you ever notice a change in your attitude (towards your education or that of your children) as you worked toward completion of the GED program?
13. Do you intend to go on to post-secondary education, training, or a job once you get your GED?
14. Do you intend to go on to post-secondary education, training, or a job once you get your GED? Please explain.
15. Tell me about a time when you were proud of the decision you made to return to get your GED.
16. Tell me one thing that has been a major change in your life as a result of your pursuing/getting your GED.
17. Do you feel you were prepared for the test? Was it easier or harder than you thought?
18. What advice would you give someone who is about to enter a GED program?
19. What advice would you give someone who is in doubt about staying or wants to drop out of a GED program?
20. If you could do anything differently in your program, what would it be?
21. Is there anything you'd like to say to your teachers?

Make sure contact information is included on your copy of the consent form

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Vita

Susan Lynn Snider

Susan Snider has worked in adult education since 1994 when she volunteered to tutor for the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC) in Pittsburgh, PA. While she was studying for her Master's degree in Adult Education, she served a year with Literacy*AmeriCorps at GPLC, teaching basic literacy and general adult basic education skills and preparing adults for the General Educational Development (GED) Tests. In 1996 GPLC hired her as the Student/Tutor Support Coordinator and she also assisted with the professional development project. She is currently in her 11th year as the coordinator of the Southwest Professional Development Center, one of six centers in Pennsylvania that provides professional development to adult education practitioners.

In addition to earning her Doctoral degree in Adult Education from Penn State University (2010), Snider holds a Master's in Adult Education from Penn State (1996) and two Bachelor's degrees from Point Park University, one in Secondary English and the other in Secondary Spanish (1973). She has been a member of the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (PAACE) since 1995, and has served on the Board of Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth (TLC) for eight years. In February 2009 she was the recipient of The Joan Y. Leopold Award for Service for her outstanding service and dedication to the field of adult education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Her interest in educating others about the GED Tests and GED students has given her several opportunities to present at the annual PAACE Conference.