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CULTURALLY DIVERSE COHORTS: THE EXPLORATION OF LEARNING IN
CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the experiences of culturally diverse interactions and learning in adult cohorts. A cohort is defined as a group of students who enter a program of study together and complete a series of common learning experiences during a specified period of time (Saltiel & Russo, 2001). There is much research on the general use, challenges, and benefits of cohort education. However, the current research base lacks multiple perspectives on student learning and interactions in culturally diverse adult cohorts. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how diversity, as manifested by the divergent backgrounds of fellow cohort members, informs the learning experience in cohorts. The findings of this study reveal the ways in which cohorts both foster and impede a greater cultural appreciation or awareness among cohort participants. Theoretical interpretations from sociocultural theory and Hays' ADDRESSING model offer holistic approaches to cohort program development and diversity programming.

This qualitative study utilized interviews from twelve students in culturally diverse cohorts. These interviews suggest that members of culturally diverse cohorts learn from the wide-ranging diverse lived experience of other members creating an empowering and sustaining educational journey. These findings contribute to increased understanding of cohort experiences, and inform cohort programming regarding value, role, design and implementation. Culturally diverse cohorts offer unique systems of trust, empowerment, and support for adult learners, and provide a context for learning as they move toward shared educational goals. Exploring contexts and communities of cohorts

inform how different cultural assumptions and power relations based on sociocultural and diversity factors play out in the classroom.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

As a member of a cohort program of adult learners, I experienced a culturally significant learning moment that left an indelible impact on my assumptions concerning the cohort learning process. In year one of a doctoral program, a fellow student reported recent experiences of racism and the effect it had on her as a multiracial female. She gave examples of racist comments made to her by faculty, staff, and students from the university. In response, a few cohort members and the instructor said she must be interpreting the situation incorrectly. There was an assumption by some in the classroom that faculty and administration could not be racist or guilty of making such inappropriate comments. I, along with many in the room, remained silent. Tensions in the classroom, emotional reactions, and unfamiliar territory (discussions of diversity, power, and positionalities) were preventing my willingness to speak out. The few who attempted to wrestle with the subject only managed to make additional inappropriate and marginalizing remarks. Internally, I longed to scream, “She has every right to feel the way she feels and interpret situations the way she did!” Why did this well-intentioned majority White cohort minimize her feelings by the comments from a few and the silence by many? Why did they assume her interpretation must be wrong or misconstrued? As one of the first experiences as adult learners in a cohort dealing with diversity issues and White privilege, we overlooked a terrific and powerful cohort learning experience. I thought about this “defining moment” often and recognized how much that moment impacted me as a cohort member, a student, and an educator/administrator. The

challenges and difficulties in this cohort classroom centered on the sociocultural context and how members of that learning community were equipped or ill-equipped to respond.

This defining cohort learning moment illustrated how learners construct meaning in their own context. The cohort moment above and literature on cohort education models showed how the unique nature of group or community membership in cohorts can impede or foster cultural appreciation and a fuller educational experience. In addition, this defining moment demonstrated that diversity issues are difficult, emotional, and confrontational. The landscape of adult education and higher education has experienced an ever-increasing diverse community of learners. This is indeed the case in adult cohort programs as well.

Cohort education models are a popular and cost effective way of delivering educational programs to adult learners (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Drago-Severson, 2004; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Satiel & Russo, 2001). Proponents of cohorts speak to benefits of the social interactions within cohorts. Some authors identify cohorts as learning communities and even families. Yet, additional research is needed regarding cohorts with diverse membership to understand the relationship between members' perceptions of the social processes and the learning experience. For example, what is the relationship between culturally diverse cohorts and learner performance? When applied to diversity issues, can cohorts foster effective learning environment that improves student learning? How do cohort members mediate the social process of learning and the diversity of their interactions? Because factors such as age, race gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, national origin, and sexual orientation affect how society

defines individuals, do culturally diverse cohort members exhibit unique learning traits? Collectively, all of these inquiries served as building blocks to a deeper understanding of learning embedded in the social and cultural context for adult learners in culturally diverse cohorts. This inquiry sets this study apart from the existing studies on cohort educational models.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a rationale for a qualitative study that explores diverse cohort education models from a sociocultural perspective. From a theoretical framework of sociocultural theory, this study directly addresses issues of culture in adult education and other disciplines and how knowledge is constructed by connecting learners' sociocultural contexts including age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, with the adult learning environment. To introduce and address this purpose, the chapter provides background for the study of cohort education models and its intersections with diversity and learning. This background set the stage for the purpose statement, followed by a description of the theoretical frameworks that inform this study's understanding of culturally diverse cohort learning. An introductory description of how a qualitative research methodology that guides the research is presented. Next, the significance, assumptions, and limitations are reviewed. Finally, the chapter concludes with a list of terms and concepts important to the study.

Background and Rationale of the Study: Cohort Education Models and Adults

A cohort is defined as a group of students who enter a program of study together and complete a series of common learning experiences during a specified period of time (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Cohorts are generally described as

“opened to non-traditional working students, offered at off-campus locations, and designed to be attractive to those who wish to complete a degree while remaining in their own communities” (Nesbit, 2001, p. 4). As education models, cohorts are classified as closed, open, or fluid in definition. The closed cohort is characterized as a model whereby students take all of their course work together in a prearranged sequence. In an open model, students enroll in core classes as a group but take additional coursework on their own to fulfill personal needs or university requirements. In a fluid model, students may join the cohort at different times rather than at a single entry point and may drop in and out as needed depending on personal and professional commitments. Overall, cohort education models, as an instructional and program delivery strategy, provide to adults and nontraditional students clear course sequencing and structure, increased contact with instructors and administration, and a supportive, cohesive peer group (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). In addition, cohort education models offer program delivery methods that are relatively inexpensive and administratively manageable for the educational institution. Therefore, a great deal of literature exists on the challenges and benefits of cohort education. Yet, despite the general use of cohorts, research lacks empirical studies beyond descriptive accounts of student and faculty perceptions of the cohort experience (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Saltiel & Russo, 2001).

Cohorts have become a popular form of group learning for adults. First introduced in the 1940s, cohorts have met with varying success and usage. Groups, such as cohorts, shared common assumptions, characteristics, and needs such as clear goals, united

commitment, and results-driven team participation which tend to provide collaborative climate and strong leadership (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). These common assumptions or characteristics have been confirmed in the abundance of literature on cohorts in the past two decades of popularity, especially among graduate programs. Basom, Yerkes, Norris, and Barnett (1996) discovered that a cohort model ensures strong relationships among peers as they capitalize and build on collegially of the group.

Cohort Models Bring Assets to Learning Experiences

Most cohort proponents described the cohort's classroom climate as growth-oriented, cooperative in nature, and an intensive and exclusive group experience. In fact, students seek cohort educational models to work collaboratively to achieve set goals and experiences (Basom et al., 1996; Drago-Severson, 2004; Hill, 1995; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Members of cohorts are expected to collaborate, interact, exchange resources, share information, and support one another in and out of the classroom. Additionally, cohorts positively influenced student values, increase student interaction and secure greater interdependence (Norris & Barnett, 1994; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Many empirical studies over the past two decades have found that cohort success rests on the ability of group members to develop strong affiliations through their supportive relationships, classroom interactions, and group cohesiveness (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Hill, 1992; Nesbit, 2001; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). By far, the greatest benefits to students of cohorts according to the literature, constitutes the support and sense of belonging that members received (Drago-Severson, 2004; Hill, 1992; Saltiel &

Russo, 2001). The cohesiveness that occurs in cohorts generally builds through group development such as team building, mutual support, and collaboration (Basom & Yerkes, 2001). The curriculum of cohort education usually provides time for structured activities in which participants can develop a respect for, and an appreciation of, the different members of the group. By growing and learning with others in a collective nature, cohort students decreased their isolation through a collaborative learning experience. Cohort group literature suggests that members become a defined group like a community with an identity and character as they strongly support each other (Hill 1992; Imel, 2002; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Cohorts share “common purpose, problems and sense of common fate” (Saltiel & Russo, 2001, p. 78).

Cohort Models also Bring Drawbacks

Cohorts also possess drawbacks as an educational model. Cohorts can be plagued by challenges, such as an unresponsive administration, a demanding, overpowering student group, and a “watering down of the curriculum” (Barnett et al., 2000, p. 260). As Norris and Barnett (1994) pointed out “a cohort, conveniently arranged as a structural component may, or may not, be a fully functioning group; therefore, its connection to the building of community may be questionable” (p. 4). For example, a cohort group became a “dysfunctional family,” according to Scribner and Donaldson (2001), if allowed too much power or not enough attention (p. 622). Students who do not fit in with the group feel marginalized and pushed out. In addition, professors may feel like outsiders and may be overpowered by a strong cohesive group. To make matters more complicated, “often the concerns arising one year will be entirely different the next year because of the

composition of the group and/or changes in the program structure” (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 409).

Despite these shortcomings, group usage in all types of adult education continues to be a guiding principle of adult education (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Drago-Severson, 2004; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). In fact, as a form of group learning, cohorts have become an ever-increasing option in adult education (Drago-Severson, 2004; Imel, 2002; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Because groups of students take courses together in a series, they became powerful learning units or communities that foster learning and development. Of primary importance to the proposed study, Norris and Barnett (1994) found group work builds tolerance, appreciation, and awareness of diversity and new ideas and opinions while developing members as a group. In diverse groups, differences exist by the nature of each members’ sociocultural position. These positions are relational, complex and fluid in the classroom (Johnson-Balieu & Cervero, 2000; Misawa, 2010; Tisdell, 2006). Therefore, it is important to look at culturally diverse cohort programming in the adult education classroom based on the premise that social, historical, and cultural contexts affect group development and learning.

This study address the current gaps in the research of cohort literature as research relates to learning outcomes, multiple perspectives, and recognition of cultural differences. In terms of cohort learning, researchers share awareness of the need to measure or assess learning experiences and educational outcomes, but are unable to conclusively produce studies with sufficient findings on the topic. Scholars call for

further investigations into various learning outcomes as a way to enhance the cohort experience (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Nesbit, 2001; Norris & Barnett; 1994; Reynolds, 1997).

A second area of concern throughout the cohort literature is the lack of emphasis on cultural differences in cohort educational models. Most studies and conceptual work look to the collective nature of cohorts in terms of structure, achievement, and perception. For example, Basom et al. (1996) advocate further studies through multiple lenses to “capture the complexity of college studentness” (p. 46). Individual and cultural differences could produce rich evidence of diversity in cohorts. Most studies do not address the make-up of the individuals involved, let alone issues of diversity. If educational institutions are accepting more and more adult learners, they not only need to know who these students are, but also they need to be more respectful of what the students want, need and expect. For instance, Nesbit (2001) found that the goal in cohort programming is to provide “a process that is as inclusive as possible for adults with diverse backgrounds and abilities” (p. 14). Inclusive practices in cohort programming may inform the needs and interests of adult learners for persistence, satisfaction and degree completion.

In the 1990s, research studies focused on the impact of diversity on cohorts. “The goal of many cohort-based programs is to have diverse groups of student, taking into consideration gender, ethnicity, learning style, amount of professional experience and the administrative aspiration of the participants” (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992, p.413). Preliminary findings regarding membership diversity suggested that a complementary

mix of experience, background, and training could maximize learning processes for cohort members (Drago-Severson, Helsing, Kegan, Popp, Broderick, & Portnow, 2001; Lawrence, 1997; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Classrooms and Cohorts: Research in Diversity and Adult Education

In general terms, cohorts in academia consist of groups taking a series of courses in a classroom and in blended-technology settings. These groups or communities possess several social, historical, and political realities. Even though adult education research has built a strong foundation on the topic of adults in the classroom (Imel, 2002; Kasworm, 2010), the field has given limited attention to race and sociocultural differences in the discourse (Kaufmann, 2010; Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, & Brookfield, 2010; Tisdell, 1993). Studies on multiculturalism, gender, and sexual orientation in the adult classroom have begun to demystify factors in the teaching-learning context. Sheared (1996) investigated racial groups' lived experiences. Brookfield (2002) looked at the effect on practice. Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey (2000) proclaim in their study, that "the power relationships that structure social life did not stop at the classroom door. Rather these relationships that are structured around class, race, gender, and sexual orientation have a profound effect on all teaching and learning processes" (p.273). Adult education classrooms inherently consist of differences in culture, ethnicity, language, nationality, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and socioeconomic status. Diverse contexts influence learning and create an environment in which participants engage in a discourse of learning.

Even less attention has been given to studies specifically on culturally diverse cohorts. The studies that exist tend to focus on characteristics, perceptions, and administrative aspects or factors in recruiting and retaining diverse students and faculty to cohort learning models (Blue, 2000; Canniff, 2003; Cunningham, 1996; Drago-Severson, 2004; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Nesbit, 2001; Potthoff, Dinsmore, & Moore, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Steele, Murry, Steele, Romero, Kamua, Wall, & Plunkett, 2006). Limited descriptive literature speaks to increasingly diverse communities of powerful learning and growth. For instance, some minority student perspectives of cohort experiences exist in the literature, particularly from a Hispanic and African American perspectives (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; St. John, 2008; Valenciana, Weisman, & Flores, 2006). Valenciana and associates (2006) found that for the Hispanic cohort group studied “cohort models helped them (students) to establish connections with others like themselves and create a strong sense of community”(p. 91). Yet, there remains much work to be completed in this vital area of study. For example, Scribner and Donaldson (2001) advocate for formative evaluations in the area of learning and performance for culturally diverse cohort groups to uncover the particulars of the learning experience. Blue (2000) and Potthoff et al. (2001) call for additional work on knowledge construction and intelligence development in culturally diverse cohorts through culturally relevant dialogue. There are relevant studies that grapple with the way in which cohort models intersect with learning and cultural awareness (Scribner and Donaldson, 2001; Drago-Severson, 2004; St. John, 2008; Steele et al., 2006). However, the studies lack substantive explorations that address conditions needed to engage and support the culturally diverse

cohort, classroom or mission. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover the nuances of culturally diverse cohorts to construct a deeper understanding of the relationship between the diverse cohort members' perceptions of the social processes in learning and the diverse nature of their interactions.

Also, important to this study are the individual learning traits exhibited in the culturally diverse cohort experience. In what ways does being a member of a culturally diverse cohort impact the learners' social and educational experiences?

Problem Statement

In summary, the gaps in culturally diverse cohort literature revealed the lack of rich discussion of cultural differences in the educational experience. Over the past few decades, studies regarding examination of cultural differences from a sociocultural perspective have offered both attractive and controversial new approaches to understanding adult learners in the learning process (Alfred, 2002; Drago-Severson, 2004; Moss et al., 2008; Tisdell et al., 2004). Because cohort members engage in a diverse social and cultural context, how might interactions with their peers inform learning and the educational experiences in the classroom? These examinations of sociocultural contexts within the cohort community inform peer perspectives and influences on educational experiences.

The premise of sociocultural learning theories centers on learners as they engage in a social process of learning informed by their past, present, and future interactions containing content and experiences they encounter. As they make sense of these interactions with people and content through multidimensional academic, social,

historical and intentional contexts, adults invoke certain resources to make sense of the interactions. Therefore, how cohort members construct the knowledge within the context of their learning is central to this study.

Sociocultural learning theories, particularly critical sociocultural theory, provide relevant insight into approaches to student learning such as adult cohort education models. Through the complexity of sociocultural differences in the cohort learning experiences, this study examines cohort learning as a vehicle to cultural and holistic ways of learning through critical reflection, open dialogue, trusting, community building, open climate, communication, and inclusive curricula (Basom et al., 1995; Yerkes et al., 1995). These pedagogical practices raised issues of identity, power, positionalities, and agency through awareness of the importance of context. A critical sociocultural theoretical perspective sheds light on the social and cultural classroom dynamics and omnipresence of hegemonic practices in adult education. Gee (1994) cautions that educators and learners cannot fully understand context unless it is situated in the social group with which they are concerned. Because learning is embedded within discourse or social practices, individuals' culture, values, and role expectations engaged that discourse community. Cohorts are discourse communities. Therefore, most relevant to the problem is the interconnectedness of diversity's impact on cohort learning among peers, in and out of the classroom, and in relationship to educational outcomes. Experiences and interactions in culturally diverse cohorts facilitate and impede learning and shape perceptions of adult students.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore how diversity, as manifested by the divergent or heterogeneous backgrounds of fellow cohort members, informs the learning experience in cohorts. In essence, I sought to understand the varied nature of membership in a diverse cohort and its influence on learning.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research study as they relate to the purpose of the study:

- 1) How does the nature of membership in a culturally diverse cohort inform learning and social interaction? What is the relationship between diversity in cohort membership and learning in cohorts?
- 2) What elements of culturally diverse cohort learning environments impede and enhance adult learning?
- 3) How do culturally diverse cohort members perceive the context of learning?

Theoretical Frameworks

Much of the prior and present research on learning in diverse cohort settings comes from traditional cognitive, sociological, and psychological perspectives (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Drago-Severson, 2004; Hill, 1992; Potthoff et al., 2001; Valenciana et al., 2006). In light of this perspective, I contend that the complexity of human experiences and cultural differences in diverse cohort settings must be understood from a sociocultural perspective. Learning from a sociocultural perspective consists of individual

interactions with culturally shared ways of understanding regarding the world and reality (Cole, 1995; Gee, 1994; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Rogoff, 1995). Additionally important in adult education and to this particular study is a discussion of critical sociocultural approaches in adult education to explore the “intersection of social, cultural, historical and political aspects of people’s meaning-making, interactions, and learning” (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 2). Finally, Hays’ (2002) Addressing Model offers one way to reach beyond the personal experience in an educational setting by exploring cultural influences, heritages, and other factors or markers of one’s own personal sociocultural make-up.

Sociocultural Theory

According to Haertel, Moss, Pullin, and Gee (2008), adult learners both shape and are shaped by the cultural practices with which they connect and are connected in daily life as opposed to any sort of passive transmission or acceptance of these practices. This theoretical framework contends that development and learning is embedded within one’s social and cultural world. Therefore, the sociocultural theory of learning consists of focusing on the individual’s social, historical, and cultural context which moves the focus of learning from solely centered on the individual to emphasize the inclusion of the mediated nature of historical, cultural, and social experiences of the individual (Alfred, 2002; Edwards, 2006; Niewolny & Wilson, 2009). As defined, a key component of sociocultural perspectives emphasizes the social nature of learning. Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning is inherently embedded within social processes.

According to sociocultural understanding, learning is socially mediated through cultural symbols and language that are socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). The works

of Vygotsky (1978), along with Leont'ev (1981), Luria(1928), and others, represent a body of literature that focuses on the cultural, political, and historical processes of learning and development. The essence rests in the understanding of cognition through context, whereby learning is culturally comprised of tool-mediated activities and socially structured interactions (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). For example, to understand meaning-making and how groups seek mutual understanding, language is used. Language, as a cultural tool, frames members' worldviews and their interactions with one another. Sociocultural perspectives on learning emphasized rich contextual understanding of society and experiences.

Critical Sociocultural Theory and Adult Education

Critical sociocultural theory covers the literature centered on learning situated with students' social predetermined markers such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, all of which are present and foregrounded in the adult education classroom. A critical sociocultural lens captures the nature of power, identity, positionalities, and agency at play in the classroom and society at large. Adult education literature uses sociocultural perspectives as well as other perspectives such as post-structural, cultural, feminist, critical race and discourse to inform understandings of the social, cultural, and political contexts in learning. Lewis, Enciso and Moje (2007) define critical sociocultural theory as understandings of "larger systems of power as they shape and are shaped by individuals in particular cultural context" (p.xi).

The use of critical sociocultural theory thrives in the contextual nature of learning which occurs simultaneously in the interactions and the multi-dimensions of social,

cultural, and historical aspects such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Alfred, 2002; Guy, 1999; Tisdell, 1995). In adult education, there has been growing attention given to the cultural and political contexts where the knowing and the learning occur. Understanding the cultural and political contexts give voice to multiple perspectives in regards to social relations, community and learning environments (Alfred, 2002; Wang, 2007). Giving voice to culturally diverse cohort members in this study offers great significance in light of the intersections of sociocultural make-up of members and their learning and interactions. The contexts of differences manifest themselves in the classroom of these culturally diverse cohorts. Through participation in diverse cohorts, there remains much to learn about the interactive process that actively engages learning and the act of knowing.

Hays' ADDRESSING Model

The ADDRESSING Model offers an understanding of the effects of diverse cultural influences on individuals' worldviews in daily life (Hays, 2008). Used in the counseling field with practitioners, its principles have been highly adaptive to the adult education field and cohort groups within a sociocultural framework. This conceptualization uses the acronym ADDRESSING and looks at contexts through the categories of Age, Developmental disabilities, Disabilities acquired later in life, Religion, Ethnic and racial identity, Socioeconomic status, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, National origin, and Gender. This model provides a way to frame the diversity of the group. By asking members to look at their sociocultural elements and how they intermingle with their peers, the A-D-D-R-E-S-S-I-N-G model served as a practical

reminder of cultural influences. For instance, age-related generational experiences, experience or inexperience with disability, religious or spiritual upbringing, ethnic and racial identity, and so on limits one's knowledge and experience in the learning exchange.

In sum, these frameworks bring the realities of individual and socially constructed labels and biases, cultural values, and power structures to the forefront in the classroom. By identifying and challenging assumptions through contextual influences, such as cohorts, one can see how dominant cultural messages create misconceptions, bias, and prejudices and develops relationships with an understanding of the influence of sociocultural contexts. By exploring sociocultural contexts in cohort educational models, this focus on the relationship between people's diverse make-up and the understanding of how people's interaction in social networks creates a process of learning about diverse people, ideas, and information across cultures and life spans and so on. The reward for these efforts is a deeper understanding of self, and an appreciation of the richness of diverse people's experiences, and abilities to provide a more effective and culturally relevant teaching and learning exchange (Alfred, 2002; Hays, 2008; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).

Methodology

The art of conducting research requires a systematic approach whether the goal is to understand a particular phenomenon in a context-specific setting or to enhance practice. A research paradigm, such as qualitative research, constitutes a worldview or a way of thinking or making sense of the complexities in life. Paradigms are deeply

embedded in the socialization of the researchers and readers of research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). As related to this study, the research is built on the methodology that guides the choice and the use of methods, which in turn defines the theoretical perspective informing the epistemology (Crotty, 1998). This study employs a qualitative research design to explore fully and deeply the social and cultural milieu of culturally diverse cohort education models.

In this study, I paint a picture of diverse cohort life by examining the complexities of interacting and learning in cohorts. The qualitative research presented here increases the knowledge and understanding of a complex and dynamic quality of the social world (Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 2002). For instance in a study of diverse cohorts, I seek to make sense of the particular cohort experience through personal stories and the ways in which they interconnect, resulting in rich descriptions of people, places, conversations, and documentation.

Because this study explored members' perceptions of their culturally diverse cohort experience through their interactions and the learning processes in the contextual setting, the basic interpretive qualitative design best provides a vehicle for deeper understanding to such a phenomenon. The basic interpretive qualitative design gathered data on the perspectives of study participants by way of semi-structured interviews. The analysis provides rich and descriptive details of individual perspectives within the diverse cohort experience, which illuminated the educational, cultural, and personal factors that have informed peer interaction and the learning process.

The selection of participants was conducted as a purposeful sample, using the sampling of unique or special cases (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This sampling produced individuals with the richest and best descriptive information and insight related to the purpose of the study. Working with admissions and the program coordinator, two cohorts were identified with heterogeneous membership representation of the adult population at large, which included the greatest diversity in the areas of the following sociocultural factors: race and ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Twelve participants were selected for the semi-structured interviews. I followed an interview protocol to maintain basic standardization across the interviews. To allow for flexibility and follow-up, the semi-structure interview protocol engaged participants to a fuller process of exploration. I audio-recorded and transcribed each interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. At a later date, the participants were allowed to read the transcript of the interview and make corrections and clarifications. Data from the interviews were analyzed for emergent themes. These student interviews served as the primary means for data collection.

Significance of the Study

As universities compete for lower enrollment numbers of traditional-age students, the pool of adult returning students has been increasingly sought to fill in the enrollment gaps. Because adult cohort models have been administratively flexible and cost effective, educational institutions continue to employ such instructional delivery strategies at an increasing rate (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Barnett et al., 2000; Drago-Severson, 2004; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Institutional and program planning of cohort models have served

as best practice guides to universities seeking to serve students in cohort programs effectively. Cohort models because of their supportive, convenient nature and make-up, attract diverse students (Alfred, 2007; Wang, 2007). The exploration of the nature of membership in culturally diverse cohorts informs learning and the interactions of the members. Through this exploration, elements of the learning environment are revealed that impede and enhance learning. Finally, valuable insights regarding member perceptions about the contextual nature of learning in a social process inform the acts of supporting, expanding, and enhancing the educational experience of diverse students in cohorts.

Current literature lacks a wealth of empirical studies regarding cohort education models from cultural perspectives in the field of adult and higher education. A handful of scholars have extensively investigated the characteristics and instructional uses of cohorts in adult education and offered possible solutions and suggestions to educators who are looking to examine the cohort educational experience from cultural lenses (Bynoe, 2007; Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Hall & Clooson, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Nesbit, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Even the most successful cohort models expose issues of exclusion, marginalization, and ignorance around sociocultural factors of students. Many times, students and faculty are not well-equipped to examine how sociocultural understandings can empower and impede the cohort experience (Nesbit, 1991). In adult and higher education, cohort education models have been proven to be ideal administrative instructional delivery modes of education. Yet, explorations into culturally diverse cohort learning experience fail to present a comprehensive look at the

social processes of learning among peers in cohorts. Some studies suggest that the social and cultural aspects of acquiring knowledge in cohort groups positively influence learning as an effective means of increasing student achievement and cognitive development (Haertel et al., 2008; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Wang, 2007). Therefore, there is great need for investigation on the sociocultural context of culturally diverse cohorts as well as the impact of the sociocultural factors on individual participants.

As more and more adults take part in cohort education experiences, it remains imperative to the field of adult and higher education to recognize the impact of increasing diversity in the individual and group context. Given the mission of most cohort education programs to be responsive to the needs of communities and underrepresented populations, continued research provides additional aspects of the educational environment that supports student persistence and success in cohort educational programming. Merriam and Mohamad (2008) call upon the field of adult education to address, “the need for the application of a cultural lens in future research” (p. 12). The significance here is that fully descriptive accounts of culturally diverse students in the cohort learning experience are still quite limited.

Finally, my personal goals of this study represent my passion as an administrator responsible for cohort educational models at off-site locations. It is my personal and professional responsibility and commitment to provide cohort students with the best educational experience and fullest personal development that cohort education may offer. Also as a member of a cohort, I possess insight and significant investment into this

particular educational type of instruction. Clearly, there are gaps and insufficient findings both at the theoretical and practical level because the literature suggests further contributions to many fields of study. As adults look to pursue and obtain a degree while balancing a full list of life's responsibilities, cohort programming clearly provides an attainable avenue.

Definition of Terms

To fully understand the research at hand, it is important to be aware of the ways in which I used several key terms used throughout the discussion related to this study. For this reason, the following is a list of these terms with definitions that might be helpful for the reader.

1. A cohort is a group of students completing an educational program of study together in a specified time period with common learning goals and objectives (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Satiel & Russo, 2001).
2. A critical sociocultural perspective investigates “how larger systems of society, the cultural and the institutions shape learning and how the structural and historical condition from the learning event” (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 241).
3. Cultural diversity is the differences in culture, ethnicity, language, nationality, and race in addition to age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability and socioeconomic status (Alfred, 2002).
4. Culturally relevant practices and education considers “the cultural, racial, ethnic, social class, linguistic, and religious backgrounds of students in planning

inclusive, anti-oppressive, and relevant curriculum and instruction” (Davis, Ramahlo, Beyerbach, & London, 2008, p. 224).

5. Hays’ ADDRESSING Model considers the critical sociocultural factors that affect how society defines the individual in terms of age, developmental disabilities, disabilities acquired later in life, religion, ethnic and racial identity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender (Hays, 2008).
6. Interpretative qualitative research “carefully and thoroughly captures and describes how people experience some phenomenon...how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).
7. Sociocultural perspective takes into account the learning conditions, the interactions of the individual with the teacher and other learners, and the individual’s cultural and social backgrounds as they affect their learning. In a broad sense, it is how cultural values and political systems impact the learning process. Sociocultural theory examines how the learning perspectives of the participants and the institutions shape the nature of the learning discourse (Alfred, 2002).

Assumptions and Limitations

As with all research, there are assumptions that all researchers inherently employ in the research methodology. In addition, there are assumptions that existed in the literature and study of both adult and higher education. This section addressed those assumptions,

embedded in the study and literature that are important to the understanding of the study's significance in cohort education models.

1. Cohorts are integrated, flexible, efficient, and relevant.
2. Cohorts are developed for a common purpose. They encourage social interaction allowing for individual and group development and they cultivate powerful learning experiences.
3. The cohort educational model both fosters and impedes the teaching-learning exchange depending on the sociocultural factors and contexts.
4. Perceptions from students regarding culturally relevant practices in the classroom give a comprehensive picture of the learning process that takes place in the cohort educational models.
5. Students believe they can learn about sociocultural factors and their impact on learning in the formal educational setting.
6. Learners articulate the process that assists them in learning and will be honest and accurate in sharing their perceptions of the process.
7. Social, economic, educational, and religious institutions and structures serve to marginalize those traditionally underserved in institutional settings of higher educations.

Not unique to this study is the existence of limitations in the study. Some of the potential limitations to this study included:

1. This study was dependent upon voluntary participation of students of diverse cohort educational models. As a result, there was a degree of selection bias in that

those who volunteer to participate may have done so as a result of extremely positive or negative experience in the program.

2. Definitions of what constitutes a culturally diverse cohort model vary. Therefore, participants may have had difficulty identifying those aspects of the educational experience that resulted in success.
3. Because of the nature of a qualitative research, limitations exist in terms of generalizability. The study relied on limited and very specific student perceptions of diversity effects and interactions with diverse peers as only they understood as concepts and the processes.
4. Because of my status as a researcher and administrator with a very personal stake in the success of cohort educational models, students may have been influenced in the participation and responses. Although my administrative role is not directly related to the department of the college that supports their programs of study, my title at the college may have been a biasing factor.
5. Because of the sociocultural factors that I brought to the study, I must be mindful of my own White, female, middle-class, liberal backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Summary

This chapter has served to introduce the concepts that will be explored in detail in the remaining chapters. It has also explained the direction of the research in cohort literature today regarding sociocultural factors of learning. In the process of exploring this topic of cohorts, this study focuses on those cohort members who identify with a

diverse cohort experience and express awareness and appreciation of the effect diversity played in their learning. This study explores the sociocultural factors that guide a cohort educational experience. The study also examines learning and interactions of diverse cohort members negotiating the cultural and social processes in the classroom.

The remainder of this document expands upon this introduction. Chapter two represents a detailed summary of the literature surrounding culturally diverse cohort educational models and learning. Chapter three gives a detailed account of the methodology used to complete the study. Chapters four and five discuss the findings and conclusions as well as the implications for the fields of adult and higher education.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore how experiences among adult learners in diverse cohorts inform learning and interactions. Recognizing that learning in cohort educational models does not occur in a vacuum, adult learners invoke a plethora of social, cultural, historical, political, and economic resources in the classroom environment and the social process of learning to construct knowledge. The goal of this study was to reveal how the social and cultural contexts enabled and constrained the learning in diverse cohort education experiences.

Because this study explores the context of learning for adults in diverse settings, this chapter reviews the literature relevant to the study. Organized in five sections of related literature, this review consists of examinations regarding theoretical frameworks, diversity in the adult education classroom in higher education, cohort programming for adult learners, culturally diverse cohorts, and learning in culturally diverse cohorts.

The first section on sociocultural theory and adult learning frames this study on culturally diverse cohorts. All subsequent sections are grounded in these theoretical frameworks and based on the related assumptions. The second section discusses the current literature on the diversity in the adult education classroom, and in general, diversity in higher education. The next section reviews literature pertaining to the unique nature of cohort programming for adults and specifically culturally diverse cohorts. The fourth section outlines group learning and adult learner needs. The fifth section reviews

critiques regarding the body of research relating to learning in higher education through culturally relevant practices, cultural awareness, and intergroup dialogue as vehicles to deeper understandings of culturally diverse cohorts. Together, these topics serve as a background to analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the current literature, as well as a rationale as to the need for future work on culturally diverse cohorts based upon the limitations and gaps identified in the literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

Traditional cognitive learning theories are criticized by focusing heavily on what is going on inside the mind as if it existed in a vacuum. In addition, cognitivists tend to compartmentalize learning as the acquisition of information and skills (Cole, 1995; Lave & Wagner, 1991; Niewolny & Wilson, 2009). In contrast, sociocultural learning theories encapsulate a more holistic approach whereby the learning conditions, the interactions of the individual with the teacher and other learners, and the individual's cultural background are recognized as learning in the classroom (Alfred, 2002; Guy, 1999; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003). In essence, sociocultural theory reaches beyond the surface to interrogate the cultural make-up of the learning experience. A fundamental premise of this study is that adult learners cannot be separated from their cultural and social context and other aspects of their lives that influence the learning experience. Therefore, in the case of this study, cohort members in diverse experiences engage their ever-changing context in which individual sociocultural factors influence the learning of the group of adult learners. In this section, I cover the vast amount of literature on sociocultural theory dealing with race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual

orientation, all of which are present in the adult education classroom. I define the theoretical framework of sociocultural learning theory and how it differs from traditional cognitive learning theories, its key components, and assumptions. I then discuss the themes, merits, and weaknesses of sociocultural theory through the literature regarding the theory's evolution from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to critical sociocultural perspective. Because my study involved adult learners self-defined as culturally diverse, I also include a discussion of Hays' ADDRESSING Model (2008). Hays' ADDRESSING Model (2008) recognizes the multidimensional and complex interplay of social and cultural influences of Age, Developmental disabilities and Disabilities acquired later in life, Religion, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic status, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, Native origin, and Gender, hence the acronym ADDRESSING (Hays, 2008). This model is used as an analysis structure for this study.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural perspectives of learning emphasize the placement of knowledge existing in the relationship between the individual and his or her environment rather than focusing merely inside the mind of the individual (Haertel et al., 2008; Wertsch, 1985). This relationship affects the way the person thinks, feels, acts, and interacts because the environment is situated in the "social, interactional, institutional, cultural and historical contexts" of learning (Wertsch, 1985, p. 86). As a learning theory, the sociocultural approach focuses on the context in which the culture and other multidimensional contexts (e.g. age, sexual orientation, gender, disabilities, religion, and socioeconomic status) engage the learning process fully. The historical, cultural, and social contexts give

structure and meaning to learners' experiences (Alfred, 2002; Enciso, 2007; Rosa & Montero, 1995). More than a decade ago, Bonk and Kim (1998) pointed out that "more attention is now focused on how sociocultural theory impacts learning and development, how knowledge is generated or constructed, and how discoveries are communicated around these emerging learning formats" (p. 74). This observation remains true today and most applicable to this study.

To better understand how the social and cultural contexts mediate the adult learner in cohort groups, it is important to understand the key components and assumptions within sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory expands the individualistic or unidimensional premise of learning often found in the cognitivists' perspectives in favor of the process by which individuals "accumulate knowledge and skills transferable from context to context" (Niewolny & Wilson, 2009, p. 26). The assumption of learning in sociocultural theory is that learners socially construct knowledge through interactions. Therefore, knowledge is a part of the social and cultural context where learning occurs. "Learning from a sociocultural perspective is the sum of how an individual or a community constructs the knowledge and the types of knowledge constructed are socioculturally dependent" (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 252). According to Guy (1999), sociocultural contexts in which people learn, live and act, strongly influence the motivations, needs, goals, and perspectives that learners bring to the learning environment. Learners use and draw from their past experiences. Learners share power in collaboration with educators and other learners. Sociocultural theorists

assume learners construct knowledge in conjunction with others through interactions of past and present experiences.

Interactions consist of reciprocal or mutual action or influence. Interaction served as unit of analysis for this study and it drives this perspective. Bonk and Kim (1998) reinforce the assumption that adult learning and interaction “depend on learning activities in the sociocultural milieu” (p. 83). By focusing on the people’s interaction in context, rather than viewing individuals as discrete entities, sociocultural theory engages the social aspects of learning. Students construct reality as a result of interactions with people by using tools to construct and internalize meaning between the social world and the internal mind (Bonk & Kim, 1998; Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, sociocultural perspectives focus on the individual’s cultural background within the context of how a person thinks, feels, learns, acts, and interacts, which is embedded in the interaction.

The sociocultural milieu and the interaction are embedded in culture. Culture, according to Boran (2008), is “shared rules that govern the behavior of members of a community or society, and a set of values, beliefs, attitudes shared by most members of that community” (p.367). This assumption implies that because individuals are social beings, it is culture that provides a basis to explain or mediates how groups make sense or meaning of shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Individual’s daily practices and lived experiences represent how one participates, produces, and mediates the social, political, cultural, and economic structures of the world (Alfred, 2002; Niewolny &

Wilson, 2009). Therefore, a key component is the interaction between the individual and the social and cultural environment.

The perspectives of sociocultural theory as a family of theories provide a lens through which to view life and the ways people understand it. These perspectives differ on points of dimensions and aspects. The many theorists outlined in this section promote the use of sociocultural theory in providing multiple lenses through which an understanding of learning engages interactions and relationships among learners embedded in environments. Together, these scholars examine the context in which elements of the learning environments enable and constrain learning and how the social, historical, and cultural context influences the personal and the collective spheres of influence (Engeström, 1999; Kozulin et al., 2003; Roth & Lee, 2007). Sociocultural perspectives also address problematic issues in the adult education field. Most importantly, they give a “multi-voiced” framework to phenomena such as culturally diverse cohorts (Wersch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). For example, in cohorts, learners are participants in the active learning process in a communal setting. The process of learning together and collaborating in cohort is a social enterprise. To understand the contexts of adult learning in cohort settings, sociocultural perspectives inform and integrate cognitive and social processes. To appreciate and fully understand how sociocultural theory defines the learning in culturally diverse cohorts, it is necessary to examine the evolution of sociocultural perspectives through the expansive literature from education, literacy studies, and psychology. These perspectives include Vygotsky’s perspective, activity

theory, distributed cognition, communities of practice, cultural psychology, and critical sociocultural theory.

Vygotsky's perspective. The evolution of sociocultural perspectives begins with Lev Vygotsky (1978) and his contributions to social psychology and education and the implications on adult education. Although Vygotsky did not coin the terms “sociocultural” or “cultural-historical,” it was his emphasis on the “method of uncovering the origins of higher forms of human consciousness and emotional life rather than elementary behavioral acts” (Rosa & Montero, 1995, p. 74) that made his approach revolutionary in application. From this social constructivist stance, higher-order forms of consciousness equate a focus on language as a tool, culturally mediated activity, and an emphasis on learning in terms of how the “intermental transforms the intramental” in the cognitive process that is culturally constructed in context (Haetrel et al., 2008, p.4). The unit of analysis for Vygotsky consists of activity with language in interaction which rests on three principles. First, there is a relationship between history and science and their interrelated practices and process. Second, there is a central focus on the relationship between learning and development. Third, he purported that higher psychological processes possessed a cultural origin.

The core assumptions of Vygotsky's perspective are foundational and fundamental to the evolution of sociocultural perspectives. Because Vygotsky was the first to center culture in the learning process, he identifies key assumptions. The sociocultural perspective of learning possesses a developmental emphasis, a reliance on social processes as the origin of higher mental processes, and an understanding that

processing in the mind can only be understood by the tools that mediate learning process (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky understands that individuals construct meaning through experiences and interactions with the environment. However, Vygotsky stresses the importance of learning and development through the social context. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning and cognitive development are constructed through the use of the cultural tool, language, which in turn gives knowledge a culturally defined meaning.

For Vygotsky, there exists an area in learning between what an individual could do individually and what the individual could do with assistance from others. This difference between the two levels is what Vygotsky (1978) coins the zone of proximal development where learning and growth occurs as an individual uses independent and collective abilities in problem solving. The zone of proximal development is “the distance between a learner’s independent problem-solving performance and his or her potential developmental level as determined by problem solving with guidance from an expert or more capable peer” (Bonk & Kim, 1998, p. 69). Vygotsky identifies learning as expert-novice interactions. This expert-novice interaction also transpires in the cohort settings of learning as members learn or co-construct knowledge with their peers and faculty members. It is this co-construction of knowledge that is key.

Interactions, according to Vygotsky, are culturally mediated by “understanding human cognition and learning as social and cultural collective endeavors rather than individual phenomena” (Kozulin et al., 2003, p. 1). Learning does not solely occur inside the minds of individuals, but rather learning has social and cognitive aspects which are central assumptions in the sociocultural perspective. Human activity is “actively realized

and changed in various contexts of culture and history (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 121).

Vygotsky classifies language as a culturally constructed tool and uses activity as the unit of analysis, which interconnects mind, culture, and language internally. According to Roth and Lee (2007), Vygotsky defines language as “tools for transmission and construction of cultural accepted knowledge” (p. 207). In other words, these mediators of learning occurs externally and then moves to internalization.

The evolution of sociocultural perspectives from Vygotsky to today’s theorists helps to clarify and resolve some of the dichotomies between his theory and the cognitivists, such as the individual and collective or mind and body. The evolution of sociocultural theory includes the perspectives of activity theory, distributed cognition, communities of practice, cultural psychology, and the critical sociocultural perspective. All perspectives rooted in sociocultural theory share the need to “dialectically link the individual and the social structures” (Engeström, 1999, p. 19). From Vygotsky, his followers worked to expand and refine sociocultural perspectives on learning, such as activity theory.

Activity theory. Activity theory, in the tradition of Leont’ev(1981), Engeström(1999), and Cole (1995) attempted to overcome and transcend the dualism between the individual subjectivity and the objective societal circumstances (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999). This dualism was embedded in the Marxian interpretation of reality. Human history, according to Marx, was a natural process rooted in material needs. Dialectical materialism defined all change as the product of a constant conflict between opposites arising from the internal contradictions inherent in all events, ideas,

and movements (Roth & Lee, 2007). Stemming from Vygotskian Marxist tradition and the concept of dialectical materialism, this theoretical lens bases the unit of analysis on the object or the activity much the same way Vygotsky does. However, by capturing “the analysis of object-oriented activities, goal-oriented action, and conditioned operations” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 201), activity theory provides a new way of understanding learning. Vygotsky’s view of object-oriented action is that action is mediated by cultural tools and signs. Today’s activity theory integrates other human beings and the social relations and distinguishes between collective activity and individual action. For example, according to activity theory, any activity relies on some historical form of mediated artifact or cultural resource, which is common to society at large. In a cohort, individuals possess beliefs and a social and historical background. The group comes together in learning, co-constructs a culture, and is transformed by the activity which is the mode of coordinating with the physical and social environment. Cole (1995) argues it is in this relational space between culture and cognitive achievement where the learning takes place. The next evolution in sociocultural theory seeks to understand how the individual engage the activity.

Distributed cognition. Another perspective to evolve from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and quite popular in educational research is distributed cognition found in the work of Rogoff (1995). Rogoff’s focus adapts Vygotsky’s understanding of the expert-novice interaction and applies the process across cultures. She observed sociocultural activity on three planes of analysis or developmental processes. Distributed cognition concerns itself with how people participate in sociocultural activity and how

their participation changes from being peripheral to being responsible for managing the involvement of learning. The involvement is the activity in context of learning and development. The emphasis of learning rests on understanding the processes in light of historical changes in activities. The first plane, apprenticeship, takes place within a frame of reference that is community based. Apprenticeship, according to Rogoff (1995), happens in small groups in a community with “specialization of roles oriented toward the accomplishment of goals that relate the group to others outside the group” (p. 143). Guided participation, the second plane, places emphasis on the process and systems of involvement and takes place within an interpersonal plane. Contribution among people serves as “the communication and coordinated effort” of participants in “cultural valued activity” (Rogoff, 1995, p.142). This contribution is mutual involvement by the individual and the communication partner. In the final plane, participatory appropriation operates within a frame of reference on the personal level. This concept of participating appropriation refers to “how individuals change through their involvement in one or another activity, in the process of becoming prepared for involvement in activities” (Rogoff, 1995, p. 142). The assumptions imply the individual is participating in the activity and not separated by it. Distributed cognition is about the distribution of knowledge that is not owned by one but constructed by many. It assumes that change occurs as a result of the participation and involvement. Gee (2008) stresses that the central importance of this participation and involvement to be the “connection between the learning and the learners experiences in the work, how knowledge is distributed across people and their tools” (p. 76). This model is particularly important in cohort

education models whereby members' participation and involvement in shared discussions and social practices define the nature of relationships.

Communities of practice. Another sociocultural approach popular in education today is communities of practice as outlined by Lave and Wagner (1991) as a "set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and interrelation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). People share a set of practices often carry out collaboratively. The unit of analysis is the social context and the key to learning is access, as new members learn from more experienced members but also from other new members. Assumptions within communities of practice define learning with others possessing different interests and levels of involvement and making diverse contributions and holding varying viewpoints in regards to the activity. Boundaries within the community are not well-defined; yet, participants share a common understanding. For instance, cohorts, many times, build a sense of community. Cohorts work toward common goals by completing common tasks. Members listen to each other, and engage in discussion, dialogue, and brainstorming to co-construct knowledge in their learning community.

Cultural psychology. Yet another sociocultural approach commonly utilized in educational research is Cole's (1995) cultural psychology which places importance on "human needs and abilities that are transformed by the activity mechanism of artifacts (p. 190). According to Cole (1995), artifacts are aspects of the material world whereby "human action serves as modes of coordinating with the physical and social environment" (p.190). Culture is about the process of development mediated through the

activities and the artifacts therein. Artifacts are important because they are entwined with each other and the social lives of human beings. Additionally, artifacts mediate in an “infinite variety of ways and unique mediums of human life culture” (Cole, 1995, p.193). Cole’s stance assumes there is an understanding of history and its origins of behavior. There is also an assumption that change takes place over time and very slow. Finally, development from a cultural psychological stance posits that activities have rules, artifacts, social rules, and cultural systems that replicate throughout generations. Under this sociocultural approach, the importance is placed upon learner’s experiences, social participation, use of mediating devices (tools and technologies), and positions within various activity systems or communities of practice.

Critical sociocultural theory. Finally, in critical sociocultural theory, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) postulate that sociocultural theory accounts “for larger systems of power as they shape and are shaped by individuals in particular cultural contexts” (p. xi). There are power relations between social and individual, global and local, and institutional and the everyday that must be taken into considerations. This perspective focuses on the assumption that learning is not static, but dynamic. Critical sociocultural theory addresses the complexity of the social world within which learners engage identity and discourse (Lewis et al., 2007). Just as the other perspectives address the concepts of activity, history, communities of practice, and production of knowledge, critical sociocultural perspective lives in the “intersection of the social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and political aspects of people’s sense of meaning-making, interaction and learning” (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 2). The strength of this perspective rests in the ability

to address issues of identity, agency, and power in the production of knowledge and understand the relationship between culture and learning. Of particular importance in culturally diverse cohorts, “ the multiplicity of voices present in the classroom and the impact of the social interaction on pupil outcomes has promoted research on sociocultural as well as cognitive benefits of collaborative learning” (Lyle, 2008, p. 229).

An example of learning in various contexts, Lee’s cultural modeling (2007), a critical sociocultural perspective, is a helpful to address the “microrelations and macrorelations of power” in addition to the contexts of people’s experience, identity shaping and agency in given activities (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p.43). This critical sociocultural perspective for culturally diverse students is built on the foundation of “cognition, use of generative topics, concepts, and forms of problem solving within subject matters, scaffolding forms of knowledge and ways of using language in everyday experiences” (Haertel, et al., 2008, p. 13). Three orientations of learning in this model, according to Lee (2007), help to create a rich understanding of the commitment of complex problem solving in academic knowledge areas through use of cultural ways of knowing outside of the classroom. The first, schema theoretic orientation, makes the focus on the role of prior knowledge or “schema-in-the-mind.” Second, an orientation in distributed view of cognition reveals how learning and thinking are combined and constructed by people and artifacts. Situational processes in setting contexts and interactions come together to help students work with each other in classroom through material resources. The third orientation is a situated view of cognition, which requires “people, artifacts, and interactions within and across settings and time as elements of

dynamic systems in which people learn” (Lee, 2008, p. 138). Lee (2008) promotes cultural modeling in an effort to help underrepresented groups gain the needed cultural capital within their “community of origins and combat stereotypes and low expectations” (p. 139). This modeling is particularly important as it relates to culturally diverse cohorts whereby members’ sociocultural elements affect the interactions and the co-construction of knowledge in learning.

Sociocultural Theory and Adult Education

In recent years, the scholarship on socially constructed notions of sociocultural factors has increased related to adult education, in part as a result of the works of Hays, Johnson-Bailey, Cervero, Tisdell, hooks and others. Socially constructed notions of age, race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation are contextual factors with an effect on adult learning. In addition, adults possess a multiple sociocultural factors socially and culturally assigned by society. Learners’ positionalities and sociocultural elements such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation intersect to influence their learning and development (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Tisdell, 1999). In sum, the positionalities of an adult learner determine the trajectory through the various developmental stages, social roles, and life events. Therefore, it is important to understand and examine the intersections and effect of these contextual factors.

Sociocultural theory has great relevance to adult education. Vygotsky saw the need for relationships and interrelationships with other disciplines other than psychology that integrates literature and the arts and concepts from all over the world and across all disciplines. Similarly, Engeström (1999) summarized that “traditional dualistic

frameworks do not help us to understand today's deep social transformations" (p. 9). In addition, Cole (1995) confirmed that "disillusionment" still exists with the domination of positivist and behaviorist approaches in research (p. 187). Sociocultural schools of thought seek to find a common language in psychology and to speak across disciplines in providing a "multi-voiced" framework (Wertsch, Del Rio, and Alvarez, 1995, p. 3). There also has been an emphasis on the integrative nature of culture and history with a "relevant application of dialectical and historical materialism" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 6). Vygotsky directed an adult education center and understood the need to emphasize "process (not product), criteria (not norms) and the qualitative (not the quantitative)" (Rosa & Montera, 1995, p. 81). His advocacy for historically shaped and cultural transmitted psychology provides an additional view of human learning and development through cultural lenses. Vygotsky's approach "shatters the dualism (individual – society) and emphasizes the development of the individual in social interaction; the individual is formed through the internalization of activities carried out in the bosom of society" (Rosa & Montera, 1995, p. 83). Sociocultural approaches have helped to dialectically link the individual and the social systems overcoming the problems of dichotomous limitations so often present in traditional cognitive approaches. By overcoming the dualism that restricts dynamic experiences, sociocultural theory informs our understanding of the interplay of social interaction, participation, prior experience, and the use of culturally mediated tools.

Teaching and learning interrogates the activity systems along with the constraints and conceptualizations of what counts as knowledge. The understanding of learning

through interactions among teacher, learner and the environment in varying contexts offer greater dialogue, understanding, and access for underrepresented groups. Wang (2007) argues that sociocultural learning theories are ideal models for cohort and collaborative learning activities in that the more students engage in group activities and interact with each other by sharing views and perspectives, the greater the learning. “They explore different ways of approaching learning objectives and problem solving that builds on each other’s contribution to the construction new knowledge and the reconstruction of their own thinking process” (p. 155). Another model that is critical to understanding cultural diverse adult learners is the sociocultural approach to adult learning and development.

According to Drago-Severson et al. (2001), culturally diverse cohort members possessed wide ranging backgrounds. The interplay of interactions helps each member understand those differences among themselves. Cohorts provide recognition, appreciation, and further exploration of cultural differences and the impact on new ways of thinking and behaving. In adult education, each classroom experience and the experiences outside of the classroom interrelate and enhance the overall learning experience. In the sociocultural perspective, the importance of social roles, the timing of life events, and the socially constructed nature of concepts of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation come together to reveal how they shape development. Cohorts consist of adult learners who possess positionalities prescribed by society as they transition through various social roles and life events. Viewing the adult learner from a sociocultural perspective informs and frames an understanding of culturally diverse cohort members and experiences. Another model, Hays’ (2008) ADDRESSING Model,

offers a perspective of working with culturally diverse individuals from the psychological frame of reference. This model provides an additional way to gain a deeper understanding of learning through social and cultural contexts.

Hays' ADDRESSING Model

Hays' ADDRESSING Model (2008) calls attention to neglected cultural influences and reminds educators and students alike of the value of diversity in the educational experience. The ADDRESSING model serves as a practical reminder of the cultural influences at play in any context. Used in the counseling field with practitioners, its principles are highly adaptive to the adult education field and in my opinion to cohort groups. This conceptualization emphasizes Age, Developmental disabilities, Disabilities acquired later in life, Religion, Ethnic and racial identity, Socioeconomic status, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, National origin, and Gender. The A-D-D-R-E-S-S-I-N-G approach emphasizes an understanding of the effects of diverse cultural influences on individuals' worldviews. For instance, age-related generational experiences, experience or inexperience with disability, religious, or spiritual upbringing, ethnic and racial identity, and so on influence one's knowledge and experience in the teaching-learning exchange. Most interesting, researchers explore these cultural differences to understand cohort members and their recognition of the complexity of human experiences and cultural differences. When individuals, in a cohort for example, reach beyond personal experience to explore other cultural influences and heritages, individuals learn about social and cultural contexts beyond their personal sociocultural make-up. In sum, this framework helps make sense of individual and social biases, cultural values and power

structures within the classroom. In addition, this model serves as an ideal way of looking at the nuances of sociocultural factors in the cohort experience.

Conceptual Frameworks in the Context of Diverse Cohorts

There is a need to view complexities of diversity through people living and learning in and with various contexts. The learner is linked to the learning context or environment by interpersonal and interactive accounts or structural conditions with distinct variables of categories such as race, class, gender, and other sociocultural factors (Niewolny and Wilson, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 1991). Because there are very few dialectical accounts of adult learning framed within the contexts of sociocultural interpretations of interactions in learning, important contributions in adult and higher education are needed (Alfred, 2002). A relational context of what it means to learn in a sociocultural experience could provide a richer understanding of learning by theorizing a mediated activity, such as the learning in culturally diverse cohorts, as a new unit of analysis for adult education practice. Contexts are performed through practices that are already related to another. According to Niewolny and Wilson (2009), it is the relationship between the structure and agency that is missing from current interpretations of learning in and between different contexts. Therefore, sociocultural perspectives offer examinations of the nature of context and learning in culturally diverse cohorts and provide assistance to understand dialectical dynamics as Lave (1991) found too often neglected in adult education applications.

Cohorts consist of a microcosm of individuals with multiple social, cultural, and historical contexts. Their unique membership may serve as a template to deepen cultural

learning and development of self and the diversity of others. The particular sociocultural context in which learners exist and act strongly influences the motivation, needs, goals, and perspectives that learners bring to the learning environment (Guy, 1999).

Sociocultural frameworks such as Lee's (2007) cultural modeling or Hays' (2008)

ADDRESSING model offer holistic approaches to researching the adult learning process that attempts to explain the interconnectedness of diversity's effect on cohort learning.

Finally, because most cohort educational programs have a mission to be responsive to the needs of their communities and underrepresented populations, research from sociocultural perspectives could provide additional aspects of learning that support underrepresented student persistence and success. Kozulin et al. (2003) found that classrooms have social and cultural underpinnings which open areas of exploration of themes of cultural diversity within learning and development. Sociocultural theory can reach students at a deeper level of understanding of the human condition. Social interaction remains instrumental in not only in shaping the learning processes in the classroom but also in validating the experience of the culturally diverse learner.

Therefore, it is important to look at the literature regarding diversity in higher education.

Diversity in Adult Education and Higher Education

Diversity by definition has been associated with race and ethnicity, but diversity also includes the sociocultural experiences of people of different genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientation, age, and physical and mental abilities (Dodson, 2009; Gay, 2000; Hays, 2008). A wider or broader contextual meaning has come to include the differences of learning styles, preferences, teaching practices and

learner's perspectives. This inclusivity appreciates the whole individual within the "context of his or her own distinctive ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic background, gender, sexual orientation, and other sociocultural factors" (Thompson & Biffle, 2008, p. 166). By contextualizing diversity through multiple perspectives, educators and learners engage in more ways of knowing and learning as their active participation shapes and facilitates experiences rich in context (Gay, 2000; Nuri-Ribin, Lindsay, & Terrell, 2003). In this section, I explore diversity in the adult education classroom and generally in higher education settings through empirical literature. Then, I specifically discuss empirical evidence on findings regarding culturally diverse cohorts in higher education.

Diversity in the Adult Education Classroom

Because cohort learners take a series of classes together, mainly in a classroom setting, it is important to explore the diversity and dynamics of the adult education classroom. In the past few decades, there has been increasing research on the topics of adult students' learning needs and their experiences in the classroom (Kasworm, 2003; Tisdell, 2006). Kasworm (2003) reported that there is still limited knowledge on the unique learning differences of adults. Today, there is an ever-increasing diversity of adult learners, a shift that is dramatically changing the landscape of higher education. Diversity in general has begun to receive increasing attention in the field of adult education and classroom pedagogical practices. Scholars and theorists in adult education generally discuss adult learning and development in regards to how sociocultural elements such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation influence adult learning and development in fundamental ways (Cross, 1995; Drago-Severson, 2001; Merriam &

Caffarella, 1999; Tisdell, 1995). Adult education classrooms inherently consist of differences in culture, ethnicity, language, nationality, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and socioeconomic status. These socially constructed elements constitute a hierarchy in education whereby people are positioned in relation to each other based on these sociocultural factors. To better understand and address issues of power, positionality, identity, agency, and knowledge construction, many critical pedagogical perspectives such as post-structural, cultural, post-modern, feminist, critical race, and discourse theorists interpret and explain the relationships and how they influence learning. Therefore, it is important to review the current literature on hegemony, power, positionality, identity, agency, and knowledge construction in the adult education classroom.

Hegemony, power, and positionality. Hegemony refers to the process in which society embraces a system of practices and beliefs that rewards some, while marginalizing others (Brookfield, 2005). Therefore, a privileged class set the conditions for all ideas and structures. Hegemony exists not only in the entire social and political systems of daily life but also in the ideology of the holistic lived experience of all adults (Brookfield, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Ironically, hegemony works by consent as we “actively welcome and support what is hurting us” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 94). Hegemonic relations of power, privilege and disenfranchisement are at play in the educational setting (Alfred, 2002; Davis & Nemiroff, 1992). The many critical perspectives help us to identify systems of oppression and power as means to analyze

society and its norms (Brookfield, 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) and then seek to include critiques of race, class, gender, and other sociocultural factors.

Power and positionality are important concepts to understand in the adult education classroom. According to Foucault (1980), power, which is both positive and negative, is everywhere in everyday life and “intimately related to how discourse/bodies of knowledge are constructed” (p. 39). Power shapes identities, maintains injustices, and dictates what is determined as truth in society. Because high-status groups hold more power, they can exert more control over their own situations and the situations of lower status groups. Kivel (2002) suggests that perhaps the most central concept to understanding the influence of sociocultural biases on individuals is that of power. Sociocultural influences such as stereotypes, prejudice and bias when combined with power, form systems of privilege known as the ‘isms’: racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and colonialism (Brookfield, 2005; Hays, 2008; Kivel, 2002). Society socializes unprivileged members of these systems to be acutely aware of the lines separating those who have privilege from those who do not. Kaufmann (2010) found that the hegemonic systems existing in Tisdell’s classroom of 1993 are still present today.

Embedded sociocultural factors and power relations, indeed, influence the adult education classroom. “Race, class and gender influence who spoke, what was spoken, what was not spoken, and in what contexts” (Kaufmann, 2010, p.466). Interlocking systems of hegemony, power, and positionality make it nearly impossible to alter what is “enmeshed in one’s socialization” (Tisdell, 1993). Sociocultural factors categorize each

person into a “sociocultural predestined position – such as race, sexual orientation, and gender – that influences his or her life” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2010). Positionality reinforces differences based on socially constructed practices omnipresent in the classroom and society (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Misawa, 2006, 2010; Tisdell, 2006).

Agency and identity. Agency is the “strategic making and remaking of selves, identity, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources and histories, as embedded within relations of power” (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p.18). Agency represents how individuals make meaning with regards to themselves within the varying structures and contest of power. Individuals’ capacity for learning has the potential to make and remake selves, identities, and relationships. Identity is how the features of a person, be it age, ethnicity, race, gender, social class, or sexual orientation, shape how that person is recognized and how that person sees himself or herself. Identity is “fluid, socially and linguistically mediated constructed” (Lewis et al., 2007, p4). The focus on how individuals shape identity and the spaces where learning occurs represent perspectives that capture the nature of identity, agency, and power.

Knowledge construction. Social structures and power relations affect not only how knowledge has been produced and disseminated in the classroom, but also how “knowledge has been determined, and by whom” (Tisdell, 1998, p. 150) within the educational system and society at large. Privilege limits a person’s knowledge of and experience with non-privileged groups (hooks, 2003; Kivel 2002; McIntosh, 1998). Again, sociocultural influences related to one’s ethnicity, physical abilities, education and professional status may work to distant him or her from people who do not hold such

privileges. Therefore, accepted versions of knowledge, influenced by power, become commonplace (Brookfield, 2005; hooks, 2003; McIntosh, 1998). “It is the sum of how an individual or a community constructs the knowledge and the type of knowledge constructed which are socioculturally dependent” (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 252). According to Guy (1999), sociocultural contexts in which people learn, live, and act strongly influence the motivations, needs, goals, and perspectives that learners bring to the learning environment. Diverse experiences among higher education student populations continue to be popular topic of study. There is a bountiful body of literature on diversity in higher education.

Diversity in Higher Education

My interest in the research topic was shaped by the relationships between students’ experiences with diverse peers in the cohort setting and the influences on learning. In the current diversity literature of higher education, there has been a great deal of empirical evidence to support the link between diversity and educational outcomes. There has been a fairly strong theoretical rationale to support such a link through psychological and humanistic traditions (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin, 2002). Sociocultural perspectives complemented these sociological and psychological findings. Therefore, there remains an additional need to explore diversity and learning especially in culturally diverse cohorts through the lens of the sociocultural perspective to fully explore how social and cultural contexts among learners in diverse cohort educational experiences inform learning and interactions in the classroom and

beyond. Do individual perceptions shape the perceptions of climate and interactions across differences?

As touched upon in the theoretical framework section, the assumption has been that culturally diverse students exhibit learning traits differently from the dominant group who have historically been validated and rewarded in the educational system (Alfred, 2002; Milem, 2003; Niewolny & Wilson, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 2002). Because learning and development cannot be understood without the context of their social cultural and historical components, the significant importance of a deeper understanding of diversity in higher education necessitates exploration. Furthermore, examinations of culturally diverse cohorts help to link the complexities of diversity in a specific adult learning context in light of the sociocultural factors that influence the learning environment in terms of participation and quality of experiences.

Forms of diversity. According to Denson and Chang (2009), diversity can be looked at in three distinct ways. Structural diversity refers to the student body make-up, usually defined by racial composition. Curricular or co-curricular diversity consists of the programmatic efforts that expose students to content about diversity in terms of ideas and people, generally around race/ethnicity and gender. Finally, interaction diversity is the informal student-to-student cross-racial or cross-cultural contact in terms of frequency occurring during the post-secondary life of a student (Chang, 1999; Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002). As diversity relates to cohort educational models, all of these definitions remain relevant and necessary.

Studies show that structural diversity does not sufficiently create a condition for maximum educational outcomes or benefits alone (Gurin et al., 2002; Thompson & Biffle, 2008) It “seems to increase the probability that students will encounter others of diverse backgrounds but it does not guarantee that students will have the meaningful intergroup interactions” (Gurin et al., 2002, p.333). However, structural diversity in conjunction with curricular and interaction diversity makes the difference. Milem (2003) supports the assumption in diversity literature and this body of work on types of diversity because “people are influenced by their interactions with diverse ideas and information as well as diverse people” (p.132). To combat the persistent inequality in higher education, the mission of educational institutions has been to support diversity in its many forms by promoting educational excellence to all and enhancing teaching and learning in higher education. Most importantly, it has been assumed that the definitions of diversity are not mutually exclusive. The interplay and intersections of these definitions also assumed significant positive effects on educational outcomes but only based upon the presence of all three types of diversity (Chang, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, 2003).

Diversity and its value and outcomes are discussed from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. Most of the literature and research addresses diversity in higher education as it relates to the individual student and the higher education institution (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, 2003). Individual benefits from diversity generally equates to educational experiences and outcomes of the individual student. Types of individual benefits include higher levels of social/historical thinking, critical and complex thinking, greater ability for understanding and learning from

different perspectives in terms of people, ideas and information, enhanced attention to diversity and its challenges in classroom discussions, and greater commitment to levels of satisfaction, persistence, cultural awareness and understanding. Research suggests that diversity enhances student growth and development for all students regardless of sociocultural differences (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Milem, 2003). In general terms, institutional benefits from diversity may enhance the abilities of educational institutions to accomplish the variety of missions regarding diversity in teaching, research, and services (Cushner & Trifonovitch, 1989; Milem, 2003; Thompson & Biffle, 2008). These institutional benefits include curricular offerings, various teaching and learning approaches for all types of students, and greater research interests on issues of diversity.

Another assumption in the diversity literature is that diversity adds to the educational experience of students. The significance of increased levels or frequency and quality of engagement in diversity-related activities and intergroup interaction creates meaningful diversity experiences that provide positive effects on educational outcomes (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, 2003). Chang's (1999, 2002) empirical work on the three types of diversity and the effect on students found that interactions among students of varying sociocultural factors have additional benefits such as a greater likelihood of staying enrolled in college, overall satisfaction with the educational institution, and a stronger self-concept. Other researchers suggest that diversity affects individual's educational experience by providing greater awareness of the learning process, better critical thinking skills, and better preparation for life beyond

the university walls (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin, 2002; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Wise & Dudka, 2005). These assumptions and findings are based upon theoretical perspectives informing the research on diversity in higher education.

Psychological perspectives of diversity. Like research on cohort, the majority of research on diversity draws its theoretical foundations from psychological theories. Much research on the mental processes in the tradition of Piaget rests on the acts of accommodating and assimilating new information as students encounter diverse peoples, ideas, interactions and curriculum. In addition, the work of Erikson on psychosocial theory has been used to address diversity in regards to educationally appropriate development stages whereby “students are freer to explore new ideas, social roles, and relationships” (Denson & Chang, 2009, p. 326). Situating studies in traditional theoretical foundations reveals that the focus on the individual in terms of diversity means the context remains at “student-level effects when in fact there can be educational outcomes and benefits that extend well beyond psychological explanations” (Denson & Chang, 2009, p.327). For example, Gurin et al. (2002) found that when students were exposed to knowledge about race, ethnicity, and other sociocultural factors through the curriculum, classroom environment, and interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds, a learning environment fostered a supportive exchange of active thinking and intellectual engagement. A number of scholars in the diversity literature advocated the need for significant works on diversity that demonstrate the comprehensive impact of interactions with diverse peers in the educational setting (Chang, 1999, Gurin et al, 2002; Hurtado, 2001; Milem, 2003; Pascarella et al., 1996). According to Gurin et al. (2002), “a diverse

student body is clearly a resource and a necessary condition for engagement with diverse peers that permits higher education to achieve its educational goals” (p. 360). It is clear that there is room for contributions to the adult and higher education field by examining diversity from a sociocultural perspective. The goal is to arrive at the depth and scope of educational outcomes within these complex social structures to explore the individual, the interactions among peers, and a deeper understanding of the social world.

Outcomes and diversity. Just as there are numerous definitions of diversity, there are many ways to define outcomes in educational institutions in the context of diversity. Learning outcomes refers to the “active learning processes in which students become involved while in college, the engagement and the motivations that students exhibit, the learning and refinement of intellectual and academic skills, and the value student place on these skills after leaving college” (Milem, 2003, p. 136). Another category of outcomes relates to democratic measures as higher education prepares students for active participation in a society that is increasing complex and diverse (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin, 2002; Milem, 2003). Process or intermediate outcomes address the “ways in which learners perceive that diversity has enriched their college experiences” (Milem, 2003, p.137). Process outcomes also include measures of student satisfaction such as persistence, achievement, and perception of campus climate. These measures are directly related to the work in adult and student development (Austin, 1993; Gurin 1999, Milem & Hakuta, 2000). Finally, many researchers refer to outcomes of material benefits in terms of a student accrual of benefits directly related to the diversity within the educational institution such as the increase potential for wages and salary, the

potential for the attainment of advanced degrees, and the greater preparation for a diverse and global workplace (Cushner & Trifonovitch, 1989; Gurin, 1999; Milem, 2003; Wise & Dudka, 2005). Just as there are many definitions and categories of outcomes related to diversity, so too is the range of findings in the empirical research. As discussed above, positive effects from diversity in terms of outcomes assumed that all three definitions of diversity- structural, curricular/co-curricular and interaction- were present (Denson & Chang, 2009). Most researchers found diversity enhances outcomes in educational institutions. Students who interacted and learned with diverse ideas, information and people showed greater relative gains in active thinking processes, complex thinking, social/historical thinking, and critical thinking (Chang, 2001; Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001; Milem, 2001). Effects of diversity produce higher levels of intellectual engagement and motivation. As students with varying sociocultural factors interact with one another and their academic and social environment, diversity influences crucial educational benefits for all students (Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Hurtado, 2001; Milem 2003). For example, Springer, Palmer, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) found that greater interaction with diverse ideas, information and people decreased the gap in views of campus climate. It seemed that diversity may mediate that climate. Finally, the findings that were most relevant to this study came in the form of outcomes related to diversity impact on greater student openness to diversity. Many studies found that diversity enhanced cultural awareness and appreciation for perspectives of groups other than their own (Chang, 2002; Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002; Thompson & Biffle, 2008). This greater tolerance for diverse ideas,

information and people affected personal and academic growth. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore adult learners in cohort education, the effects of group learning and development in cohort educational models, cultural diverse cohorts, and the learning strategies that occur in those cohorts.

Adult Learners in Cohort Education

A cohort is defined as a group of students who enter a program of study together and complete a series of common learning experiences during a specified period of time (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). An adult cohort-based group possesses a unique nature that Nesbit (2001) defines as “opened to non-traditional working students, generally offered at off-campus locations, and designed to be attractive to those who wish to complete a degree while remaining in their own communities” (p. 4). By definition, cohorts can be characterized as closed, open, or fluid. In a closed cohort, students take all of their course work together in a prearranged sequence. Students in an open model enroll in core classes together as a group but take additional coursework on their own to fulfill personal needs or university requirements. Finally, fluid models offer students the flexibility to join the cohort at different times rather than at a single entry point. Students in fluid models often drop in and out as needed depending on personal and professional commitments. Overall, cohort education models provide adults and nontraditional students’ instructional and program delivery strategies that possess thoughtful course sequencing and structure, increased contact with instructors and administration, and a supportive, cohesive peer group (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). In addition, cohort education models offer program delivery

methods that are relatively inexpensive and administratively manageable for the educational institution. Adult learners in cohort-based programs share certain sets of characteristics and assumptions.

Cohort Characteristics and Assumptions

According to the literature, cohorts possess unique systems of trust, empowerment, and support for adult learners, which provide a rich context for learning as they move toward shared educational goals. The role of the adult learner in most cohort-based literature in adult and higher education is based upon Smith's (1982) six general observations on the nature of learning for adults: learning is lifelong, is personal, involves change, is partially a function of human development, pertains to experience, and is partially intuitive. Based on these general observations, four essential characteristics of adult learners can be identified. First, adults come to the learning environment with multiple roles and responsibilities that result in a different orientation to learning than that of children and adolescents. Second, adults possess accumulated life experiences resulting in distinct preferences for learning methods, styles, and environments. Third, adults pass through a number of developmental phases in the physical, psychological, and social spheres. Such transitions require reinterpretation and rearrangement of past experiences. Finally, adults experience anxiety and ambivalence in their orientation to learning (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Knowles, 1980; Smith, 1982).

Because cohort models of education are commonly used with adults, the structure builds a foundation upon the self-directed nature of the adult learners and creates a context in which social support can nurture learning. The underlying assumption in adult

learning exchanges such as cohort-based models lies in the success of the effective facilitation of these self-directed learners. “The more autonomous, informed, and proactive the learners are in a cohort-based program, the greater the probability of their success in the program” (Saltiel & Russo, 2001, p. 70). Barnett and Caffarella (1992) stressed the use of active involvement of learners and educators to create learning experiences that build on the knowledge and experience of the learners. Adult education programs such as cohort models emphasize the learner perceptions of experiences. This particular way of grouping students together creates a learning environment that enhances and increases the effectiveness of participants’ efforts and commitment to the educational endeavor (Nesbit, 2001; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Satiel & Russo, 2001). Cohorts possess a unique membership and mission, a defined structure of program, an intensity of experiences and relationships, and a common set of goals.

Literature in adult and higher education reveals that adult learners, and this is true for cohort program learners, share motivational factors for returning to school to complete a degree or educational goals. Saltiel and Russo (2001) stated “the intellectual stimulation of the academic environment and the quest to fulfill a lifelong dream motivate adults seeking further education and training” (p. 76). For many adults, there is a catalyst that drives the decision to return, be it empty nest, divorce, death of a loved one, or need for job security and more money. Primarily, adults returned following a life transition, or to accomplish a long-standing career goal, or for additional socialization. Because adult learners are primarily workers, not students, some look to gain and enhance work skills and knowledge. According to Knowles (1980) adults come to the

learning environment when they are ready. Adult learners seek “education that can fit into their busy lives” (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, p. 74). Adult learners are motivated by the call to knowledge, personal growth, and personal goals. However, the reality of adult education can be quite daunting for adult learners. They generally find higher education administration processes to be overwhelming as a result of administrative expectations and the level of unfamiliarity in the classroom. In addition, adult learners experience a great complexity of social roles and unique barriers that can be difficult to overcome. Therefore, it is important to recognize the special needs adult learners bring to the learning environment. Elias and Merriam (2005) found that “educational activities must meet the needs of adult learners and...the practical consideration which necessitate an emphasis upon individual needs and interests” (p.144).

Most researchers agree that group interaction is fostered naturally as a result of the collegial support system of the cohort group structure (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Yerkes et al., 1995). Trust, openness, and mutual respect are valued in the many variations of program development, be it accelerated class formats, collaborative learning, learning communities, cooperative learning, and team learning. As an educational model, cohorts are different because of the level of intensity and exclusivity of the group membership. Generally, cohorts tend to have intensive scheduling components, closed memberships and impermeable boundaries that define and differentiate their members from other students (Reynolds & Herbert, 1995, Saltiel & Russo, 2001). This intensity of membership fosters a sense of community that is not

attainable in typical open-entry/open-exit educational programs. Adults, such as those arranged in cohort groups, came to share resources and information, not to mention things like carpooling, photocopying, and child care. Counseling services also are needed for adult learners because of all the various transitions and motivations of returning. According to the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (2005), the best services that institutions provide adult students are through “outreach, life and career planning, financing, assessment of learning outcomes, teaching-learning processes, student support systems, technology, and strategic partnerships” (p. 73). Institutions offer online support systems, tutoring, mentoring, advisors, along with flexibility and creativity in programming, customization, timing, and locations to adult students such as in cohort groups. Cohesiveness and strong supportive atmosphere mean cohorts tend to possess better retention rates (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Nesbit, 2001; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Cohort programs prove to be highly selective in recruiting focused students as well. In sum, successful cohort educational models are mindful of group dynamics, enhanced social support systems, and student-friendly policies.

A cohort also creates a community with a shared group memory and history that affects the group process and the relationship among the students, faculty, and administration. Cohort models depend on culture-building and the nurturing environment of support and collaboration. Group cohesiveness creates a “wonderful expression of a group on a journey of educational exploration” (Saltiel & Russo, 2001, p. 9). Cohort members build a strong network that may last a lifetime. These connections are not only among the cohort members but also with the faculty, program administrators, and the

institution. When the course development, structure, and delivery are based on creativity and stability, cohort models of education have the capacity for an open and safe learning environment conducive to inclusivity of its members.

Other issues that are prevalent in the literature include student perspectives and satisfaction, faculty perspectives and satisfaction, and other factors influencing learning. Much research centers on student perceptions of inclusiveness and collaboration as performance enhancement and indicators of higher academic achievement and greater motivation (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Basom et al., 1996; Hill, 1992). Common ingredients found by researchers seem to be group cohesiveness, community building, critical reflection, and dialogue. For faculty perspectives and satisfaction, researchers concurred that cohort education models provided faculty a sense of belonging, opportunities for growth, enhancement of professional and personal networks, and meaningful interactions with students (Basom & Yerkes, 2001; Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996). The literature also addresses numerous factors that were found to influence learning such as group climate, roles of individual participants, communication, problem-solving, group norms, and formative evaluations.

Some cohort researchers investigated learning from a holistic framework and how learning occurred in cohorts and how it facilitated higher-order thinking (Leshem, 2007; Reynolds, 1997; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Communal learning provides a rich context for learning. For example, Scribner and Donaldson's (2001) data suggest "group climate influenced the types of learning that took place by laying the foundation for the nature of group performance" (p. 617). Evidence also points to the importance of active

involvement in the learning process, teamwork, integration of learning experiences, and holistic approaches.

Additionally, much of the research find value in group cohesiveness in cohort education models as an important factor in learning and academic success. Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt (1999), in accord with similar findings, suggest that groups with greater cohesiveness tend to have stronger and more inclusive academic and social networks that lead to increased group performance. Still other researchers examine whether group dynamics in cohorts can foster or impede learning (Basom & Yerkes, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Groups become cohesive when participants reflect on their accumulating experience, evaluate their own learning and rely on others in the group for support. Cohesiveness also requires clarity and purpose (Barnett et al., 2000; Basom et al., 1996). Evidence of the importance of group collaboration, community, and affiliation reveal that additional benefits increased collegiality, bonding, community, support, cooperation, sense of belonging, and the desire to be connected and supportive of each other's learning (Barnett et al., 2000; Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Harris, 2006). In fact, Nesbit (2001) comments that students in his program found "the greatest asset in each other" (p. 10). Creation of community within cohort settings is a significant factor in obtaining a degree.

Cohorts are not without their drawbacks. The literature reports a proclivity toward cases of groupthink, clique development, and power issues (Barnett et al., 2000; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Cohorts are plagued by challenges such as an unresponsive administration, a demanding, overpowering student group, and a "watering

down of the curriculum” (Barnett et al., 2000, p. 260). For example, a cohort group begins to resemble a dysfunctional family according to Scribner and Donaldson (2001) if allowed too much power or not enough attention. A student who does not fit in with the group feels marginalized and pushed out. In addition, a professor may feel like an outsider and overpowered by a strong cohesive group. To make matter more complicated in terms of assessment, often the concerns arising in evaluations from one semester will be entirely different the next semester because of the composition of the group and/or changes in the program structure (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Saltiel & Russo, 2001).

Group Learning and Cohorts

The purpose of the study was to explore how diversity, as manifested by the divergent backgrounds of fellow cohort members, informs the learning experience in cohorts. I sought to understand the nature of being a member of a diverse cohort. Therefore, it is important to address the learning that occurs in group settings. Groups are defined as “interdependent individuals who influence each other through social interactions” (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p. 3). Learning in groups has long been a relevant part of the educational process. Rooted in the traditions of humanistic adult education, group dynamics, and group processes, group instructional learning produced goals, purpose, and practice for reaching the needs of adult learners in higher education (Basom & Yerkes, 2001; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Group learning is a popular way among adult educators to foster growth, collaboration, cooperation, and community.

The history of group learning in adult education goes back to Lindeman and Dewey. Both championed the use of groups as valuable tools in adult education. In fact, Lindeman (1926) viewed group work as a method to guarantee learning and instill democratic ideals. In the 1960s and 1970s, the use of learning groups in humanistic psychological movements was at a height in the progressive movement (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Knowles (1970) studied groups that exhibited cohesiveness and found that when classroom instruction exhibited a student-centered and problem-focused pedagogy, academic learning was greatly enhanced. Still at the beginning of the 21st century, Basom & Yerkes (2001) stated “theories of adult learning and development served as the foundation for the creation of learning communities in educational programs” (p.5). The overarching theme or purpose of group learning remains to affect growth (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Basom & Yerkes, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). In this section, I review the literature regarding group usage in adult learning in higher education. These bodies of literature included group dynamics, group development, and the cohort learning model, a specific type of group learning readily used in adult educational programs. Learning in regards to groups exhibited assumptions and characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, and unique findings and implications.

Group dynamics. Group dynamics includes group climate, norms, roles, and communication that may foster or impede learning (Bales, 1970; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Group climate refers to the way groups deal with primary and secondary tensions (Bales, 1970). When groups come together, they encounter primary tensions as they get to know each other and develop and assume productive

work. Secondary tensions speak to issues that play out in the group such as personalities, values, beliefs and the conflicts that arise as groups learn to perform together. Norms are created through “group processing strategies becoming a fixture in the way the group operates” (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p. 7). The longer groups are together, the more social control they exert. Roles are “sets of perceptions and expectations shared by members about behavior of an individual in both the task and social dimensions of group interaction” (Bormann, 1990, p. 161). Roles are ever evolving and changing as the group develops over time. Finally, communication in group dynamics refers to the matter in which the group deals with the spoken and the unspoken, the verbal and the non-verbal, the explicit and the implied messages that are expressed and exchanged relating to information, ideas, and feelings (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Much of the group dynamics literature characterizes groups as being defined by dynamic interaction and interdependence. First, dynamic interaction is influenced by the individual members, the size of the group, and the frequency of the encounters. Second, both individual and group development affects the interdependence that characterizes group dynamics. Interdependence is “the degree of interaction (i.e., cohesiveness) and purposeful commitment displayed” (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p.4). For example, ropes activities or trust-building exercises are valuable ways to encourage group dynamics early in the development of a group. Group members interact and collaborate together. This interaction and collaboration leads to interdependence by “supporting each other, pooling resources, combining efforts, and developing friendship bonds, rules and rituals” (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p.4). According to Nesbit (2001), the success of learning in

group rests with dedication and realization of the individuals involved. “Everyone works collaboratively and collectively on improving their own and others’ learning experiences” (Nesbit, 2001, p.3).

Adult education instruction readily employs group discussion, group projects, committees, teams, and peer review groups as increasingly popular instructional techniques to engage groups in formal and informal settings. Group work in higher education has been thought of as discussion activities such as sitting in circle, sharing ideas and concerns, and brainstorming solutions. Of course, these instructional strategies can be seen as a negative or a positive depending on the individual preferences, the perception of the activity, and the quality of facilitation by the instructor. Since group dynamics can foster and hinder group learning and development, it is important to look at the strengths and weaknesses in group dynamics and learning.

Much of the literature on group usage spoke to the positive and negative nature of group outcomes in adult learning and findings about the dynamics. Literature on group dynamics, along with empirical studies, suggest that group climate sets the stage for the group’s performance and the learning that will take place (Bales, 1970; Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Nesbit, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Climate is positive when group members come to know each other and work together well. However, there are also constraints from conflicts that may be rooted in differences such as gender, age, and other sociocultural factors as well as values, beliefs, and experiences. Students can quickly feel marginalized as a result of these differences. In the literature on group norms, it is generally the case that the

primary norm was to ensure that all members successfully completed their goal (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes & Norris, 2000; Barnett & Muse, 1993; Nesbit, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994).

In cohorts, the all-consuming goal of successful completion was sometimes at a cost of deeper learning such as more critical thinking in the learning process. Another negative was that many times one person's ideas can dominate the discussion, projects and direction of the class as people jockey for position and status in the group. Also in the literature, roles within the group roles had implications in the type of learning that occurred. Assigned roles are sometimes based on preconceived notion of each person's strengths. This assignment may limit one's breadth of experiences and exposure to learning opportunities (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Finally, findings regarding communication in group dynamics have mixed reviews in the literature. It seems that the greater the ability to communicate and problem-solve constructively, the more effective is the quality of learning (Barnett et al., 2000; Barnett & Muse, 1993; Nesbit, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994). Generally, these groups have stronger networks of relationships and valued open lines of communication among members. However, there were certain aspects of group dynamics that hampered communication and limited learning such as internal conflicts, group desire for consensus, and the groups' perceived goals (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Nesbit, 2001; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

The review of the literature on group dynamics leads to important practical implications and areas for further investigation. Barnett and Caffarella (1992) suggest a

group interview in which students are allowed to share their values, beliefs and expectations for joining the group when considering grouping members together. Building group dynamics and group development into the curriculum early in the group meetings are key according to Nesbit (2001) and Norris and Barnett (1994). The focus on the group means that members sustain motivation and interest in the program just by being a member of the group (Cranton, 2003). Groups offer support for their membership in both social and emotional needs such as “relieving stress, anxiety and promoting self-esteem” (p. 168). In sum, many researchers recommend that group members discuss and address group dynamics and development and the skills required in group work to fully engage the objectives of the program and the educational materials of the courses (Cranton, 2003; Nesbit, 2001; Scribner and Donaldson, 2001).

Group development. Group development is defined as patterns of change and continuity in groups over time (Barnett et al., 2000; Norris & Barnett, 1994). Group interaction and collaboration are necessary for group and individual development. According to Norris and Barnett (1994), groups are based on three primary and interconnected cornerstones: interaction, purpose, and interdependence. As the group grows stronger so does the individual. Interactions affect collegiality. Interaction and collaboration are needed for individual development and group development. The group develops as it takes on certain characteristics and identities in becoming cohesive. Cohesiveness is defined by the members’ “attendance, arrival time, participation, satisfaction, and goal attainment” (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p.5). Purpose is based on collaboration. Interaction and cohesiveness as well as purpose and collaboration result in

group interdependence (Norris & Barnett, 1994; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Interdependence is arrived at in the structures created in programming and the curriculum objectives such as group activities, projects, and in-depth discussions in and out the classroom. Norris and Barnett (1994) found that groups perceive growth and bonding in group cohesiveness in that their efforts lead directly to a purposeful goal.

Group development and learning have very similar strengths and weaknesses as the literature in group dynamics suggested. Purposefully organized learning activities such as those discussed above in the section on group dynamics foster group development as well. For example, Barnett and Muse (1993) found that adult learning in groups was positively affected by affiliation, mutual learning, collective decision-making, and supportive peers and faculty. Strong relationships and affiliation are powerful motivators of individual and group development. Collaboration and cohesiveness characterize strong group development (Imel, 2002; Norris & Barnett, 1994). Imel (2002) found that groups function best when a balance is created between the development of the group and the development of the individual.

However, group development and learning are not without limitations. Some factors, characteristics, and behaviors that occur in groups are detrimental to the group as a whole and limit learning such as both passive and dominant members, changes in membership, lack of commitment by members, inability to meet member expectations, and lack of multiple methods to address varied learning styles (Cranton, 2003; Imel, 2002; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Although there have been current studies on how goals, purposes, and practices in higher education are changing to

meet adult learners' needs, there remains little research on the changes on adults learners in groups specific to their development (Harris, 2006; Imel, 2002; Leshem, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Steele et al., 2006).

To illustrate the specific type of group learning discussion in the previous section, the cohort education model, it is important to discuss Norris and Barnett's (1994) individual and group development model of cohort education. The premise of this model is that group development is a context for creating and enhancing individual growth. In this model, individual learning is greatly enhanced through the group experience of cohorts. In Figure 1, below, the triangle represents the cohort as a total group. The group is based on three cornerstones described above and represented at the points of the triangle. These cornerstones are: interaction, which results in cohesiveness among the cohort members; purpose, which results in collaboration; and interdependence, which represents the totality of the group's reality. This model is cyclic and reciprocal. As the group affects and empowers the individual, the individual reciprocates the process.

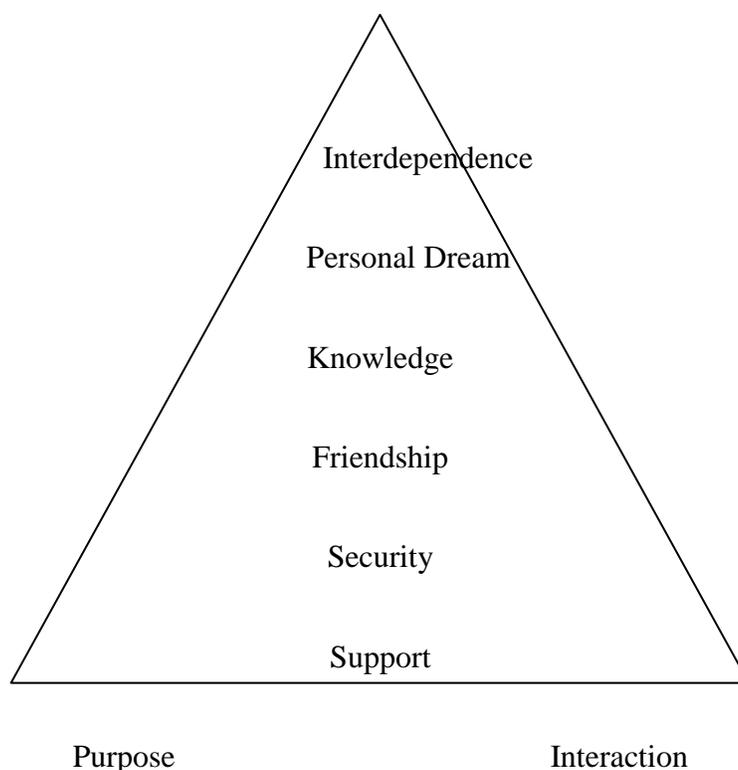


Figure 1. Individual and group development: A cohort model (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p. 34)

Group usage in all types of adult education continues to be a guiding principle of adult education. As a form of group learning, cohorts have become an ever-increasingly option for “administrators, educators and participants alike” (Imel, 2002, p. 3). These groups of students who take courses together are more than an administrative structure. They have become powerful learning units that foster learning and development. Of primary importance to this study, Norris and Barnett (1994) found that group work built tolerance, appreciation, and awareness of diversity and new ideas and opinions while developing the members as a group. Therefore, it is important to look at culturally diverse cohort programming in adult education based on the premise that social and cultural contexts affect group development and learning.

Culturally Diverse Cohorts

Cohort education in conjunction with opportunities for interaction and learning across diverse groups of students engages diversity that creates an intensive group learning context. Contextual effects, as Denson and Chang (2009) found, affected student engagement with diversity causing significantly positive educational experiences.

“Student frequency of engagement in diversity through curricular activities is associated with positive ratings of his or her own self-efficacy, academic skills, and self-change in his or her capacity to engage with racial-cultural differences” (p. 343). Contextual effects of diversity in the cohort environment where students are more engaged with diverse ideas, information, and people had significant positive educational effects. Therefore, research is needed to uncover the rich findings regarding educational context through diversity in cohorts that support student learning and development.

Definitions and Assumptions of Culturally Diverse Cohorts

Culturally diverse cohorts are groups of students completing a program of study together and completing a series of common learning experiences but also consist of any combination of individuals’ traits and differences in culture, ethnicity, language, nationality, and race in addition to age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and socioeconomic status (Alfred, 2002; Barnett & Muse, 1993; Nesbit, 2001; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). The assumptions are that cohorts embrace a common purpose, they encourage social interaction allowing for individual and group development, and they cultivate powerful learning experiences. However, within even the most successful cohort

models, issues of exclusion, marginalization, power struggles, and group think may transpire.

Much of the literature on culturally diverse cohorts comes from the cognitive developmental and psychological perspectives focusing on the individual learners' growth and development in the classroom. These culturally neutral perspectives overlook differential effects from participation by diverse groups. The interplay or intersection of individuals and groups such as cohorts with diverse ideas, information, and perspectives requires additional exploration. Culturally diverse cohorts can be seen as elements of institutional culture containing the values of the university. Therefore, these cohorts, many times, serve the needs of the dominant culture jeopardizing the experience of those students on the margins. For example, Basom et al., (1996) pointed out that much literature on cohorts is devoid of the voices of individual cohort members. Most studies lack examinations of the differences and the richness of diversity. Although Basom et al., (1996) suggested a great need for studies on the complexity of the diverse cohort, there still remains a gap in the literature fifteen years later. Culturally diverse cohorts necessitate thorough investigation.

Discourse of Culturally Diverse Cohorts

There exists a body of literature on culturally diverse cohorts as a subset of cohort education models. The majority of the literature addressed the role of the institution and the functionality of the model itself. Three themes are consistent in the literature as it relates to creating and maintaining culturally diverse cohort models. First, studies address the role of the institution in recruiting and retaining culturally diverse students and

maintaining a climate for diversity. Second, a number of studies explore the faculty involvement in creating and maintaining culturally diverse cohorts. Finally, many studies address outcomes of culturally diverse cohorts both at the institutional level and at the individual level. Based on the discussions and findings of these themes, there exists some serious gaps in the literature as it relates to the individual voice and perception and the educational experience within culturally diverse cohorts.

Success in culturally diverse cohorts rests with the institution and its commitment to the cause. Much of the cohort literature focuses on the need for educational institutions to address ways of recruiting and retaining culturally diverse students. The literature concentrating on culturally diverse cohort models supports the finding that cohorts could be vital and productive vehicles to recruiting diverse students because of the unique nature of the cohort model (Cunningham, 1996; Nesbit, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Steele et al., 2006). For example, Cunningham (1996) found that by increasing diversity as recruitment goal in a graduate program, Northern Illinois University's cohort in Adult Education increased its minority student participation pre-cohort from "only 16%, while minority students represented 64% at the height of cohort participation" (p. 6). Recruitment, however, was not enough according to the findings. As universities accept more and more non-traditional minority students and open additional off-campus locations, they must be more respectful of what culturally diverse adult students require for success. Nesbit (2001) stated,

Whether by modifying programs and course requirements, maintaining flexible administrative structures and instructional modes, or by choosing

delivery times and places that are convenient for learners' needs, cohort programs can ensure that learners' overall educational experience responds as much as possible to their goals and interests. The goal here is to provide a process that is as inclusive as possible for adults with diverse backgrounds and abilities. The approach focuses more on the needs and interests of the adult student rather than solely on those of the institution.

(p. 14)

Future research should connect the institution to the teacher and the students. Much of the current research reflects institutional practices that result in a devaluing of the diverse adult student (Cunningham, 1996; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Valenciana et al. (2006) highlighted the need to seriously critique the transformation of "fundamental inequities within institutional structures that obstruct equal educational opportunities and hinder the recruitment" (p. 96). Adults are frequently separated from traditional students in evening classes taught by adjunct faculty, and some faculty still consider the adult to be a burden to the institution. Institutional culture influences practices that are not friendly to the culturally diverse student. Some research suggests that the institution must embrace programs and policies that not only attract and retain culturally diverse students but also incorporate inclusion and preservation of cultural heritage and dedication to diverse communities for greater success in building culturally diverse cohorts (Bynoe, 1997; Hall & Closson, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). For example, Scribner and Donaldson (2001) advocate that cohort programs should incorporate group dynamics literature early in the

curriculum, and instructors should periodically provide time to debrief on issues related to cohort development throughout the program. Likewise, literature on diversity training, racial consciousness, and roles of culture in the classroom should be introduced and be omnipresent in the curriculum.

Creating conditions such as perspective broadening and an open climate to nurture the culturally diverse cohort are common findings in the literature. For instance, Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2002) suggest that institutions are responsible for creating the “climate conducive to the potential rewards of diversity” (p. 21). Therefore, culturally diverse cohorts must also create a welcoming climate for diversity. Yet, only superficial suggestions were made. No studies directly research pre-conditions to fostering the culturally diverse cohort, climate, classroom or mission. Yorks and Kasl (2002) point out that there is scant guidance for adult educators as they search to create these conditions. Much of the literature sets up general statements or vague recommendations involving diverse cohorts. The question remains how to create institutions, classrooms and cohorts that embrace cultural diversity in a successful and measurable way.

The second theme in literature on culturally diverse cohorts is faculty involvement, not only in institution diversity practices and policies involving recruiting and retaining, but also in curricular and interaction diversity. The faculty play a significant role in community building in the cohort and prove to be active players in the recruiting and retaining of students (Cunningham, 1996; St. John, 2000; Steele et al., 2006). In particular, minority faculty must play a visible and committed role in recruiting minority students as Bynoe (1997) and Cunningham (1996) suggest. As minority faculty

help recruit a great number of minority students, a critical mass of minority students serves as another important ingredient of a successful cohort. Evidence shows that “cohort models helped them (students) to establish connections with others like themselves and created a strong sense of community” (Valenciana et al., 2006, p. 91). Most of the studies found the need to create a safe space in the classroom for inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives through dialogue, discussion, and group work. Yet Callery (2008) asked how faculty can create such a classroom environment of safety. The vague, yet telling, response depends on the ability of the faculty member to engage and nurture discussion and the students’ ability to understanding other student’s perspectives through critical thinking. Cohort values are affirmed through inquiry, reflection, and analysis. Therefore, educators are powerful influences on diverse students (Canniff, 2003; Hall & Closson, 2005). As research suggested, faculty are responsible for setting the tone in the classroom for diversity by creating an inclusive culture open to opportunities for students and faculty to interact and understand each other’s unique sociocultural factors (Bynoe, 2007; Hall & Closson, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). It is the educator who either embraces or neglects the multicultural landscapes in the curriculum and classroom. Because there has been much research dedicated to the faculty of culturally diverse cohort, this study does not address faculty directly.

Student perceptions of diversity, cultural awareness and appreciation are needed in future research to address the individual student voice in culturally diverse cohorts. Literature on cohorts tends to be wanting of individual voices, let alone marginalized

voices. The individual member or voice is lost when addressing the functionality of cohorts. The challenge in the cohort education model exists in the model itself. Many times, the individual is sacrificed for the good of the group. If researchers can get at cultural ways of understanding learning, experiences and interactions, they can get to marginalized voices. Cunningham (1996) suggests that professors and students can serve as “space makers fostering a counter discourse to the dominant one” (p. 8).

Although some studies on culturally diverse cohorts provide examination into the issues of diversity, other studies directly relating to culturally diverse cohorts possess significant problems in how they represent the individuals in the cohorts. For example, Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2002) conducted a comprehensive quantitative study of 1,293 people from two graduating cohorts in attempts to gauge student education experience and their skill development through cultural diverse interaction; yet, the respondents were 94.2 percent Caucasian. Ironically, Canniff (2003) looked at cohorts as vehicles of supporting culturally responsive pedagogy. Yet, she does not even identify the race and cultural make-up of her seven participants. Furthermore, Potthoff et al. (2001) studied 49 participants in three cohorts who were 98 percent Caucasian as they discussed the needs of training and supports of faculty in diverse classroom population. Yet, this university setting consisted of an only 4 percent ethnic minority student body. In all three cases, diversity was present in the titles of the studies which is a bit misleading. Therefore, it is quite apparent there is still much room for examinations of perceptions in culturally diverse cohorts.

A final theme in much of the literature of culturally diverse cohort is measuring outcomes. Learning outcomes and process outcomes are of significant importance in fully understanding culturally diverse cohorts, but extremely difficult to measure (Nesbit, 2001; Potthoff et al., 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). As in the general cohort literature, there is no conclusive evidence that learning outcomes are enhanced through culturally diverse cohort education because there is a lack of significant research. Findings in many studies do not address learning outcomes in a measurable way and only indirectly discuss learning outcomes for diverse cohorts. Because most of the studies focused on university diversification of enrollment and its effects in terms of costs and benefits, perspectives, and the ambiguity of the structure, study after study suggested the need for further research on learning outcomes (Callery, 2008; Canniff, 2003; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Hall & Closson, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002). Hall and Closson (2005) discovered the need for “course content, diverse knowledge promotion, understanding of race relations and development of positive racial identity among all students” (p15). For example, Callery (2008) only goes as far as to advocate for culturally relevant course content for student learning success even after her literature review found no evidence of research about “students’ journey to becoming strong critical thinkers” (p. 71). Alternately, Blue (2000) found the need for an “environment for intelligence development, knowledge construction, and self-reflection that is open, dialogic, and culturally relevant” (p. 21). However, in line with much of the literature, Canniff (2003) discussed the difficulty in defining “what it means to be successful for their students” (p. 20) and questioned ways to measure outcomes in standards and accountability measures.

Furthermore, there was a big difference between learning and performance as Scribner and Donaldson (2001) found regarding instructional implications that involved the “importance of formative evaluation of cultural diverse cohort group to get to the problems that are limiting the potential of the learning experience” (p. 632). In the final section of this literature review, I discuss the research on learning in culturally diverse cohorts through culturally relevant practices, cultural awareness, and intergroup dialogue.

Broadening Perspectives and Engaging Interactions in Diverse Cohorts

Diversity in adult education through culturally diverse cohort influences student learning. How institutions incorporate appreciation, importance and necessity for diverse groupings of adult students varies in practice. It is one thing to put diverse populations of students together in cohort units; it is quite another thing to use a cohort as a platform of culturally relevant practices throughout the educational experiences. This area is where cultural awareness and intergroup dialogue coupled with the building blocks of learning in diverse groups and culturally relevant education and practices come together in culturally diverse cohort settings.

Culturally Relevant Learning

In addition to an understanding of what happens in group learning and how cohort learning seeks to understand the power of the group dynamics and development, it is also important to look at the individual learning in a diverse setting such as a cohort. Cohorts potentially have the power to create a culture of support and collaboration. Much has been written both conceptually and empirically on the topic of culturally relevant education or the subtopics of culturally relevant learning, culturally relevant pedagogy,

culturally relevant practice, and culturally relevant curriculum. Culturally relevant adult education is an educational approach that attempts to “incorporate learners’ cultural practices and values in the teaching-learning process” (Guy, 1999, p. 180).

Culturally relevant learning and practice is based on the humanist tradition of helping students participate to the fullest extent in their own education by integrating student experiences into the learning. Culturally relevant education “considers the cultural, racial, ethnic, social, class, linguistic, and religious backgrounds of students in planning inclusive, anti-oppressive, and relevant curriculum and instruction” (Davis, Ramahlo, Beyerbach, & London, 2008, p. 224). For example, Sealy-Ruiz (2007) found that using a curriculum that integrated African American adult women’s lives into the course reading content connected adult student experience in life with the classroom expectations. The learning centered on “cultural ways of knowing” (p. 45). Furthermore, by looking at their own individual experiences and comparing those experiences with other members in the class, they created a shared culture. Culturally relevant learning uses the experiences of the learners to foster greater learning by “refraining and reconceptualizing how these experiences are viewed” (Sheared, 1996, p.14).

Culturally relevant education rests on several assumptions about learning. Adults bring a variety of experiences and their own culture into the classroom. In turn, culture shapes adults’ lives (Guy 1999; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007; Sheared, 1996). One of these assumptions is that “humans are social beings and culture provides a basis to explain how groups make sense of shared values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors” (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007, p. 47). The “sociocultural environment affects participation, the quality of the learning to

the extent the classroom materials do not relate to the learners' life experiences, these materials become irrelevant and ineffective in facilitating learning" (Guy, 1999, pp. 15-16). Monzo and Rueda (2001) also look at how the sociocultural theoretical stance interconnects with culturally relevant education and conclude that "interactions and relations fostered through these contexts play a vital role in student achievement" (p. 1).

Culturally relevant activities in the classroom use members' lived experiences for creating meaning, which develops in writing assignments, group projects, and discussions. By allowing for a complexity of interactions among all in the group, a context is created that depends on the knowledge of students' cultural and community experiences and modes of interaction. Rich dialogue serves as a cultural connection to build knowledge about self and community. "In the dialogical process, teacher and students share in the production of knowledge, as the circles of their individual exploration intersect and overlap through the implementation of pedagogical strategies" (Davis & Neminoff, 1992, p. 25). This process is the true essence of culturally relevant practice. The culturally relevant approach seeks to integrate students' experiences into the learning to encourage and enhance meaning-making (Guy, 1999; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

In the area of culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings' (2006) work explores components that described academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness as main ingredients in learning. Culturally relevant teachers think deeply about what and how they teach. Focusing on the development of long-term academic goals, educators use students' cultures, lifestyles and culturally relevant examples to make curriculum pertinent. By recognizing cultural beliefs and practices,

students are empowered to navigate their lives in and out of the classroom. Greater diversity can maximize community. Practitioners who work with a diverse population in educational institutions increasingly find themselves in situations that require them to engage effectively in cross-cultural exchanges between themselves and their students (Davis et al., 2008; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Culturally relevant learning has been praised for the active involvement of learners, integration of learners' experiences, collaboration among students, and holistic view of learning. In fact, Guy (1999) found that culturally relevant curriculum fostered group identity by focusing on the sociocultural contexts in which learners engage. This engagement takes into account the learner's motivations, needs, perspectives, and goals. According to Davis et al. (2008), "the dialogical strategy (of culturally relevant education) affords a classroom climate where all voices are valued and participants feel accepted and included" (p. 227). The greatest strength of learning is that the culture of the student is placed in the center rather than on the margins of the curriculum, the classroom focus, and all activities.

However, the major gap in the literature of culturally relevant education mirrors findings and critiques found in the general and culturally diverse cohort literature. Research on how to create institutions, classrooms, and cohorts that employ culturally relevant practices and learning outcomes in a successful and measurable way is greatly needed. In addition, the difficulty rests in how effectively to harness the power of these diverse experiences in the practice of adult education, especially in the cohort or group setting (Canniff, 2003; Guy 1999).

The empirical findings in the culturally relevant education literature can be grouped into themes related to the nature of learning and educational practice. First, a number of sociocultural factors affect social relationships. Familiarity with cultures contributes to stronger interactions through open appreciation of cultural differences and helps students utilize their resources in negotiating varied contexts (Blue, 2000; Monzo & Rueda, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007). Second, groups who share knowledge and out of school or classroom activities create learning relationships that extend beyond academia. In addition, programs that recognize and address the constraints of the university, the community, and the program allow students and educators to structure activities that support student learning and social needs (Blue, 2000; Monzo & Rueda, 2001). These programs can recognize and integrate all the roles that individuals play and how they impact interactions, relationship, and the learning environment. Students' lived experiences when shaped by sociocultural factors make learning more effective. Finally, by sharing these experiences, students find reciprocity in the whole educational process.

Just as motivational factors serve as a catalyst for adults returning to the higher education experience, it is the curriculum that is the catalyst to the success of that teaching and learning exchange. The power of community in a cohort, coupled with the practice of culturally relevant practices, can enhance learning in adult educational experiences through the lived experience of learners, which are grounded in race, class, gender, and other sociocultural factors. This shifting of paradigm thinking to improve academic performance and enhance community in the educational context of adult cohort

models can serve as a powerful vehicle to incorporation of learners' cultural practices, interactions, and values in the teaching-learning process. This blending of the micro social level of educational practice in cohorts to the broader sociocultural and societal issues of power and cultural differences in society could bring to the forefront an analysis of the individual experience and a comparison to others' experiences in this shared community. Adult education stresses the lived experience of the learner in the learning process. This inclusive context fosters learning through empowerment because all voices are heard and creates a richer understanding of diversity and sociocultural factors. Culturally relevant pedagogy involving the sociocultural environment and context, communicative processes, instructional practices, classroom norms and expectations, learning evaluation criteria and instructional content address the multiple cultural needs and the lived experience of learners (Guy, 1999; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

According to Blue (2000), providing an environment for "intellectual development, knowledge construction and self-reflection that is open, dialogic, and most of all culturally relevant" is of critical importance (p .44). When educational contexts afford diverse students opportunities to utilize resources they bring to the educational environment, 'culture' is validated and appreciated as significant in learning. This idea is not new, but putting it into practice is the difficult part (Monzo & Rueda, 2001). In educational contexts, it is not enough to acknowledge cultural difference through celebration, food, and dance. These superficial practices have little impact on student learning. The impact rests in the inclusive practices in groups that are rich and extensive

sets of resources that interrogate and create learning through dialogue and cultural awareness in new contexts (Ross-Gordon, 1990; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Cultural awareness through intergroup dialogue demonstrates diversity in functional and cultural ways. Functionally, there is an extensive body of literature, as outlined in the previous section, in terms of structural, co-curricular, and interactional diversity. The broad definition in the cultural diversity literature defines cultural awareness as “greater interaction with diverse people, interactions, and ideas that helped students develop greater understanding and appreciation of the perspectives of groups other than their own” (Milem, 2003, p. 139). Within this broad scope of cultural diversity, groups have distinct and subjective “cultural value systems, norms of behavior, modes of interaction, socialization, practices, and linguistic patterns” (Cushner & Triforovitch, 1989, p. 318). In relation to culturally diverse cohorts, the focus of cultural awareness exemplifies student openness to diversity because the assumption is that cohort members have increasing contact with members from differing cultural backgrounds, attitudes, hopes and dreams, and ways of doing things that differ significantly from their own (Cushner & Triforovitch, 1989; Milem, 2003).

Some of the findings in the literature on culturally diverse cohorts address cultural awareness (Blue, 2000; Callery, 2008; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Potthoff et al., 2001; Valenciana et al., 2006). This body of literature provides evidence that cohort models evoke openness to ideas and perspectives. Potthoff et al. (2001) find that the culturally diverse cohorts, by nature, exhibit interactive and open environments that allow members to explore their own and others’ personal lives encouraging personal growth

and honest sharing. Consensus from a wide array of studies suggest that cohorts sponsor active engagement of members in diverse interactions growing members' cultural experiences with differing ideas, information, and people (Blue, 2000; Callery, 2008; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Potthoff et al., 2001; Valenciana et al., 2006). Some studies have connected cultural awareness to student satisfaction, achievement, and the effects of diversity (Drago-Severson, 2001; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Potthoff et al., 2001). For example, Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2002) explore diversity and its effect on cohort members' educational experiences and skill development. Their findings suggest that participation in culturally diverse cohorts can provide an environment that enhances cultural awareness and satisfaction. Collectively, these findings suggest increasing student diversity, interracial interaction, achievement, and satisfaction. However, there is much room for more work in diverse cohorts experiencing and expressing awareness and appreciation of the effect of sociocultural diversity in their learning processes and practices. For instance, how do cohort members effectively develop awareness and appreciation of diversity? In what ways, do co-constructing and negotiating new understandings of the influence of cultural diversity on one's own belief system and worldview impact learning?

Current studies on cultural awareness in the classroom suggest some concurrent themes such as student openness to ideas and perspective. A few studies have explored student satisfaction and achievement as it relates to this cultural awareness. There is a subsection of cultural awareness and diversity known as intergroup dialogue. In the remainder of this section, I explore the definitions, assumptions, findings, limitations, and

need for further research on cultural awareness and appreciation through intergroup dialogue. One of the assumptions in this research position contends that dialogue evokes “greater awareness of others’ positions, values, and views that may lead to the creation of an opportunity for deeper levels of understanding, coexistence, and consensus building” (Dessel & Rogge, 2008, p. 217). The relevance to this study is the exploration of this openness and the implications of culturally diverse cohort elements on the interactions with people, ideas, and information. Working from the findings of Potthoff et al. (2001) of openness as a result of cohort members’ participation in activities such as dialogue, I contend that dialogue, especially intergroup dialogue, is one of the major vehicles to cultural awareness in culturally diverse cohort models.

Intergroup Dialogue

Intergroup dialogue as defined in the cohort literature is a “collaboratively structured form of group conversation characterized by participants’ willingness to listen for understanding” (Clark, 2005, p. 51). As described above, dialogue as a subset of cultural awareness serves as a cultural connection to build knowledge about self and community. The concept of dialogue and active expression comes from the traditions of Freire (Banks 2002; Freire, 1985; Gay 2000). Dialogue according to Freire (1985) involves the presence of critical thinking to question the “too-often held assumptions and tried and true practices” (p 19). In the broadest sense, according to Dessel and Rogge (2008), dialogue is a process of “human interaction and conflict resolution” (p. 200). Furthermore, Dessel, Rogge, and Garlington (2006) contend that intergroup dialogue addresses power, cultural differences, and controversial issues.

Intergroup dialogue is defined and situated by a set of given assumptions about learning and the process of education. The first and primary assumption is that intergroup dialogue fosters learning about the perspectives of others and the reflection on one's own views by highlighting similarities and differences among individuals and groups. It allows participants the ability to engage in mindful listening and speaking to examine varying perspectives, diverse ideas and biases. As an example, Dessel and Rogge (2008) suggest "promoting generous listening, reflection before speaking or acting and genuine thoughtful speaking" (p. 215). Another assumption of intergroup dialogue links critical learning practices of critical self-reflection, appreciation and awareness of cultural differences and alliance building (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Nagda, 2006). These assumptions of intergroup dialogue suggest that positive change occurs in behaviors and attitudes. Intergroup dialogue and cultural awareness requires the building of relationships.

Most of the intergroup dialogue literature and foundational work comes from social psychological models and perspectives, cognitive learning, and social identity theories. Another theoretical framework embedded in some of the diversity research focuses on construal of perceived differences, which addresses intergroup dialogue as an attitude change such as critical self-reflection (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Nagda, 2006). Therefore, theoretical and conceptual frameworks address different levels of the continuum of definitions and assumptions for intergroup dialogue. Much of the cognitive learning and social theories and perspectives address conflict and biases reduction and the promotion of relationship building. Intergroup dialogue is seen as a tool for groups to

examine group dynamics and identities, either within their own and other groups (Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Nagda & Zuniga, 2003). Also, embedded in these frameworks are discussions of power, privilege, and inequality and their effects on cultural groups. Intergroup dialogue serves as a way to explore intergroup differences. By fostering mutual learning in and among groups, a context is built for intergroup relations and outcomes of intergroup harmony, understanding, and collaboration among diverse students (Gurin et al., 2002; Nagda et al., 1999; Rozas, 2007). Rozas (2007) suggests that the purpose of intergroup dialogue is deemed to be improvement in intergroup relations by challenging and promotion student learning. Therefore, this position links and builds on the body of literature discussed above in the group dynamics and development literature. In addition, intergroup dialogue also fits nicely with sociocultural theory, although there is only a small body of literature engaging the interplay of intergroup dialogue and culturally diverse cohorts.

Dialogue can break down the isolation of sociocultural difference. Hence, learners experience the benefits of collective and collaborative inquiry in a manner that encourages them to move from disempowering individualistic accounts of the learning world as in traditional modes of learning to more viable and empowering ones in sociocultural theory (Davis & Neminoff, 1992; Thompson & Biffle, 2008). Many conceptual pieces look at cohorts and groups of students as vehicles in cultural or holistic ways of knowing/learning such as critical reflection, open dialogue, trusting, open climate and communication, and inclusive curricula (Basom et al., 1996; Berger, 2008; Bracken, 2008; Shaw, 1998; Steele, 2006; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). By limiting

conversations of diversity in the classroom, students' "lived racial realities" diminish the learning dynamic and stifle the classroom environment (Callery, 2008, p. 70). "In the dialogical process, teacher and students share in the production of knowledge, as the circles of their individual exploration intersect and overlap through the implementation of pedagogical strategies" (Davis and Neminoff, 1992, p. 25).

Dialogue is a powerful way of creating culturally relevant practice. According to Thompson and Biffle (2008), the use of dialogue in diversity is about time, trust, identity and learning environment. Dialogue can lead to a broader understanding of diversity and how that understanding can inform the cultural gaps in the educational system (Garcia, 2005). It is the contention of this research study that embedded in work in group development and diversity is sociocultural theory. Therefore, culturally diverse cohorts can achieve cultural awareness through intergroup dialogue. Primarily, dialogue can attain "greater awareness of others' positions, values and views," creating greater opportunities for understanding and appreciation for cultural differences (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Potthoff et al., 2001).

Current research pertinent to this study related to intergroup dialogue comes from the diversity literature. Others build from the group dynamics and development literature. There have been few select studies in the culturally diverse cohort literature. The three main themes involved the effects on the group or interpersonal aspects, the effects on the individual or intrapersonal aspects, and the broad array of outcomes in terms of student satisfaction and student achievement.

Interpersonal aspects include all the effects on the group as a result of intergroup dialogue. The findings around the effects on the group are many. Some studies confirm findings from cohort, group dynamics, and diversity literature that dialogue helps to build understanding of the commonalities and the differences among members of the group (Basom et al., 1996; Potthoff et al., 2001; Steele, 2006). For example, Potthoff et al. (2001) illustrates the power of the group in dialogue. A cohort member remarked that “one of the positive things was the dialogue...it’s open and for the most part it’s sincere and people are respected for their opinions and for their comments” (p. 3). Another student confirmed the power of the experience in fostering “collective pooling of ideas” as persons from different settings interact (p.3). From diversity literature, intergroup dialogue focuses on the “common dialogic communication processes” which promoted understanding, collaboration and the development of a shared identity (Gurin & Nagda, 2006, p. 22). Intergroup dialogue enables groups to explore similarities and differences in attitudes and issues in a safe and structured space (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Nagda, 2006). Members of groups collaborated as they spoke from past and current experiences while remaining open to new ideas and possibilities. Clark (2005) blends together the group dynamic and development literature and cohort literature with the diversity literature in regards to intergroup dialogue. Cohort dynamics of conflict and resistance evolved as the group cohesion increased. Conflict brought thoughtful and productive discussions, whereas resistance brought creative and constructive tension (Clark, 2005). Finally, Rozas (2007) concludes that the focus on group consists of the interpersonal relationships created, the appreciation and

understanding of difference and commonalities among members, and the actions produced beyond the group.

The second theme concerns the individual and the effect of interpersonal dialogue on the individual's worldview. Much of the diversity literature pertaining to intergroup dialogue suggests that the individual gains improved analytical skills, cultural awareness, and ability to think pluralistically in considering the perspectives of others through self-awareness, cultural awareness, and knowledge construction (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Nagda & Derr, 2004). Nagda et al. (2005) and Rozas (2007) find that intergroup dialogue fostered active thinking and knowledge construction about group-based differences, inequalities, and complexities. In sum, as Potthoff et al. (2001) find through their study of a diversity cohort that participants experience personal growth through dialogue and "an environment fostering open and honest sharing, even when the issues were tough or controversial" (p. 5).

The third and final theme in the literature on intergroup dialogue involves outcomes in student satisfaction, achievement and cognitive development. Gurin et al. (2002) conducted a large-scale quantitative study that found positive learning outcomes regarding diverse experiences with peers, perspectives, and discourse. These outcomes affect students' perceptions and how they engage in learning. All students' learning outcomes were affected positively by greater diversity experiences. Outcomes of dialogue participation suggest that openness to diverse people, ideas, and information, improved relationships within groups, and a sense of commonality of both dominant and marginalized groups increased student satisfaction, achievement, and cognitive

development (Gurin et al, 2002; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez,2004; Nagda, McCoy, & Barrett, 2006).

However, it was difficult to confirm dialogue's contribution to change in attitudes. The dialogue methodologies in studies regarding outcomes are extremely difficult to summarize because of the lack of clear description of the criteria around the dialogue or the participants. Many times, replicating studies to confirm the effectiveness is not possible (Dessel & Rogge, 2008).

Outcomes regarding learning present problematic features in the costly and time-consuming nature of studying them. Such studies are also met with resistance. However, understanding the effect and outcome of participation in intergroup dialogue environments presents multiple benefits. Some of the large quantitative studies on intergroup dialogue in the academic-based literature found important implications and effects but only based on ethnicity and race (Gurin et al., 1999, 2004). For example, Caucasian students in both studies increased openness to differences and commonalities in relations to other groups. For students of color, students improved scores on all learning outcomes measured. In fact, students of color expressed greater positive relationships with Caucasian students, perceptions of greater commonalities and more positive views of conflict. The qualitative data on the topic of outcomes in intergroup dialogue participation found positive results. Students reported improved openness to perspectives of people from other social groups, increased analytical problem-solving skills, expanded understanding of differing viewpoints, and raised awareness of social inequalities and membership identities (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Nagda et al.,

1999; Nagda & Zuniga, 2003). In addition, qualitative studies highlight outcomes and themes centering on the reduction in stereotyping, increased openness to the perspective of others, and cross-cultural relationships (Dessel, Rogge & Garlington, 2006; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Nagda, 2006).

The current body of literature on intergroup dialogue possesses limitations and needs for future research. The limitations rest in the question of how to assess intergroup dialogue. First, to understand the complexities of dialogic processes and practices, there remains a need for better research methods to measure variables, outcome measures, and program evaluation methods. Because of the very complexity of the subject, the current and past studies experienced difficulty separating effects of intergroup dialogue from other interventions meant to promote multicultural understanding, cultural awareness, and social change (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2005; Nagda & Zuniga, 2003; Nagda, 2006). As a body of literature, intergroup dialogue remains limited by issues of assessment and ineffective and inclusive evaluation.

There are challenges in identifying the components of interpersonal and intrapersonal results that may or may not foster change. Defining change in this regard varies greatly. Change, according to Dessel, Rogge, and Garlington (2006) equates with action, but defining action is extremely difficult. The most problematic of the themes is the claims of successful outcomes. Many studies lack information about response rates, employ the use of convenience sampling, and lack specificity and causality. Future research could benefit from greater understanding of the characteristics of dialogic processes and short-term and long-term outcomes in learning, behavior, relationships,

environments, and policy changes (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

Culturally diverse cohorts offer a space to interrogate the necessary components of dialogic processes and practices as it relates to outcomes. Pertinent to this study, multicultural intergroup dialogue can be seen as the method and variable to recognize the common goals and perspectives for how interpersonal or intrapersonal influences affect outcomes on learning and relationships (Nagda, 2006; Potthoff et al., 2001; Ross, 2000). This review is important to the topics of cohorts, diversity, and culturally diverse cohorts for a number of reasons. Throughout the review, unspoken assumptions, both positive and negative, have been addressed. Cohorts serve as context in which members are encouraged and challenged by one another to assess their own assumptions. This engagement affects the common learning endeavor and the academic and cognitive development of members (Drago-Severson, 2001; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002; Potthoff et al., 2001; Satiel and Russo, 2001). Interpersonal relationships with peers make a critical difference to academic and cognitive development and the ability to broaden members' perspectives.

Cohorts can be transforming and powerful learning communities whereby members share unique experiences and multiple learning approaches. Therefore, cohorts may also suffer from constraints and culturally neutral or devoid practices. Because discussions of diversity in the classroom can be confrontational, difficult, and emotional, members and educators sometimes choose to neglect the diversity among members and the diversity within curricula. Many of the themes and the critiques informed important

practical implications for administrators who develop, educators who teach, and participants who experience cohort programs. These discussions also identified serious gaps in the literature such as students' perspectives and attitudes. This study directly addresses these gaps particularly in the areas of student perceptions and educational experiences and strives to add to this body of knowledge. By employing a qualitative study to gather important descriptive data about the individual experiences, the programmatic influences, and group learning experiences of culturally awareness, and intergroup dialogue, the body of literature regarding culturally diverse cohorts will be greatly benefited.

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

This chapter on methodology begins with an introduction of the qualitative study, including a review of the purpose statement and the research questions. This chapter explores the definitions and assumptions, the benefits and strengths, and the controversies and limitations of qualitative methodology. The general overview includes a discussion of qualitative research from its various typologies to its comparisons to quantitative methodology. This chapter reflects a justification as to the appropriateness for such a study on diverse interactions and learning in cohort educational models. Important to discussions on qualitative research are the roles and background of the researcher which is central to the research process. In addition, examinations of the method and criteria for participant selection are discussed and followed by a brief introduction of all participants in the study. This chapter also addresses the explanations regarding data collection methods and includes the interview method, question development, and the interview process. Next, this chapter includes a full description of the data analysis and data verification strategies as it pertains to understanding and identifying the meaning of the data. In closing, I offer explanation of the ways in which the study fulfills the requirements set by the Pennsylvania State University Office of Research Protections and the participating university's Office of Human Subjects.

This qualitative study was designed to increase the understanding of how diversity among adult learners informs interactions and learning in the cohort setting. By examining these student perceptions, the researcher and readers gain an in-depth

understanding of learning in cohorts. This study employed a basic interpretive research design. The framework complements the research questions by providing a format of study designed to provide insight into the member perceptions of cohort learning and how they inform and are informed by diverse interactions.

Purpose of the Research Statement

The purpose of this research study was to explore how diversity, as manifested by the divergent backgrounds of fellow cohort members, informs the learning experience in cohorts. In essence, I sought to understand the nature of membership in diverse cohorts and its influence on learning.

Research Questions

1. How does the nature of being in a culturally diverse cohort inform learning and interaction? What is the relationship between diversity in cohort membership and learning in cohorts?
2. What elements of culturally diverse cohort learning environment impede and enhance learning?
3. How do culturally diverse cohort members perceive the context of learning?

Qualitative Research

This study utilized a qualitative research design which demonstrates how the purpose guides the methodology. Those who conduct research do so in a systematic approach to understanding a particular phenomenon in a context-specific setting or practice. A research paradigm such as qualitative research constitutes a particular way of thinking or understanding about the complexities in life. This worldview includes

the deeply embedded socialization of both the researchers and the readers of research (Patton, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Therefore, qualitative research offers a descriptive view of the rich and complex events and situations such as cohort learners' experiences and perceptions.

Qualitative research strives to increase knowledge and understanding of a complex and dynamic quality of the social world (Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 2002). Therefore, qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which these stories interrelate; and therefore, result in rich descriptions of people, places, conversations, and documentation. In addition, qualitative research may also be referred to as naturalistic approach, ethnographic, field, or participant observer research. In its broadest terms, qualitative research is defined as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17).

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in distinct and systemic ways. The underlying assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of the two methodologies are quite different. The fundamental differences between the quantitative and the qualitative research paradigms rest in the core assumptions of the ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, logic, generalizations, and causal linkages. Basically, each has a very different worldview stance. On ontology, quantitative researchers adopt a singular reality while qualitative researchers believe in multiple realities. On epistemology, there exists a distance and impartiality for the quantitative researcher, but there is an intimate relationship for the qualitative researcher. For the quantitative

researcher, axiology is unbiased and the methodology is deductive. For the qualitative researcher, axiology is biased and methodology is inductive.

The strengths of quantitative research include the testing and validating of already constructed theories and theory modifications. This testing is based on data collection of random samples of sufficient sizes which can be replicated on many populations and subpopulations. Testing also results in cause and effect relationships in which the researcher eliminates bias and confounding influences of variables. This type of data collection can be done relatively quickly and provides numerically precise data. The data analysis is less time consuming and results in independent findings. One weakness of quantitative research is that findings may be too general for direct application to certain contexts and individuals. As another weakness, findings may not explain or reflect specific understandings. At times, researchers overlook phenomena that may be occurring by focusing on the hypothesis testing rather than theory building. In sum, Patton (2002) contends that quantitative research is concerned with research which is based on the scientific methods utilizing inductive reasoning, large sample sizes, and random participant selection to arrive at generalizability of results.

However, qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known. This method can generate new perspectives on events or occurrences about which much is already known, or gather more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, qualitative analysis results in different types of knowledge than does quantitative inquiry as more of an individual phenomenological

perspective (Ridenour and Newman, 2008). Qualitative methods are employed in situations where the researcher needs to first identify variables that might later be tested quantitatively. In other instances, the employment of qualitative methods may be used to describe or interpret a situation that quantitative measures cannot adequately quantify.

The most common assumptions of qualitative research include the existence of multiple realities, which are equally valid and socially constructed (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002; Ridenour & Newman, 2008). Another assumption of qualitative research includes the “elaborate description of the ‘meaning’ of phenomena from a participant perspective” (Ridenour & Newman, 2008, p. 7). Hence, these rich and thick descriptions of the phenomena result from open-ended, extensive data collection in order to develop deep understandings of the context. This research is understood as value-bound since it is from a participant perspective. Therefore, logic flows from specific to general.

Qualitative research also assumes that the researcher is integral to the research process. In other words, the researcher is the primary instrument in the research study. Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the complexity of context and the meaning people make of their interactions and experiences through information gathering completed by the researcher. Since the researcher is such a central feature of the process, transparency of beliefs and assumptions of the study and its resulting data are profoundly influenced by the researcher. This is not to say that findings are inherently biased or too narrowly focused to such a small population, but instead if done correctly, findings build on a body of knowledge on a particular phenomenon. These assumptions arrive at the strengths and weaknesses of the qualitative method.

The strengths of qualitative research include the focus on participant's meaning, the depth of limited cases, and the rich descriptive nature of the phenomenon itself. Findings provide an understanding and description of people's personal experiences situated in contexts that identify factors that relate to the phenomenon of interest. The meaning people make of the interactions, learning, and community necessitates the use of qualitative methodology rather than a measure of central tendency as dictated by quantitative methodology since the researcher seeks to observe and interpret meaning in the context. People's meaning-making processes or worldviews are constantly changing, adapting and shifting. Another advantage of qualitative research is the depth of investigation with limited cases. The goal is to produce and understand more in-depth, comprehensive information to gain a complete picture of the phenomenon. This depth of information is used to describe the context of the variable under investigation, as well as considerations of other variables. A final strength of qualitative research rests in the rich descriptive nature of the phenomenon in context through holistic, detailed analysis. It is the rich and descriptive data regarding people, places, and conversations that help to produce multiple ways of interpreting experiences and their meanings. This rich and descriptive data allows others to view a situation from a holistic view. In qualitative research, generalizability is sacrificed for the depth of a limited case with very rich and descriptive data.

Qualitative research has limitations. Findings may not be generalized to other populations and settings. It is more difficult to test theories or modify them through quantitative predictions. Many times, there is lower credibility associated with qualitative

research. Because the researcher is an integral part of the investigation, the subjectivity of the inquiry presents difficulties in establishing reliability and validity of the approach and information. It may be very difficult to prevent and detect researcher-induced bias. The very nature of qualitative design requires the researcher to have personal contact with the people and the situation under investigation and results are more susceptible to the researcher's influence. Finally, since data collection and analysis takes a great deal more time, the scope of the study is limited due to the in-depth, comprehensive data gathering that the approach requires.

Types of Qualitative Research

The various types or models of qualitative research have the following in common: all possess an established goal, human instrument, and analysis component, as well as an inductive building of themes, categories, concepts, or theories (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Types of inquiry may include basic interpretive, heuristic inquiry, symbolic interaction, hermeneutics, narrative inquiry, systems theory, chaos theory, case study, critical research, postmodern research, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenological. Basic interpretative research seeks to understand "experiences, processes, perspectives, and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, pp. 6-7). Heuristic inquiry looks at a person's experience of the phenomenon and the essential experience of those who also experience the phenomenon intensely. The goal is to arrive at meaning of the experience. Symbolic interaction gauges a common set of symbols and understandings that emerge to give meaning to people's interactions. Hermeneutics look at the conditions under which a

human act takes place or a product is produced that makes it possible to interpret its meaning. Narrative inquiry looks at what a story reveals about the person and world from which it comes. A narrative can be interpreted, understood, and clarified in the life and culture it was created. Systems theory examines the system as a whole function. Chaos theory or nonlinear dynamics examines what is the underlying order of a disorderly phenomenon. Case studies are detailed investigation of individual, groups, institutions, or their social units. The researcher attempts to analyze the variable relevant to the subject under study. Finally, there are orientational traditions which include, but are not limited to, feminist inquiry, critical theory, cultural studies, and queer theory. All types of orientation variation maintain that all research is informed by some theoretical understanding of human and social behavior (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2002). Researchers attempt to examine how the unique perspectives manifest itself in the phenomenon. For instance, race and ethnicity can be another defining lens or orientation for qualitative inquiry.

Quite recently, Richard and Morse (2007) narrowed all of the above types into three broad categories of ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology. Each type asks different foundational questions. Ethnography drives at the experience and how it connects with and offers insights about culture, situation, events, or ways of life. Grounded theory looks at theory that emerges from the systematic comparative analysis that is grounded in fieldwork to explain what is observed. Grounded theory is concerned with the outcome of the research. A researcher using grounded theory focuses on the generation of theory or building theory rather than theory-testing or sheer description.

Phenomenology seeks to find the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. There should be no preconceived notions, expectations, or frameworks guiding the researcher. In sum, qualitative research is not a single, uniform approach but a set of multiple sources of qualitative inquiry based on varying tradition of thought. Qualitative inquiry is seen as a unique process of discovery to identify themes and patterns with an emphasis on the context and meaning. This study utilized a basic interpretive design because of the emphasis on understanding in-depth perceptions of the participants in the study.

Utilizing a Qualitative Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative methodology asks the researcher to carefully consider the purpose and the focus. The researcher must determine the ‘who, what, when and why’ of the phenomenon under investigation (Seidman, 2006). The researcher must consider the process from start to finish. How will the data be collected and recorded? How will the data be analyzed? What is feasible in term of the logistics of the data collection when it comes to scheduling and budgets? These guiding questions dictate the creation of a research method and design. The researcher compares the qualitative type of study to the overall goals and research questions of the study.

Another consideration in determining a research methodology is the theoretical framework for the study. The link between theory and the research process is the theoretical orientation of the research study. The theoretical framework is the lens that frames or shapes the research. The theoretical framework focuses the study and reveals understanding and meaning of the phenomenon. Important to this study is the meaning

people make of their world as a result of their interactions with the others in their environment or context (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Without context, there is “little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience” (Patton, 2002, p.17). By framing this study with sociocultural theory, I engage a meaning-making process regarding culturally diverse cohorts. Vygotsky (1978) contends, “Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (pp. 236-237). Viewing participants’ perception from a sociocultural perspective illustrates the value of interactions as they influence and are influenced by peoples’ beliefs and opinions. The influence of others changes how individuals perceive themselves.

Thoughtful decisions dictated this research study. To fully paint a picture of cohort life and the culturally mediated spaces in which culturally diverse cohort students engage in their environment, interactions, and experiences with one another, a basic interpretative design is most effective. Because interpretive research is concerned with ascertaining the participant’s perception of the phenomenon, the paradigm is culturally bound. My concern regards how people construct their knowledge both individually and collectively in cohorts. To examine the practices and the cultural contexts in which these experiences occur, implementing and developing a more holistic approach to research requires me to “engage and interrogate a variety of theoretical positions and to use multiple methods” to capture the complexities of cohorts, diversity and teacher-student and student-student interactions (Croninger & Valli, 2009, p. 534). In fact, contextual factors may shed light on resources, opportunities, constraints presented by the context (Greene, 2007). For example, the central argument is that cohorts represent a complex,

multifaceted phenomenon that is best suited to an in-depth interviewing protocol.

Therefore, this study focused on the rich and descriptive details of individual perspectives within the diverse cohort experience in hopes of illuminating the educational, cultural and personal factors that inform and are informed by learning and interactions. The rationale for this approach is that the qualitative data and subsequent analysis will provide a general understanding of the research problem such as the conditions, contexts, strategies, and consequences of being in a culturally diverse cohort.

In general, qualitative data examines experiences and perceptions. The data can be cross-case comparisons and analysis in some cases and in-depth individual descriptions in other cases. The latter is the case for this study. The data were collected in a naturalistic setting and interpreted inductively to explain the construct. This type of research was responsive to change through the exploration of the phenomenon. A phenomenon such as culturally diverse cohorts benefits from investigations of participant's perceptions of the learning processes and effects of diverse peer interactions. Because this research study asks for participant's perspective of diverse engagement with others in a particular context and its influence on learning, it is essential to know about the adult learners' experiences to understand if their beliefs changed, adapted or shifted in regards to their interactions with one another in the cohort. Therefore, it is necessary to forego the generalization to broader populations for the benefits of in-depth knowledge of individual perspectives.

Background of the Researcher

In this, as in any research study, there are particular considerations regarding the background of the researcher that must be acknowledged and addressed. From a qualitative basic interpretive perspective, the researcher identifies with a personal stance. For example, my presence and authority in the research environment is not neutral. In addition, the research design, although tested and with the best intentions, is not perfectly neutral or impartial. Finally, considerations of my own biases, interests, and identity cannot be overlooked.

One element of my background is my professional administrative career. I work daily in cohort programming development with administration and faculty. In addition, I work closely with cohort learners. Therefore, I have a great personal stake in the success of the cohort educational model. Every attempt will be made to select adult learners who have limited knowledge of my role with the university. However, my positionality also offers an interesting advantage. I am a member of a cohort; and therefore, can empathize and understand the student perspective. Additionally, my background as a forty year-old, Caucasian, middle-class, well-educated woman affords certain privileges. My experiences in higher education inform my role as a researcher in terms of perspective. Due to my race, age, class, and gender, culturally diverse student participants may have varied levels of comfort discussing their experiences.

My research experience to dates has been limited to past qualitative studies in my master's degree work, and projects and informal inquiries for my past and current professional employments. Theoretical sensitivity as coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985)

refers to the personal quality of the researcher in terms of skill and readiness. This personal quality indicates an awareness of the subtleties of the meaning and the nuances of data. In addition, a researcher's needed skills refer to the attributes of having "insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which is not" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 42). Although I am relatively new to the role of interviewer, I have conducted interviews in prior studies and informally in my current position. I am comfortable with various interviewing strategies such as active listening and questioning in effective in-depth interviewing. My familiarity with the topic of inquiry, cohorts, is an added benefit.

Participant Selection

Seidman (2006) recommends being thoughtful and purposeful when creating the sample pool. Keeping the purpose and goals of the study in the forefront, the researcher's mission is:

to present the experience of the people he or she interviews in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects (p.51).

The selection of participants was selected as a purposeful sample, using the sampling of unique or special cases (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Purposeful sampling produced individuals with the richest and best descriptive information and insight related to the purpose of the study to produce comprehensive thematic evidence. "Data gathered as a sample of the phenomenon under study are chosen to represent accurately those behaviors, perceptions,

and events that are part of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 144). Purposeful sampling such as snowball or chain sampling is commonly employed. Subjects are selected because of who they are and what they know rather than by chance. Purposeful sampling refers to the assumption that the investigator wishes to discover, understand, and interpret information-rich cases for in-depth study. These cases are selected on the basis that one could learn a great deal about the issues of the central importance to the purpose of the study. A typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 1998). The disadvantage of sampling is the incidents of errors that may occur due to insufficient breadth of coverage, changes over time and lack of depth in the data collection.

In the case of this study, student participants, program coordinators and faculty helped to identify a pool that was the best representation of the cohorts. The criteria for the attaining a purposeful sample required that students were: (1) at least in the second semester of the cohort program or no more than three years graduated from the cohort program and (2) participants self-identified as being part of a culturally diverse cohort. A culturally diverse cohort member was defined as someone who belonged to a cohort whose membership consisted of divergent or heterogeneous backgrounds of members as representative in the population of adult learners. This criterion was confirmed by the program directors and faculty of the selected cohorts and a demographic questionnaire included in the interview protocol. The interview protocol was based on questions designed to elicit and explore the experiences and perceptions of participants who

expressed awareness and appreciation for the presence of cultural diversity in the cohort.

I selected twelve participants for the study based on the above criteria. Below is the breakdown of the participants.

Table 1

Interview Participants Profiles

Name	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Cohort Program
Lauren	Female	31	Caucasian	Masters, College of Education
Kate	Female	32	Caucasian	Masters, College of Education
Nicole	Female	39	African American	Masters, College of Education
Desiree	Female	32	African American	Masters, College of Education
Janice	Female	56	African American	Masters, College of Education
Tracy	Female	41	African American	Masters, College of Education
Charles	Male	62	African American	Masters, College of Education
James	Male	35	African American	Masters, College of Education
Juliana	Female	30	Hispanic	Bachelors, College of Education
Virginia	Female	52	African American	Bachelors, College of Education
Matthew	Male	35	Caucasian	Bachelors, College of Education
Kimberly	Female	25	Caucasian	Bachelors, College of Education

Twelve adult cohort members from two different off-campus programs located in an urban setting agreed to participate in this qualitative study. Eight out of thirteen students volunteered from a Master's program in a social science discipline located at an off-campus location of a rural state institution. The program ran three and one half years in length as a full day Saturday program in six week sessions per class. The group graduated together in December of 2010. Of the thirteen members, eleven were female, two were male, four were Caucasian and nine were African American, and ages ranged from mid 20s to early 60s. The faculty teaching in the program was all Caucasian males and females ranging in age from mid 40s to early 60s.

The second cohort to participate came from an undergraduate program in the social sciences as a degree completion program offering the junior and senior years at an off-campus location in an urban city setting. Four out of sixteen students volunteered from this recently graduated cohort group. The program ran two years, two nights a week, taking six credits per semester. Of the sixteen students, fourteen were female, two were male, two were Hispanic, eight were African American, and eight were Caucasian with ages ranged from mid 20s to mid 50s. Faculty teaching in the bachelor's program was a mix of males and females and included two African American males. All students from both cohorts were employed while attending the programs and had a host of family and home commitments. This section concludes with a description of each participant.

Lauren

Lauren is a thirty-one year old, Caucasian, female student. She is married and had a child through the course of the cohort program. She holds an undergrad degree from a state university. Upon entering the program, she worked in the public health field as an advocate and educator. She is now employed in the public school system. She selected the master's cohort model because of timing and the desire to further her education.

Kate

Kate is a thirty-two year old, Caucasian, female student. She is married with two children. One of which was born at the end of the cohort. She holds an undergraduate degree from a state university. Upon entering the program, she worked in the public school system. She is currently under-employed working in the service industry. She

came to know about the master's cohort program through a co-worker who offered encouragement to continue her education in this field.

Nicole

Nicole is a thirty-nine year old, African American, female student. She is married with two children, ages 21 and 11. She holds an associate's degree in human services from a technical school and a bachelor's degree from a large state affiliated university's satellite campus. She is currently employed with a private residential school. Although she originally looked into the cohort program, she decided to attend the on-campus program for a variety of reasons. At the beginning of the first semester, she decided the driving and the time away from home was not working. Thinking she would have to drop from the main campus program, she and the faculty decided that switching to the master's cohort was the optimal choice.

Desiree

Desiree is a thirty-two year old, African American, female student. She is married, although her marital status was separated for one year of the program. She has three children, ages 11, 6 and an infant, born recently after completion of the cohort. She completed her undergraduate degree in business at an out-of-state college. She was working as a program manager in a student services office when she entered the program. She was interested in the master's cohort program because it was a program specifically for non-traditional students. She was drawn to an experience which focused on seasoned, experienced, professional learning together in a cohort setting at a convenient location.

Janice

Janice is a fifty-six year old, African American, female student. She is married with one grown child, age 21. Janice holds a bachelor's in education and a number of equivalencies and hours towards certifications. Upon entry to the program, she served as an educator in an urban school district. She learned about the master's cohort from an advertisement and found the format and location to be most convenient and desirable. She is still employed as an educator, but also serves as a support team member and is contemplating additional or alternative employment options.

Tracy

Tracy is a forty-one year old, African American, female student. She is married with one child, age 15. She attended a number of undergraduate institutions: a historically Black university, two community colleges, and a private college where she completed a bachelor's in business. She worked in private industry prior to the cohort. Wanting to work with children and make a real difference, she was drawn to the cohort through an advertisement based on purpose, convenience, format, and location. She is currently working in a few capacities in the human services field with a child focus.

Charles

Charles is a sixty-two year old, African American, male student. He is married and together, he and his wife served as guardian of their niece. He attended a segregated vocational high school. After enlisting in the military and serving in Vietnam, he graduated from a historically Black university on the GI bill. He went on to law school and worked as an attorney for over 30 years. Now retired, he volunteers as a mentor in

the urban public school system. He saw the need for strong, minority, male role models. He was drawn to the master's cohort to gain additional opportunities to help struggling youth.

James

James is a thirty-five year old, African American, male student. He is married with one child, 4 years old. Raised by a Caucasian mother in the inner city, James received a bachelor's in business and communication from a state university. Prior to the cohort, he worked in juvenile justice as an officer. He was accepted to a business MBA program when he heard about the master's cohort. The university internally switched his application to the program. James currently works in an urban public school district.

Juliana

Juliana is a thirty year old, Hispanic, female student. She is married with one child, age 6. She earned an associate's degree after many starts and stop-outs from a community college where she tried her hand at several possible majors including accounting and criminal justice. She confessed that she never liked school until she came to the bachelor's cohort. She worked part and full-time as an administrative assistant throughout her schooling. Now post cohort, she received advanced standing into a master's program at a state university.

Virginia

Virginia is a fifty-two year old, African American, female student. She is married with three children, ages 31, 29 and 23 years old. Upon entry to the program, Virginia worked as an administrative assistant at a non-profit center and completed an associate's

degree part-time at a local community college. During one of her final classes at the community college, a representative of the cohort program came to speak about the degree completion option to gain a bachelor's degree part-time at an urban center. Virginia longed to be a manager or educator or counselor so she joined the bachelor's cohort. Now, she is a program manager and counselor.

Matthew

Matthew is a thirty-five year old, Caucasian, male student. He was married with 2 children, one of which was born post-cohort. He obtained an associate's degree in human services from an out-of-state college. Having worked in the helping field for years, he was frustrated at being passed over for positions due to a lack of bachelor's degree. He reported that when he saw the advertisement for the bachelor's cohort program, he had been out of school for years but now felt compelled to return due to the convenience and location. Now serving as an administrator, he has gone on to a master's program.

Kimberly

Kimberly is a twenty-five year old, Caucasian, female student. She is single with no children. While working part-time jobs, she received her associate's degree from a community college where she heard about the bachelor's cohort program from an instructor and mentor. Upon entering the cohort, Kimberly was working full-time as a supervisor. With a busy schedule, the program provided convenience and flexibility. She is now an administrator in a helping field.

These twelve adults recently graduated cohort students participated in the qualitative study from May 2011 to July 2011. They met with me for one interview

ranging in length from one hour to one hour forty minutes. Each participated in a follow-up to review transcripts and offer additional information, corrections and clarifications. Interviewing concluded with twelve students when saturation of information was achieved.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data tend to be words from interviews, observations, images from photographs, or videotapes. The data collection results from a relatively small number of people. This collection tends to be more extensive to understand the true context. Data analysis attempts to describe the data and construct explanatory or exploratory arguments from the data and speculate the outcomes. Approaches in the collection of data value the use of observation and interviews to address the research questions. Qualitative data analysis makes sense of the data by “working with it, organizing it, breaking it down into manageable units, synthesizing it, and searching for patterns” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 145). For purposes of this study, semi-structured interviews were the primary source but field notes and journaling were utilized as well.

Interview Process in Data Collection

Qualitative data collection methods, in general, may be semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, observations and historical/archival research. Data collection generally takes two forms, either through interviews or observations. Interviews may be the primary data collection technique or may be used in conjunction with other collection techniques such as observations and document analysis. In interviews, data are collected from a few participants at a few sites. Open-ended

questions accomplish a goal of deeper understanding or meaning of the phenomenon. Just as there are several types of sampling options to choose from, there are variations in interviewing choices such as informational, semi-structured, and open-ended. In general, all types of interviews are guides, lists of questions, or general topics that the interviewer wants to explore during each interview. Using a guide guarantees that the interviewer gathers the same information from each person. Of course, there are degrees of variation. In addition, data collection consists of preferences, in terms of recording data.

Patton (2002) points out that “empathic neutrality” (p. 50) is that space for middle ground where one balances between getting too involved and staying too distant. An interviewer seeks “an empathic stance in interviewing through vicarious understanding without judgment by showing openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness, and responsiveness” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). A skillful researcher is able to be an active listener, record data precisely, begin writing early, combine primary and secondary or supporting data, provide transparency, ask for feedback, attempt to attain balance, and write accurately. Recording data or field notes tend to be running descriptions of the setting, people, activities, and sounds. Detailed records of what occurs may include those things that characteristically can be taken for granted; and therefore, provides a depth of description. The final consideration during data collection is to ascertain when to stop interviewing. As a general rule of thumb, researcher are ready to move on to the analysis of data when resources has been exhausted, consistencies become commonplace, or saturation is reached.

This study employed twelve in-depth interviews of a purposeful sample of adult learners over the age of twenty-four and members of a diverse cohort. I followed an interview protocol to maintain basic standardization across interviews. To allow for flexibility and follow-up, the semi-structured interview protocol engaged participants to a fuller degree of exploration. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. Each interview was one hour to ninety minutes in length at the off-site satellite urban location and consisted of open-ended, as well as follow-up questions, which were audio recorded and transcribed. Although the interviews were standardized, a semi-structured format allowed for rephrasing and follow-up questions. The interview questions were designed to explore participants' individual experiences through diverse interactions within the cohort setting. Participants were allowed to read the transcript of the interview and make corrections and clarifications. The second portion of the interview protocol included demographic information such as age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, sexual orientation, national origin, indigenous heritage, relationship status, and number of children.

According to Fontana and Frey (2000), the interview process is culturally bound as the researcher and participants mutually create stories together. Warren's (2002) words regarding this exchange suggest, "In the social interaction of the qualitative interview, the perspectives of the interviewer and the respondent dance together for the moment, but also extend outward in social space and backward and forward in time" (p.98). In the interview process, I also followed Seidman's (2006) recommendations. He advocates listening more, talking less, asking the obvious, questioning for clarity, paraphrasing for

further understanding, and avoiding leading questions. He urges interviewers to keep their egos in check. Finally, the interview is only as good as the guiding questions and interviewer's skills and rapport. Seidman (2006) contends, "Truly effective questions flow from an interviewer's concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward" (p. 93).

To establish rapport and put interviewees at ease, I explained the informed consent and the purpose of the study. These introductory courtesies helped me and the participant to become more familiar with each other before embarking on the interview. I recognized the importance of each interviewing relationship as being culturally bound. For this study, I and the participants were of different genders, races, ages, social classes, and relationship statuses. It was essential to recognize that the interview process influenced and was influenced by the experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and individuals' socially constructed markers of both myself and each participant. Therefore, Seidman (2006) suggests working hard to find "balance between means and ends, between what is sought and what is given, between process and product, and a sense of fairness and justice that pervades the relationship between participant and interviewer" (p. 109).

Other details when interviewing include the timeline of the study, managing the number of participant, managing the data, and knowing when to stop interviewing. The timeline of the interviewing process is sensitive to the needs of interviewer and interviewee, the budget, and the logistics of facilities. Considerations must be made so there is sufficient time to transcribe an interview before embarking on the next. Because the emphasis of qualitative research is on the in-depth understanding of the meaning

people place on their experiences, another important consideration is to ensure a true representation of the population at hand and determine the appropriate number of interviews.

In sum, this study consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted over the summer of 2011 with twelve recently graduated cohort students. I spend one hour to ninety minutes with each participant. I followed all appropriate protocols in the interviewing process to ensure confidentiality. In addition to the in-depth interview, I kept field notes and a reflective journal. I used field notes to records observations and thoughts as I was conducting each interview such as room conditions, non-verbal cues, certain words that stood out or connected to another participant's thoughts. I used the journal to record the research journey in terms of my thoughts and ideas of the process and what was said and what was not said by participants.

Analysis of Interview Results

Elements that are vital to qualitative data analysis are the text and image analysis, themes, patterns or generalizations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Patton, 2002). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) define qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 157). Thorough analysis of the data, qualitative researchers tend to use inductive analysis of data producing critical themes from the emerging data (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 1998). “The text or word data are analyzed using increasing levels of abstraction” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.30). However,

qualitative analysis also requires some creativity because the challenge is to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories. To be successful at data analysis, the researcher must examine data in a holistic fashion and devise a way to clearly communicate the interpretation to others.

Analysis begins with the identification of themes referred to as open coding. Coding text develops from the themes and interrelated themes to form broad generalizations. Saldaña (2009) defines a code in qualitative analysis as “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Then, the researcher deconstructs the data into manageable chunks or conducts an audit trail. It is at this point that researcher focuses on the use of “voice” in the text or the participant quotes that may illustrate the themes. According to Grbich (2007), this process entails “segregating, grouping, regrouping, and relinking data in order to begin consolidating meaning and explanation” (p.21). The next phase of data analysis is the re-examination of the data which is referred to as axial coding. Axial coding enables the researcher to begin constructing the big picture. By building a conceptual model and determining whether sufficient data exists to support that interpretation, the research can translate the conceptual model into a story line.

For this study, I used content analysis of the data that included transcripts, participant observations, field notes, and a reflective journal. To look for patterns and themes that emerged, I followed Saldaña’s (2009) advice to always keep “an eye back to the research questions, purpose, theoretical framework, and goals of the study to help

focus the coding process” (p.18). I also created a running code list which served as a reference of emerging codes, and examples. I utilized individual’s passages and grouped them into categories to form thematic connection among them. My ultimate goal was to weave participants’ stories together while recognizing and highlighting their individual differences. Patterns and themes emerged and reemerged. By revisiting the transcripts, notes, and journal, categories solidified into main themes, which were verified by my dissertation advisor. In addition, I was careful to create pseudonyms for the participants that were culturally relevant to the participant’s age, ethnicity, and context such as where they were born. Throughout the entire process, I followed Saldaña’s suggestions to “be organized, exhibit perseverance, exercise flexibility, and maintain ethical behavior” (p.29). For me, the greatest piece of advice I could share with others new to this process is to touch the data every day, be patient, and be open to change....very open to change. This constant work with the data led to an understanding of the findings.

Verification Strategies

Verification is essential to demonstrate the true integration and legitimizations of the results of the findings (Greene, 2007; Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Verification must also link back to the theoretical framework and the research purpose. Qualitative research lends itself in perspective to addressing confirmability, credibility, and transferability in support of data collection, analysis, and finding results. From a qualitative stance, validity procedures rely on participants, the researcher, or the reader (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). There is a joint responsibility in establishing the value of the qualitative research product. The role of the reader in

judging qualitative research ultimately rests in the relevance and possible use of the research study. The reader is looking for soundness, consensus, and instrumental usefulness (Patton, 2002; Bodgan & Biklen, 2003). An excellent way to judge the quality of qualitative research is by examining the criteria of qualitative inquiry.

In qualitative research, researchers generally rely on multiple sources of information to provide evidence for a theme. Credibility in research depends on the sample size, the descriptive nature of information gathered, and the investigative abilities of the researcher. Patton (2002) recommends the use of triangulation or a multiple methods that strengthens the study by looking at the problem from different lenses, different methods, a variety of data sources, or a multiple researchers. Although triangulation is ideal in principle, it can be expensive and time consuming. Therefore, credibility can also be maintained by making segments of the raw data available for analyze and by using member checking in which respondents are asked to corroborate findings. Sometimes, establishing credibility means the researcher must utilize prolonged and varied field experiences, time sampling, reflexivity or the importance of self-awareness, peer examination, interview technique, member checks, triangulation, and comparison of data (Patton, 2002).

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the degree of similarity between the original situation and the situation to which it is transferred. The importance in judging the research quality rests on how well the researcher can specify the transferability of findings by providing sufficient information that can then be used by reader to determine whether the findings are applicable to the new situation. Patton

(2002) suggests using extrapolation or reaching “beyond the narrow confines of the data to think about other applications of the findings” (p. 584). Transferability can also be assured through comparison of sample to the demographic data and dense descriptions, which is the strategy for this study.

The final use of judgment of verification rest on the dependability of the research since there is no credibility without dependability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). To establish dependability, inquiry audits by reviewers examine the process and the product for consistency. Dependability audits look for dense descriptions of research methods, stepwise replication, triangulation, peer examination, and code-recode procedures. It is important for the researcher to try to be non-judgmental and strive to report what is found in a balanced way. Therefore, it is important to have audit trails of raw data, analysis notes, reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, personal notes, and preliminary developmental information. As I stated earlier, I utilized interview transcripts, field notes, reflective journal entries, and participant reviews to triangulate the data. Triangulations from different sources helped to reveal where the data intersected and what was unique or different. Therefore, together the various sources verified the findings since no one source can provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. As a final example or safeguard of research integrity and ethical conduct, this study went through two internal reviews.

Research Compliance and the Internal Review Board

The research study described in this chapter was conducted within the guidelines set forth by the Internal Review Board of the Pennsylvania State University and the

participating university. In doing so I assured that all consideration in the research process involved ethical treatment of all human subjects. In addition, I guaranteed that participants will not be harmed, manipulated or coerced. I also assured anonymity through informed consent and creation of pseudonyms. Finally, I guaranteed that storage of data would be in a secured environment. A recruitment script was read to the participants and consent was received to audiotape the interviews. Identities remained anonymous and copies of interviews were secured.

Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of this chapter provided an overview of the methodology employed in this study of culturally diverse cohort experiences and interactions in a learning context. The remaining chapters address the specifics of this study's findings as well as the discussion and implications of those findings. Patton (2002) offers great advice to doctoral students embarking on the dissertation phase such as myself. He warns, "Be prepared to be changed. Looking deeply at other people's lives will force you to look deeply at yourself" (p. 35).

CHAPTER FOUR THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this research study was to explore how diversity, as manifested by the divergent backgrounds of fellow cohort members, informs the learning experience in cohorts. By identifying the nature of membership in a diverse cohort, I sought to explore meaning and understanding as to the perceptions of diverse interactions and the influences on cohort learning. This basic interpretive research study, as outlined in chapter three, utilized interviews between the researcher and twelve adults from two recently completed cohort programs of study at a satellite campus of a public state university in an urban setting. These interviews took place during the summer of 2011. The research study addressed three research questions.

1. How does the nature of being in a culturally diverse cohort inform learning and social interaction? What is the relationship between diversity in cohort membership and learning in cohorts?
2. What elements of a culturally diverse cohort learning environment impede and enhance learning?
3. How do culturally diverse cohort members perceive the context of learning?

The data were gathered from a basic interpretive qualitative design, using in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each of the twelve participants. Interviews of one hour to ninety minutes in length were audio-taped and transcribed, providing the data for this study. The data were analyzed using a systemic and detailed analysis to develop themes. The participants' experiences are presented and supported

without editing for grammar or syntax in the attempt to convey the participants' emotions and presence of the words and non-verbal context.

This chapter examines perceptions of the adult students as they relate to cohort educational models, diversity, and learning. Within this context, the resulting themes of this research study have been synthesized into seven broad themes: powerful bonds with peers; deep relationships with faculty; existing stereotypes revealed; recognizing similarities and valuing differences; promoting learning in culturally diverse cohorts; outcomes and reflections of a culturally diverse cohort experience; and limitations of cohort learning. Each of the seven themes is explored in-depth in the participants' own words. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings. The first theme, powerful bonds with peers, consists of three subcategories: (1) strong feelings of family and friendship, (2) academic support and challenging feedback, and (3) program consistency and flexibility.

Powerful Bonds with Peers

To examine members' perceptions of diverse interactions and learning experiences in cohorts, the interviews began with their definition of a cohort, how it differed from previous educational experiences and what was unique about the experience. For all of the participants, the powerful bonds formed with peers was one of the most significant factors of the cohort experience. Most participants expressed creating bonds among members that they would probably never find again with a group of people simply because they interacted with same classmates over and over again from two years for the bachelor's degree program to three and a half years for the master's degree

program. This category manifested three distinct yet interconnected subcategories: strong feelings of friendship, family and support and challenge through academic feedback, and consistency and flexibility.

Strong Feelings of Friendship and Family

All of the participants described the cohort experience as a function of a friendship network or a family unit. They spoke of the nature and specific roles within that network and how the group functioned. Members likened it to the way outside friendships and nuclear and extended families operate. Cohort members take on roles quite similar to roles within families and friendships. They also reported on the nature, power and evolution of becoming friends and family. Most felt these bonds left a lasting impression on their lives.

Strong feelings of friendship and family did not happen overnight. Time and togetherness built bonds. When asked to define cohort, members spoke of coming together, becoming close, and developing relationships. For example, Desiree, the outspoken African American leader of the master's group, described her experience as:

They (members) really became my family. The cohort brought you into people's lives to look past the superficial and help each other as a sense of family. The cohort became family and linked together in strength where the people were real and showed each other who they really were.

Similarly, Tracy, a female African American member of the master's program and, at times, self-proclaimed outlier of the group, emphasized that "going through all your classes with the same group of people and graduating together" facilitated becoming a

family. She spoke fondly of the first friendship she built in the cohort and how they forged a friendship by “talking every day since that first meeting and going through the experience together.” Likewise, Janice, an older respected member of the master’s cohort also supported this claim. She stated:

You build relationships and you build families. Over time, you tend to gravitate to more people in the cohort than you ever would have in another education setting. The unit as a whole becomes a family. The family and the associations that come out of the cohort were so much more than any experience encountered in my many years of education. We became family and that was just life. We were handling life together.

This culture of cohort togetherness involved not only the membership and the common goal but also the structured meetings and the passion for the program of study. For example, Charles, the senior member of the master’s group, whom all looked upon as one of the most intelligent and respected member summed it up nicely. He reflected:

I think we were defined as people who were interested in people and people who were interested in our field of study. But, together in the cohort, we definitely had our share of good times, bad times, and everything in between, regardless of everything, we did it together. So, it really gave us a sense of family.

The same was true for the cohort members of the bachelor’s program of study. Juliana, a young Hispanic member of the bachelor’s program of study and someone who never liked school before this experience, spoke of the process of starting to make friends with the members of the group. She recalled “starting to see that, okay, we’re not the only

ones going through this experience here. We all have families in some form or another. We are all going through different experience in our lives.” As her friendships deepened through time, she noted:

We started to come together. We formed bonds. We had more of a buddy system. We all became friends. Within the cohort, we really know each other personally. We knew children and husband names. We got to meet spouses and children of fellow members. I feel a bond with these people. I am still good friends with some of them. We really became like a little family. This family as it became, made me want to come to class and learn.

Likewise, Kimberly, the youngest and at many times the loner of the bachelor’s degree group, described her cohort as a group of family members and friends who built a foundation together to strengthen each other to work together. She said, “Whether we liked each other or not, we were stuck with each other for the next two and a half years. We don’t always like our own family and friends sometimes.” Finally, Virginia, a seasoned member of the bachelor’s group with a great deal of practical experience, reached for the essence of what the cohort meant to her. “It was more of a family than anything else. We were close knit and learning in a family oriented fashion. It was different. I had never experienced it except in my own (nuclear) family.”

Exhibiting strong feelings of family and friendships, peers in cohorts assume roles. For example, members spoke frankly of who played what role in the cohort.

Desiree remembered:

You knew who to get to rally, who to ask for what, who was calm enough to approach the professor, and who can get the group started. You have your committees, the ‘sunshine’ committee, or the ‘I don’t care’ committee. That was the best part of the cohort.

Tracy, the head of the sunshine committee or as she called herself, Ms. Sunshine, described her role as “letting people know about community events and members’ birthdays.” She organized cohort events that involved planned celebrations and gift giving. She reported that she is still the one who keeps in touch with everyone and keeps the whole group informed of what everyone is doing since the cohort ended.

Sometimes, family roles took on literal meaning as well. All members in the master’s cohort referred to Charles as Uncle Charles. They valued his opinion and guidance. He assumed the role and reciprocated. He said, “I feel like the uncle (laughing) with all of my nieces and nephews here and they are so bright and when they make a presentation or something, I just feel a sense of pride.” Juliana talked about cohort member as siblings. “One minute you were like, you are on my nerves. The next minute you said, oh, come here, let me give you a hug, let’s talk.”

Members also spoke of the nature of friendship in terms of the evolution and lasting impression. Strong feelings of family and friendship in the cohort evolve over time and through interactions with one another. Members spoke of how their own personal triumphs and tragedies had an effect on the cohort bonding process. Kate, a Caucasian member of the master’s program who experienced some significant challenges during the cohort experience, related to that process. She stated, “We had births. We had

deaths. We celebrated and mourned just like in a family.” The cohort experienced myriad social and emotional interactions and events contributing to family unity and friendship network building. For example, members celebrated weddings, engagements, and pregnancies, but also they mourned miscarriages, deaths of members’ nuclear/extended family, and lost jobs. They spoke deeply of the ability to support one another in a tragedy. This ability stood out to many. Janice spoke of the power of support in family. “There was great sadness for some and we offer a listening ear and a hug. I think many worked through grief and anger because of our cohort.” When Tracy’s brother passed away, she reported that her cohort family helped her significantly through the process. One student had a miscarriage just as another became pregnant for the first time. Many spoke about the hardship of supporting one person’s tragedy while the other member had to downplay her celebration.

Cohort members reflected on the lasting impressions and connections of their experiences together. This sense of family and friendship carried significant social and emotional development for members. For example, Nicole credited the fact of “spending time with each other, meeting outside of class, being in one another’s home and really getting to know each other” for the cohort bonding process. Juliana explained this process as a “family life journey together.” She went on to say,

In this cohort family, you have somebody to talk to, to laugh with, to cry with, just to share with. I think that’s a credit to the cohort and that people were comfortable enough to be able to share who they were and what they were going through. This was very powerful at times. We divulged stuff to one another and

trusted the fact that it was going to stay there. You shared your life. You shared your ups and downs. You were free, free from judgment. Your cohort family listened. Sometimes they offer advice and sometimes they were silent. Whatever was needed for that person. That was the most powerful and positive thing that came out of that and there was a lot of it.

Similarly, Desiree reported that because of the close relationship, the group still keeps in touch. She said, "I have never let strangers into my life as much as I have this group and felt secure". Matthew, the only Caucasian male in the bachelor's cohort, explained:

The best thing about a cohort is the lasting connection. Even though I don't talk to them anymore, for over two years, I relied on them and knew when someone was going through something or struggling, most likely others were too.

Janice said that "even to this day, I could pick up a phone and we would just pick up as though we had known each other for all of our lives." She went on to say of the benefit of the cohort family, "you touch the lives of some people you may have never met. By studying with them, you allow them to see some things that you never would have let people see. It was a really good place to be." Likewise, Tracy said, "I will stay in touch with this group for the rest of my life. It didn't matter that we were Black or White or whatever, we were all family." Finally, Juliana sums up the essence of cohort families when she stated:

We would very regularly just put our lives out there for each other. We were open books. I was not a very trusting person, but there isn't one person in that cohort that I wouldn't trust. I think that taught me a life lesson. I keep my circle pretty

tight but I consider all of them family. You put yourself out there and you are free of judgment. They accept you for who you are. They helped me grow and mature as a person. That is what a family does.

This first subcategory of the strong feelings of family and friendship painted the picture or provided essence of the powerful bonds in terms of the nature, roles and evolution supporting this theme. The next subcategory supporting the theme of powerful bonds with peers revealed the acts of support and challenge through academic feedback.

Support and Challenge through Academic Feedback

For members of these cohorts, the actions exhibited in the cohort provided the powerful bonds they formed with each other as a system of interdependency and networking. In this study, members credited the group and the cohort format for offering support as well as challenge when it came to feedback.

Supporting and challenging one another consistently proved to be an incredibly valuable action for both of the cohorts. All cohort members spoke to the action of going through this experience with each other. They were not alone or as Matthew put it, “They were all in the same boat.” Research participants talked about how their experiences were similar in that they were all working, going to school, all had families and understood each other’s struggles. Each was willing to help the others to attain the collective goal of program completion. Bonding together was an added bonus that they all acknowledged as the fond memories of the experience.

Peer bonding included academic and student services and personal supports. This willingness of group members to help each other seemed to be a significant feature of the

cohorts and most attribute the helping, sharing and supporting to their success and completion of the program. Janice confirmed:

We really were all coming in to learn some things and when you were stuck, members were willing to say, ‘Look, let me help you. Let me unwrap this for you. Let me help bind this one up for you. Let’s help you move on.’ We worked on one another throughout the entire cohort.

Similarly, Tracy, from the master’s group and Virginia, from the bachelor’s group admitted that members were always on the phone with each other trying to explain concepts, working together, or even keeping each other awake to complete homework or reading. Likewise, Nicole said:

We encouraged and supported each other. When one was down, we would call them and lift them up. We say, ‘Come on study. Get that paper done.’ We had busy lives, hectic schedules, different personalities, and voices at the time but everybody always pulled it through.

Academic support was necessary for many of the cohort members. Lauren, one of the youngest in the master’s group, added:

We got through it one class at a time and we were pushed. It was tough and there were times where we felt, ‘How are we going to keep going this way for two more years?’ Somehow, we all did (laughing).

Likewise, Tracy commented, “If one of us missed notes, somebody else picks up something we missed, or if we misunderstood something, we were able to help each other understand it so we could get the assignment done.” In the bachelor’s cohort, Juliana and

Matthew spoke about making sure all members succeeded by pushing each other and helping each other whether it be an assignment or a ride somewhere. Likewise, on the topic of supporting each other emotionally, Desiree said:

There were times when people were able to just kind of vent and know that people could respect it and really hear it and understand it. When you had a long day or week at work and you would come to class wondering, 'I don't think I am going to make it'. You may have come in to class negative, but you left feeling like, all the others made it through and I can make it too. The group recognized when someone was a little off because they had been around each other for so long and they could say, 'Is something going on with you because you are not here (emotionally)?'

Cohort members also spoke of the actions of challenging each other. Kate reported that many times she wanted to quit or take the easy way on an assignment, but her fellow peers scolded her by saying, "You are more than that. You are capable of giving and doing so much more." As another example, Juliana commented that her peers when doing work in groups "challenged her to work harder, contribute more, and think differently." James, the younger of the two African American males in the master's group, felt that the reason members got through the cohort was because they put each other 'in check' and held them accountable. Likewise, Kate, Lauren, and Desiree reported that once they had formed friendships and bonds, they did not want to let other members down and that was a motivator for them. Similarly, Kate recalled, "I have to get going now because I would feel weird leaving the group because we are all together. My cohort

members kept me going by saying, ‘Just stay with it. Just stay with it’.” She continues and frankly admitted:

The other people pulled me through because if I had not been close to that group, I would have dropped out. It was hard. It was time-consuming. It took me away from my family. We all cried to each other. We all had times we felt we couldn’t do this anymore. For me, the group made me want to learn. Even when I wanted to slack (laugh), they would say ‘Come on, you can do it’. They brought me up. I felt like they really cared and I felt I could do this. There were good people here. This program is right for me and these people are right for me.

The challenges, both academic and emotional, took a toll on cohort members at times. In fact, Lauren, Kate, Kimberly, and Juliana found the experience quite challenging but credits their peers for getting through it. Lauren said, “It was very challenging at times, but we got through it. We would laugh about it in the next class that we didn’t think we would make it and here we are. The challenges turned into wonderful learning opportunities.” Desiree admitted how much she admired others in the group for challenging her and going up against her strong personality.

Another way students challenged each other was through constructive feedback. Members felt true acceptance and ability to offer constructive feedback to one another. Members found that the ability to give honest and open feedback to each other facilitated acceptance. For example in the master’s cohort, Kate felt that her classmates were truthful and frank, yet mindful of feelings in discussions and group work assignments. While conducting practice exercises in dialogue, Kate reported:

They (fellow classmates) would say, 'Come on, this is really good' or 'I used this information this way'. They wanted me to contribute to the group and that made me want to contribute because I wanted to see and get feedback from them because it was so valued.

Likewise, Juliana was frank in reporting that the group could bond all it wanted and feel accepted, but if we do not get the work done, we won't be here to bond. She continued, "My classmates and I felt responsible to let others know if they were not pulling their weight. We did it in a nice way. We did it in an accepting way." All members were conscious of that fact and asked much of each other. Desiree stated, "No one was afraid to challenge each other in the classroom and call each other out. You had to come out of your shell and give real feedback and that is real growth." Finally, summing it up, Virginia put it nicely:

The difference to me from the previous college experience and the cohort was that when you sit in a regular college class and personally, because I am older and haven't been to school in a long time, I felt that when I do ask a question, I am being judged like I should know that. In the cohort program, they understood and they didn't or I did not feel any judgment at all. I felt like I could say anything smarter or not smarter or funny or whatever without judgment.

Students felt they could honestly talk about their feelings, values, and opinions without fear, but they became adept at giving constructive feedback as well. Another important component to bonding with peers is consistency with elements of flexibility.

Program Consistency and Flexibility

Cohort members felt their close bonds were also possible because of the consistency offered in cohorts. Consistency for them meant sequenced pre-arranged courses, a core faculty group, and, most of all, the same students. Before the program started, students knew the delivery format, the full rotation of the classes, the format of time, day, and length of study, and the expectations of the program. As the program began, members took on the reality that they would be with the same people for the duration of the cohort. Nicole explained, “Being in a cohort was like being in a community. People consistently came to every class.” Likewise, Desiree spoke about their assigned seats or their preference for seating and how they kept that arrangement for the entire length of the cohort. Members also speak of a rhythm that developed to each class. For the master’s group, Desiree was always the first to speak, while Kate and Tracy waited until the end to add to the discussion. James and Tracy always came to class late. Nicole was always first to complete an assignment and the group could count on Charles to turn in a five page assignment when only two pages were assigned. For the bachelor’s group, Matthew reported:

I liked the consistency. That was positive. I mean if they are going to throw you in a group, by the time you are done with your first semester, you knew who was the slacker and you knew if you were working with these people you were going to have to do a little bit more work (laughing). You just kind of accepted it. I like the consistency of knowing who I was sitting next to.

Even though members came to rely on the consistent nature of having the same classmate, the same faculty, and most of the time the same classroom, there was flexibility.

Consistency did not equate rigidity. Flexibility helped members when deadlines were just too tight, when logistical situations arose, and when small group assignments warranted change. Some of the cohort members had problems with how structured the cohort process could be. Matthew, Kimberly, James and Janice expressed a variety of difficulties. Matthew was frustrated with faculty in flexibility in constantly going over content such as APA style. He felt teaching time was taken away to continually review how to write a paper. Kimberly did not realize how much group work would occur in the program. Although she was in favor of flexibility, her busy life was extremely structured with two jobs and a travel distance to class. Reporting about one of her group work assignments, she said, "People in my group would plan to meet and work on a certain day. I would request days off at work and then the group would change dates or cancel." Similarly, James and Janice spoke about flexibility in some faculty syllabi, while other faculty members were too rigid in outcomes. This consistency, flexibility and rigidity impacted relationships with peers, but also with faculty. Relationships with faculty are another significant feature of cohorts.

Deep Relationship with Faculty

For faculty, cohorts are more time-consuming, but that time is essential to building cohort relationships. In fact, in cohorts, faculty tend to be more closely involved with all aspects of the students' experience such as the admission process, orientation,

course content, and on-going events. The nature of the cohort format usually requires a faculty member to teach the group more than once. All cohort members discussed at length the dynamics of the faculty-student relationships, which was quite different than their previous relationships with faculty in the traditional college setting. Students in this study expressed the importance of forming deep relationships with faculty in their learning experience and completion in the program of study. First, students came to view faculty as subject experts and supportive mentors and professionals. These roles were essential. Second, student valued faculty for their acts of dedication, guidance and accessibility. In fact, they regarded these actions as key characteristics in developing deep relationships with faculty.

Subject Experts, Supportive Mentors, and Professionals

Faculty members in cohort-based programs serve more roles than facilitators of subject content in a given field. For the students in the two cohorts examined, professors were also seen as supportive mentors and professionals. Particularly, Kimberly, Virginia, James, and Nicole viewed faculty as a point person or literally the link to the institution. All participants in this study described relationships with faculty completely different than with any professor in prior programs of study. Professors in the past rarely knew their names. In fact, in a cohort, Charles reported that there was “opportunity to know the professors as well as be able to talk with them and be open with them if there is something going on with the student.” Cohort teacher-student relations were highly interactive through meaningful involvement and dialogue. For example, Lauren expressed the sentiments of relationship building in a cohort when she said:

My first impressions of faculty found them to be a very high caliber group of people. They knew what they were talking about. I felt I would learn a lot. Right off the bat, when we had our first class, the professor set the tone and the foundation for the entire program. Everyone was welcomed. We were all on a level playing field. We all had different things to bring to the table, whatever our backgrounds, we were made to feel that we had something to share and contribute. From the beginning, we were able to forge a pretty strong bond that was initiated by the professor. Without that, it would have taken much longer.

Students quickly came to value faculty expertise, opinion, and wealth of knowledge. Faculty pushed students to engage in classroom participation and practice to gain skills needed for the profession. Lauren expressed, "It is a direct reflection on the institution and the professors that are involved in cohorts. I have nothing but the greatest respect for them, and feel that they have so much knowledge to share." Together, students and faculty members were very involved in the learning process. Desiree related what one such practice session looked like as the professor told them, "I know you are close with each other and you don't want to hurt feelings. Give each other the cold, hard, honest feedback. That is the only way you get better." Matthew, Virginia, and Desiree acknowledged faculty for preparing them academically for their given profession. Kate described the exchange as:

I learned from them because they were able to share their own practical examples such as 'Oh this is what I did with a student or client and this is what I didn't do with a student or client.' So I was able to use the stuff that we learned from the

faculty and I took it back and tried it in my internship. We learned so much from those professors especially since they knew what it was like in the field and they had such great experiences to teach from very diverse vantage points.

Speaking of faculty as mentors and professionals, Juliana and Kimberly spoke at length about the positive effect faculty had on their lives and in their jobs. When confronted with a work situation, they asked themselves, “What would Dr. X do in this instance?” Juliana reflected, “Without them (faculty members), the program would not have meant what it did to all of us. I think that’s just a testament to them, their professionalism, and just how much practical, hands-on examples they have to share.” Finally, James summed up the students’ sentiments about the impact of faculty influence when he said:

I learned to respect the cohort and their (faculty) perspectives. We learned to respect the professors because they were all different with their different perspectives. They would disagree with each other but always in the most respectful way and they’d joke about that. We learned to see how you could be a professional and be mindful of other people but speak what you believe; and that was so positive.

As professionals, the students felt faculty members were well-versed and current in the field. Students also felt faculty left a lasting impression on their lives as mentors and friends as a result of the cohort experience. Because most had never had such a close relationship with any other professor in their entire academic experience, research

participants spoke at length on connections made and life lessons learned because of the influences of faculty members.

Students recalled that one faculty member instilled a few defining concepts seemingly foreign in prior academic programs. The first concept most spoke of was the ‘loving yourself first’. The second was ‘life is about your experiences so experience them’. Students found personal philosophies embedded in the classroom to be inspiring. Kate hoped to be able to instill the same in her clients/students. Another faculty member left an impression that seemed to be contradictory in higher education when he said, “A student can get a grade of an A or a B but he or she is still the same person. Do not let a test define who you are.” For one student, Charles, a former attorney, this was such a shocking statement that it left him marveling to this day. He said of previous educational experiences, “You were defined by your grade. If you were a C student, you were labeled and treated as such.” He found this to be a refreshing and freeing learning environment. Another faculty member became known as the “ball breaker” of learning. He was tough and extremely demanding but the students viewed him as an expert researcher and mentor. Another faculty member was all about affirmation. He espoused “be who you are and being okay with that. Just stand for what you believe in.” One of the female faculty members was “strong, in your face, and spot on” as Desiree described her. Other women in the cohort were impressed by her strength and looked to her as someone to aspire to be like in the profession. Another female faculty member forced them to take an honest look at themselves, asking them to be real and authentic in life, work, and self. For these men

and women in the undergraduate and graduate cohorts, mentorship and professionalism from faculty were a welcomed and unexpected side benefit of cohort education.

By definition, faculty came to be seen as mentors and valued professionals because of their dedication to the field, their constant guidance, and their ready accessibility with their time and energies. The next subcategory examines how the actions of dedication, guidance and accessibility are different in a cohort setting cementing relationships between faculty and students.

Dedication, Guidance, and Accessibility

Just as support, acceptance, and consistency were important for students as they bonded with classmates, dedication, guidance and accessibility were deemed critical in building relationships between students and faculty. In fact, Janice said, “They had gotten to know us, just as we had gotten to know them, and I think they really cared about us and really took an interest in our personal and professional lives.” Several reported that faculty members understood them not only as students, but also as busy adults, caregivers, and workers. If not for faculty dedication, guidance, and accessibility, students felt they could not have been as successful in their program of study.

Students perceived faculty as extremely dedicated individuals to the field and to the cohort. For example, Nicole said, “I felt like the instructors thought that what I had to say was important. Also, I felt like they challenged me on a number of occasions, professionally and personally through their commitment to us.” Likewise, James found his instructors to be “very genuine and dedicated to the program and every student’s growth.” Even of a particular faculty member who didn’t mesh with his personality and

learning style, he reflected, “I had to accept him for who he was and it turned out that I had a pretty good relationship with him in the end mainly because I knew he only wanted me to be better.” Kate related a similar story that encapsulates the power of faculty involvement and commitment to the cohort when she reported:

After my husband lost his job, I was forced to resign from my job. I was just devastated and almost went... I guess I was depressed over it because I stopped handing in my work on time. I was trying to hold onto the cohort, because I wanted it, but I was falling apart. So I would do my stuff, but it wouldn't be good. It wouldn't be on time. I would do practice but it wasn't good. My professor and program coordinator called me and said, ‘We need you to come in for a meeting.’ I told a fellow cohort member that they (faculty) are kicking me out. I was finished. I was probably going to be out of the cohort, which would be rightfully so since I wasn't doing the work that I was supposed to be doing. I arrived at the meeting and I sat at a table with five faculty members of the department. Then, they said, ‘What is going on? You have changed. You used to be a go-getter. Now you are not. You are someone who doesn't do the work or participate now.’ I started to cry. I told them about my job loss and it was my identity loss. It was just so hard telling them about what was happening in my life. I said that I didn't know what to do. Surprisingly instead of dismissing me from the program, they said, ‘How can we work together to get you through it? Do you want to stay in the cohort?’ I did and they pulled me through. They showed true compassion. They did not give me a break or lighten the load. I just had more time and more support

to get the work done. They showed me how dedicated they were to me, my cohort, and our success. I would have never received this in a traditional program on a traditional campus.

Students in the two cohorts felt that the dedication shown to them by faculty proved beneficial in their persistence in the cohorts as demonstrated by Kate's story. Students also reported that academic and professional guidance was important to them.

On the subject of guidance, students felt professors made a huge difference in the cohort and in their lives through the close advisement and guidance. All students considered that the sequencing of the courses and the constant contact with the faculty members allowed for advising and guiding students at a more micro-level. Virginia said, "They made you feel like you wanted to be the best. They prepared us for academics and for our profession." Kate, along with Nicole, described faculty as heart-warming, very respectful, and exceptionally willing to provide anything that was needed to help with learning in the classroom and growing in the profession. Students perceived faculty members as collaborators and friends because of the guidance and individual influence. Students such as Kate, Tracy, and Kimberly reported wanting to work harder because the faculty cared about them.

Many of the participants from the bachelor's cohort were first-generation college students. They identified their advisor and faculty members as monumental influences as they navigated academia cohort-style, especially when students did not attend classes on campus. For example, Juliana reported, "My professors showed me a new world. I loved

learning for the first time. Each semester, professors taught me how to be more confident and successful as a college student, a researcher, an intern and a new professional.”

From the master’s program, students reported many of the same experiences, but at a higher academic level. Tammy said of her cohort faculty, “They guided us to reach for more in our professional career. Under their advisement, I saw myself grow holistically.” Likewise, Desiree commented that faculty members were willing to bring and share articles, journals, and additional books when students were looking for additional examples and supplemental materials. She said, “It was all about enriching discussions and guiding our futures as professionals in the field. We made them (faculty members) look good! (laughter)” Both graduate and undergraduate cohort students confirmed that the concept of guidance served as a foundational need in off-campus programs.

Finally, in addition to dedication and guidance, the faculty’s accessibility served to create deep relationships in cohorts. Professors were readily available to the students especially because

the programs were held at an off-campus site location and generally met one or two times a week for classes. Of the graduate cohort faculty, Janice said, “They emailed back when you emailed and if you called they talked to you.” Likewise, Juliana, from the bachelor’s cohort, recalled, “We would call them and email them since they said, ‘Call our home if you need help’ and that helped to bond us to our professors.” Being available, supportive, trustworthy, and approachable was of extreme importance to all cohort members. Kimberly summed up the relationships by saying,

The professors were always readily available whether by email or by phone. One instructor said, ‘Call me after 9:00pm. If you don’t get ahold of me, I can easily return your call. I’ll get back to you’ and he meant it. All faculty members were like that. They got back to us immediately, and I think that was crucial. I say crucial because we were learning at the bachelor’s level and it took us awhile to build our knowledge base and foundation. Sometimes we were struggling to understand concepts. Their emails and phone calls would relate, ‘This is how it works. This is what we have to do.’ It gave us the little pushes in the direction we needed. They gave us the support we needed. They were always really kind and respectful.

Cohort members lamented the lack of easy access to campus offices and services such as the library, the bookstore, and convenient office hours. Therefore, students collectively appreciated the faculty’s willingness to give of their time and energies for the sake of the cohort.

Student perceptions of cohorts have thus far consisted of bonds with peers and relationships with faculty. In addition, students discussed individual factors. Members struggled with personal opinion, when beginning with the cohorts. Many times, these personal opinions exhibited the existing beliefs and misconceptions they brought to the cohort experience. In the next section, existing stereotypes are examined and revealed.

Existing Stereotypes Revealed

Students arrive at the classroom with stereotypes when it comes to engagement with diverse people, ideas, and information. In cohorts, students know that they will

commit to an extended amount of time together in and out of the classroom with the same group of people. In the case of the two cohorts featured in this study, cohort members spent either two years for the bachelor's degree program and three and one half years for the master's degree program. As in any classroom setting, students arrive with pre-existing notions of other students in the room. These pre-existing notions of others are based on personal beliefs and societal, social, and regional norms. For cohorts consisting of the same people over a specific period of time, personal beliefs and misconceptions were powerful influences in the classroom. Cohort students bring their sociocultural backgrounds to make meaning of this group. Their beliefs and misconceptions impacted students' first impressions of one another which ultimately influenced how the groups came together or did not come together. Societal norms along with pre-existing beliefs also contributed to racial, generational and sexual orientation divides on a variety of topics ranging from religion to legacies of slavery. Cohort members spoke at length on this topic of existing stereotypes and their interplay in the cohort setting. The theme consists of four subcategories: influence of personal beliefs and misconceptions from students of color; influence of personal beliefs and misconceptions from Caucasian students; first impressions in the classroom; and racial, generational, gender and sexual orientation divisions.

Influence of Personal Beliefs and Misconceptions from Students of Color

Members of the cohorts came with different backgrounds, varying personalities, and a plethora of diverse experiences. These influences formed a basis for the personal beliefs of students' of color. Many of these personal beliefs consisted of misconceptions

and stereotypes as well. Participants elaborated on the various stereotypes based on these personal beliefs that they brought to the classroom. For example, Charles, an African American student, said, “When I grew up in the inner city, my family was poor and so when I see suburban White middle class, I think how could there be any problem there? There is a wonderful life.” Likewise, many of the African American cohort members thought the Caucasian students could not have experienced a great deal of adversity growing up. Similarly, Juliana, a Hispanic student in the bachelor’s group, said almost the same thing when she stated, “Growing up in the projects, I would look at others and say, what do they have to worry about?” Consistently, minority students in the cohort spoke of their feelings about American Caucasian society which also impacted their views of the educational program as well. Nicole admitted that she assumed that the program would be a program designed for Caucasian students by Caucasian faculty. She shared, “Programs that I have been a part of thus far in my education have been devoid of cultural differences. Examples never include someone who looks, acts or thinks like me.” On a similar note, Desiree reported that even before she arrived to class she expected that “there would be one or two racist White people in the room. I don’t know if it’s a Black expectation or just my expectation since I am someone who is racially charged in the class.”

The African American students also expected to be the only token minority student in the class as they usually were in most previous educational experiences. All of the students of color related stories of being singled out in classes to give the minority viewpoint. Most assumed this program would be no different. In fact, Virginia reported:

I come to the classroom with my guard up. I expect to be offended by ignorance as I am put on the spot for opinions from an African American perspective. It would be nice to come to an academic setting on a level playing field.

Janice summed up the effect when she said, “Even though our backgrounds may be similar, we don’t behave the same way and we certainly don’t think alike. I wish professors and other students understood that fact.” Stereotypes were in the forefront of the African American students’ experiences as they entered the classroom. Imagine their surprise when the recruiting process produced greater diversity than they had experienced previously.

In fact, many of the students of color were shocked at the class make-up in the program. For the master’s program, all students commented on the number of African American students represented in the cohort as nearly a fifty percent split between African American and Caucasian students. Desiree said, “I was also surprised about the number of African American students in the room. So surprised that I thought maybe they (faculty and administration) were doing a case study or a research study on us.” In the bachelor’s program, the student body was comprised of a blend of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian members. In fact, Virginia, an African American, made note of the classroom and that for once there would be more representative of the client population they will serve as professionals. She expressed a desire and hope for a truer and more diverse perspective in the classroom. She confessed, “My first thoughts were that there will be greater diversity in voice and material. How cool will that be!” Meanwhile Caucasian students were also influenced by stereotypes in personal beliefs.

Influence of Personal Beliefs and Misconceptions from Caucasian Students

For the Caucasian students, personal beliefs and misconceptions played out a little differently. Caucasian students also talked about their stereotypes that they brought to the classroom. Caucasian students did not speak as much about the presence of race in the class. They did acknowledge the greater representation of minority students in the room. They spoke of feeling unaware of the African American experience beyond a very brief history received in their formal education growing up. Kate and Matthew reported that they had been in mainly Caucasian classrooms with little minority representation. Matthew said, “All African American students in his associate’s degree programs had been from the college’s athlete teams.” Likewise, Kate said, “The courses and extra-curricular activities such as band in the past academic experiences were not well represented by African Americans.” Nearly all Caucasian students revealed that they knew there were misconceptions they brought to the classroom just as a result of the nature of their race and upbringing. For instance, Lauren and Kimberly, the youngest members in their perspective cohorts, attributed their preconceived notions to their age and inexperience. They felt that they had their guard up because of their inexperience. Lauren reported, “I felt like I always had my guard up and I felt very undereducated about African American experience.” Likewise, Kimberly said:

I was so young in comparison to the rest of my cohort. I thought I may not have anything worthwhile to contribute or wonder if I would connect with others so different than myself. I was really inexperienced in talking about issues of race and ethnicity.

Stereotypes were also apparent in the groups when it came to their first impressions of each other.

First Impressions in the Classroom

The personal beliefs and misconceptions that the cohort students brought to the classroom set the stage for the first encounters with each other. Most of them talked about those first class meetings and their impressions of the other students. Kate, a Caucasian student, summed up her thoughts when she walked into the first night of class, looked around at the other cohort member and reported:

I have my opinion of them, like prejudgments. She is going to be that type and this one is going to be like that. But then as I got to know them, the things that I thought would be turn off to me, like, 'I am not really going to be friends with Desiree, an African American student. She is too outspoken. She is just not like me. She is just too different and she just says whatever she has on her mind. She'll just be an acquaintance but I ended up really appreciating that about her. It taught me things. I did not think I would like Nicole, another African American, because she came in and she had all this jewelry on and I thought, 'Oh she is not my type.' Now that is one of the things I like about Nicole.

Likewise, Janice, an African American student, spoke of the dynamics and differences in personalities in those early impressions of each other. She quickly picked up on "who was more animated, who was more laid back, who was more controlling or should I say, really independent (laughing), who was very friendly with everyone and who stood

alone.” Students spoke of their first impressions as the revelations of their personal misconceptions and long-held stereotypes.

For the students in the master’s program, these first impressions made a large impact. Charles spoke of his fellow African American male counterpart, James, when he said:

If you had asked me based on seeing James and hearing him talk, I would have probably said he grew up in a middle class African American neighborhood. I would have never guessed he was biracial. His mother was White and his father was Black and that he grew up in public housing.

Students, both African Americans and Caucasians reported that Tammy must never have been raised around any other African American. She seemed so naïve and sheltered to them about the African American experience. Tammy, too, confessed of having a preconceived notion of Charles as soon as she discovered he was an attorney. She quickly built a wall, thinking Charles would be condescending with the group. She said:

Charles is a lawyer so even though he was African American, I automatically had this mindset about lawyers and how much money they had. I was very closed minded about him because he’s a lawyer and that stuff that comes with it.

However, Desiree reported that she immediately knew she was going to sit next to Charles once she knew he was a lawyer saying, “I knew he would be an A student and I sit next to A students. I don’t sit with people I can socialize with. Then, I might not be an A student.” In addition, Desiree, based on her personality, looked around and sized up her competition and reported, “My first impressions of others were that I was going to be

able to monopolize the conversations and the class. They did not seem as extroverted as I am.” Therefore, first impressions in many ways perpetuated misconceptions and in some ways shattered stereotypes. The same was true for the undergraduate program of study.

In the bachelor’s cohort, students’ first impressions were seen through the lens of a first ice breaker activity at the very first class for the group. Matthew, a Caucasian male, spoke about his observations of that first encounter or activity where students were asked to complete a group task of getting everyone over a table. He saw students who quickly strategized to complete the assignment. He spoke of those who were extremely uncomfortable due to age or weight. For Hispanic student, Juliana, she thought the ice breaker was a great way to get the groups talking and interacting together, although she, too, thought there was uneasiness throughout the room. However, she attributed that uneasiness to the non-traditional make-up of the group. She went on to say, “The cohort was unlike anything I knew before. There were so many who were much older than me. I just really did not know what to expect and what others were thinking about me.” Finally, Virginia, an African American student, reported that she was not excited about the ice breaker activity and did not want to take part mainly due to the physical requirement of the task. She felt it was inappropriate for a non-traditional adult classroom but participated because of faculty expectation of group participation. Individual motivations, stereotypes and subject matter in the classroom also contributed to how the group came together or did not come together as seen in racial and cultural divides.

Racial, Generational, Gender, and Sexual Orientation Divisions

In the beginning, the very nature of differences and differing opinions created definite rifts in the classroom. As a general observation, Matthew, a Caucasian student, reported that for the most part in the bachelor's group, "all the African Americans sat together and all the White people sat together." Kimberly confirmed that in the beginning when students could pick groups, cohort members self-selected along racial lines. Students found comfort in the new setting of the cohort with others who shared like attributes and interests. In the beginning, students gravitated to other cohort members based on race, age, gender, and other visible characteristics such as smokers, talkers, previous classmates in a prior class and similar fashion-sense. Some students reported that such divisions were just human nature. For cohorts, these early rifts are important to observe because the bonding and learning processes are affected over time in the cohort setting.

Divisions along racial lines were evident in not only what students saw as groups self-selected, but also in what was spoken or not spoken. Many of Caucasian students reported that they had never experienced any type of discrimination, and therefore; found it extremely difficult to understand the true effects of discrimination. In fact, Matthew, Lauren, and Kate, who are Caucasian, spoke about the lack of experiences that helped them to relate to their African American counterparts in the classroom. For example, Kate said, "I was excited to be in such a diverse group but fearful that I would say something wrong since I felt somewhat unaware of how it felt to be in a minority group or in a discriminated and marginalized population." In a similar vein, a couple of the

Caucasian students came to the classroom unaware of a thorough history of African slavery. Lauren admitted, “I never really received an education of African American history. I felt unequipped to discuss such issues intelligently.” On this topic, Desiree commented, “I was shocked when a White student confessed not knowing that slavery existed outside of America.” Likewise, Kimberly struggled with her perceptions of others of different race and age because of lack of knowledge. She said, “My educational upbringing was devoid of other cultures and ethnicities.” In addition to racial divisions, there were also generational factors that played a part within the classroom dynamics.

In the cohorts, ages of students varied greatly from mid-twenties to mid-fifties in the bachelor’s group and mid-twenties to early sixties in the master’s group. The youngest students and the oldest students felt the greatest effects. For instance, Lauren, who was in her late twenties, said:

I can remember at some points during our early conversations that I would feel like because I was younger I just didn’t understand as well regarding things that they were referencing to or talking about. That just comes from life and life knowledge. My life knowledge was different, just not as developed. We were definitely at different stages.

On the other extreme, both Janice and Virginia, who were both in their fifties, confessed to uneasiness about their age and feeling they may be judged for it. For example, Virginia said, “Because I am older and have not been in the classroom for many years, I worried that others will think that I should know concepts or I should not ask so many questions.” Janice admitted, “Since I was one of the few mature (in age) members in the classroom, I

expected a little judgmental behavior from the younger students.” All students reported instances where the age differences were apparent in the classroom. Matthew, a thirty-five-year old, summed it up nicely, when he explained:

Some of the younger ones were still living at home and not working and they would say, ‘I don’t know how you guys (meaning older students) do it. You guys work full-time and you have kids. I don’t know how you do it.’ I replied to them that I did not know how they (meaning the younger students) were mature enough at 24 years old to handle this program. When I was 24 years old, I was not mature enough to succeed in school. In fact, I did not and dropped out. They kind of admired us for what we did and I don’t know if it was reciprocated by all, but I admired the younger people for actually having their crap together.

Another division, gender, created rifts and some uneasiness in the cohorts.

Because the two cohorts examined in this study are from helping fields, they traditionally have drawn more females than males, which in itself is a stereotype. In each cohort, only two males joined the ranks. Matthew said, “The profession is not the most masculine of professions. Male voices are rarely heard. Women are the ones who tend to work around emotional issues.” Likewise, James reported, “I felt extremely outnumbered at times and unable to connect with the female perspective.” However, all four males reported wanting to make a difference in the lives of others and be a male role model for their profession. For example, Charles said, “There are children out there in great need of a solid, male voice.” Although the women did not talk about the low numbers of males in the cohorts,

they did talk about gender issues and their personal perceptions of them. Nicole, who is African American, said:

I remember hearing something when I was in my undergraduate program. A professor said that African American females would be, by the year 2000, on the same level financially as Caucasian males and I have always kept that in my heart. The instructor had asked a question, 'How many of you think White males are on top of the food chain financially?' Everyone raised their hands. She continued, 'Who do you think is next in the upcoming future? No one answered. She said, 'African American females'. I have always remembered that. So when I am with males in class or work, I always kept it in my heart so I don't feel as intimidated by them.

Gender was omnipresent in the stories and examples students related about the perspectives they brought to the classroom. Charles related a story that reveals assumption about gender:

A student in the class, a female told the class about leaving lights on when her husband was out of town and having difficulty sleeping alone. She was shocked to hear that I too have the same difficulty when alone. I told the class, 'The neighborhood knows when my wife is away because all the lights are on in the house. In fact, I roam the house most of the night.' So in many ways our assumptions of each other based on gender are very subtle.

In one final way, stereotypes about others played out in the classroom as students talked about past experiences and perceptions on sexual orientation.

Early in the cohort, topics regarding sexual orientation arose in group conversations and created divisions as well. Stereotypes and personal beliefs affected those group conversations. Students struggled to address religion and homosexuality. Tammy came with very strong religious beliefs that did not condone same-sex relationships. She said, “I just struggle with that because I know it is not what God wants and I think of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet they are still people too. And they will be my clients/students.” In the bachelor’s cohort, Matthew added this observation:

There was a really religious girl who sat in the back of the room and every time the class brought up the topic of homosexuality, she would react. I mean it was as if God was smacking her on the back of the head and she was forced to grunt out loud. I swear it happened every time. I felt like saying, ‘Are you kidding? You cannot hold that in.’

Likewise, Kimberly shared a story about a class member (not participating in this research study) who was commenting on a professor’s admission of her son playing with dolls. Kimberly said, “The student said, ‘there is no way in hell I would let my son do that and turn out to be gay’. I was shocked that they would say this.” These early admissions of strong personal beliefs and stereotypes set a stage for the cohort in terms of bonding together and learning with each other. After this initial phase of coming together, cohort members started to see similarities and value differences in each other.

Appreciating Similarities and Valuing Differences

The unique nature of cohorts requires a sense of ‘togetherness’ with the same group of people. Therefore, it was imperative that the group found a way to work

together for the sake of the program and their success. The cohort members in this study found avenues to appreciate similarities and value differences. This valuing was accomplished through three distinct ways. First, the groups used the similarities and differences within the group as a frame of reference to explore new ideas. Second, the cohorts exposed unfamiliar social experiences and discriminatory practices as ways of finding value and recognition in differences. Finally, the group capitalized on their similarities to work together by utilizing each other's strengths.

Providing a Frame of Reference to Explore New Ideas

Once students in each cohort started to look past their first impressions of each other, members began to search for a frame of reference to explore new ideas together based upon their similarities and their differences. Similarities for the groups represented the large representation of African American students in the cohorts and new friendships, many across racial and generational lines. Differences for the groups represented their views of diversity or differences and varied life experiences.

As groups were coming together, student searched for commonalities. One of the most obvious and most powerful was the sheer number of African Americans in the groups. Never before had students been in a classroom with such great diversity. For the African American students, there was security and comfort in these numbers. For example, Nicole, an African American student, said, "it was different for me because there were way more minorities in the classroom than I had ever experienced. There were just so many of 'us.'" Furthermore, Desiree explained:

I was also surprised to see other African Americans in the class. I knew this was going to be an experience like no other. There was just sense of relief and ease when you know that there is a collective presence of minority representation.

Likewise, James added, “Just having other Black students and in a sizeable number gave me a reference point for this program. I couldn’t wait to hear all the perspectives and see what we had in common and how we were different.” Janice has several years of education in varied programs and universities in which she was always the only African American. Therefore, of being with several other African American students, Janice said:

In respect to learning, it was a wonderful opportunity to have so many minds together on one issue and to see it from so many different points of view. It was so encouraging and prideful to speak. We didn’t all think alike. We all came from different backgrounds and had different experiences. Even though we may have been the same color, our experiences and our culture did not give us the foundation that was all the same. We were so difference from one another. My husband commented at graduation that he had never seen that number of Blacks graduates from a program before. So my schooling and even my employment had never been so diverse and that was enriching, empowering and just a great opportunity to both witness and be a part of.

In the bachelor’s cohort, Virginia noted that having other African American students and faculty in the class made a significant difference for her in terms of setting her mind at ease to focus on learning in the group and making some new friends.

New friendships were forged as racial and generational divides began to melt. For instance, Matthew said of his relationship with the only other male in the bachelor's cohort:

There was me, the White guy. There was an African American guy as well. He was only two years older than me. We had a lot in common. He was a cool dude. He was a Cowboys fan. I was an Eagles fan. Not to sound sexist, but not too many of the women in the class wanted to bicker about football with me. It was nice to have that connection.

Also forming new friendships, Nicole, Tracy and Kate looked past their differences to see the value of their similarities. Nicole and Tracy were African American and Kate was Caucasian. Tracy spoke of their cross-cultural friendship. She said:

Kate and Nicole became really close friends at first. Then, Kate and I became really close friends. It was odd because you would think Kate, who was White, would have been friends with the other White people, but she became friends with the two Black girls in the group.

However, Kate cleared up the friendship mystery, when she exclaimed:

Something Tracy said really stood out for me. She said to me, 'I cannot believe you are friends with me!' I asked her 'Why wouldn't I be friends with you?' Tracy replied, 'Because I am Black.' I said, 'So?' She said, 'I thought you would have been friends with Lauren or Brittany (two Caucasian students in the cohort).' I said 'Well, they are okay, but I like you better. I like your personality.' Tracy

seemed a little shocked and said ‘Oh. I guess it really is not that they are White or Black, it is about personality and the fit’.

Nearly everyone talked about forming new friendships with others. Juliana who is Hispanic became close with two cohort members, one was Caucasian and one was African American. She reported that they still talked nearly every day since the cohort ended. She took a great deal of pride in their different views.

Another way cohort members appreciated similarities and valued differences was by providing a frame of reference in defining and redefining diversity or difference through interactions. Most reported that they defined diversity in a restrictive way before starting the cohort, which was mainly along the lines of race. The cohort redefined this for them. For example, Juliana came to view the diversity as “a group of different people, not just race, but gender, religion, and sexuality. It really was about differences. We are not all the same.” Likewise, Lauren explained that “there was not only a nice mix of ages, races, and educational backgrounds, but we also had a nice range of occupations.” For Virginia, the diversity of group was as simple as “the differences in people no matter what the differences were.” Desiree expressed her paradigm shift as:

cultural divides that were at work in the various small groups that brought people together. This continuous work started to bring us together and enable us to understand each other’s different races and the mix of older and younger students. We started to see that within all these groups, there were so many differences.

In addition, James commented on the individualistic favor of it all when he said:

Because everyone was so different, you could be assured that if there are two White people in a room, they would be completely different. No one was the same. Everything we did, every type of interaction we had with each other was so different.

Tracy reported that she used to think that diversity was only about race, because of the program she came to know that it was about “all the differences that includes nationality, religion, sexuality, and everything under the sun.” For Janice, diversity and differences meant:

What makes me, me. It is how I was brought up, how I handled how I was brought up, what customs I was taught, what customs I retain, how I am able to communicate, my personality and how I appear to someone else. Culture is not race.

Kimberly pointed to the geographic difference as her greatest point of reference. “Students were from all over Pennsylvania and beyond either currently or growing up and that gave people a different way of looking at things.” Finally, Kate also pointed to the things not seen but given a frame of reference as the group shares their backgrounds. Kate said, “Of our backgrounds, some people were in foster programs. Some people were in poverty. Some people were spoiled and their parents gave them everything.” Members of the cohorts started to realize the diversity among themselves. This diversity included their wealth of life experiences like their varied upbringings.

Cohort members ranging in age from the mid-twenties to the early sixties brought with them a great deal of prior experiences in life, and their professions and educational backgrounds. For instance, Kate said:

We all had life experiences. I think that was the biggest thing and everyone had different lives and everyone was in different points of their lives. It was so varied, the many kinds of perspectives. When we came together, there was so much potential to learn.

Likewise, Kimberly explained:

Each of our experiences taught us different aspects of different walks of life that we didn't know existed until we met somebody different than us. Everyone had different backgrounds and different personalities. We had to do tons of activities where we shared those backgrounds and shared family experiences. What I remember is how very different those experiences were.

Finally, Juliana commended, "It made us work together and work through differences. There were some opinionated people in our cohort. We had to learn that is okay, your opinion may count, but yeah, someone else's does too." Learning from differences and realizing the many opinions in the room held value helped students to wrestle with discriminatory practices and unfamiliar social experiences.

Exposure to Discriminatory Practices and Unfamiliar Social Experiences

As students got to know one another, they began to relate instances of discriminatory practices and unfamiliar social experiences as their awareness of each other's differences grew. The value of exposing sometimes hidden and unspoken

practices fueled the group's interest in their field and in them. Many of the unfamiliar social experiences and discriminatory practices were based on race, gender, age and social class.

Although some students were all too familiar with discriminatory practices, some students were amazed by them. For instance, Matthew, a Caucasian student in his thirties, said:

Some of the other cohort members who were of different cultures than myself give specific examples of what discrimination was and it put a face on discrimination for me. I had never really heard or know people that had actually occurred to.

For James, interacting with other students allowed discriminatory views to be reexamined. He said:

It let White students see a different part of African-American culture. They could see that not all African Americans wear their pants below their butt. They do not have to be loud and belligerent. They do not eat fried chicken and watermelon every meal (laughs). It allows people to be introduced to more of a particular culture than what media or what rumors or stereotypes try to get across.

From the Caucasian perspective, Kate reported that she felt like a minority at times in her cohort because African Americans outnumbered the Caucasian students. For Kate, she thought, "This is how they must feel sitting in a room with all White people. It was so fascinating and I liked the experience." Juliana, a Hispanic student, related a story about

group assignment that encapsulates the idea of exposing yourself to something you never would have if given the choice. She explained:

For our group project, we decided to get together and go to restaurants that we never went to before and never actually thought of going. So we went to Passage of India, which is Indian food. That was big for me and, I know it is wrong but I never wanted to go and would say 'your food smells' and 'I'm not eating there.' That is why we, collectively, decided we all had to go places we did not think we would like in order to get out of our comfort zone and experience new things. We want to stop discriminating against cultural things we did not understand. The experience was so diverse and so different. We went and I enjoyed the food. So we started to do that. We would pick a different theme and we would go to a restaurant. We did Indian, Japanese, Mexican, and Irish. We realized how wrong it was to assume things about differences. We enjoyed the experience so much that we continued the social gathering long after the class assignment ended. We would get together as a group and go to dinner somewhere different. It was fun and gave us outside of class bonding time. Plus, when we went to Mexican restaurants, we had margaritas (laughing)! It was something that started from an assignment that we were not thrilled about, but grew to love it and continued to do throughout the cohort.

Within this line of reasoning, Juliana knew she had been biased towards others by some previously held misconceptions and discriminatory practices. She wished to begin shattering them one by one. In another example of a practice that played out in the

classroom, a few students commented about an experience where somebody had stabbed another person in the back, so to speak. Tracy said, "I could not believe it because they were both the same race. I would have thought those two would have got along better because they had that one thing in common." Likewise, Charles reflected on the assumptions he made about others in the classroom. He originally assumed that James was Black and from a middle class neighborhood just based on looking at him and listening to him. He said:

I was shocked that my assumptions about him were so off and I found it was very easy from an intra-racial perspective to be wrong about people and it was very easy from an inter-racial perspective to be wrong about people.

Likewise, Kimberly explained, "I think we were more prejudiced than racist and it was the cultural diversity of the group that brought us together to understand the cultural awareness amongst us." Charles summed it up, when he explained, "I think it is easy for all of us to stereotype people and situations. Even when we believe a certain stereotype to be a perspective, it kept us from really getting to know the individual person." Finally, Tracy said, "it came to a point where it did not matter about race or our age, we all had one thing in common with each other, the cohort." Discriminatory practices were very much based on race, but unfamiliar social situations cross race, age, and gender lines.

Nearly everyone has experienced unfamiliar social situations such as attending a fancy party or walking into an unfamiliar neighborhood. The cohort members spoke at length about such experiences in their lives. As the students related to each other, they found that similarities and differences were ways to see past awkward feelings in social

situations. For example, Matthew was very vocal about situations inside and outside of class that were uncomfortable for him. These uncomfortable situations included a multitude of factors such as being one of only two males and personal views. Matthew recalled:

One faculty member had a practice of asking students to provide their views on various social issues with a vote of hands. For example, the faculty member asked, ‘Do you think all American should be entitled to healthcare?’ I voted NO while the rest of the class said YES.’ Another time, the professor asked, ‘Do you think all Americans are entitled to welfare?’ Again, I voted NO while my classmates voted YES. I was generally in the minority view when it came to these votes. It was so uncomfortable. I do not know if it was a gender thing or my upbringing, or what. Then, it got more uncomfortable when the class would press me to talk about my answer. I would tell them that I did not want to discuss my reasoning. It was my opinion and I am entitled to that. The situation was very uncomfortable if your views went against the majority in the room.”

Age was another factor that created some unfamiliar social situations. The youngest members of the cohort expressed a great deal of trepidation in a classroom among students with so much life experience. Kimberly and Lauren remained silent during many discussions because of their unfamiliarity of the topic or a frame of reference that other more experienced members possessed mainly based on more years of experiences. Kimberly said, “Many times, I was uncomfortable in class and group work because my inexperience and age. Nearly everyone had children and I did not. It was

very uncomfortable when it came to that topic.” However, the most mature cohort individuals also expressed uncomfortable social situations. Virginia and Janice, both in their fifties but representing the two different cohorts, reported having feelings of unfamiliarity in coming to the classroom again. For example, Janice stated, “I really wondered if cohort members would judge me due to my age.” Likewise, Virginia pondered, “Will I be able to work in a group of twenty something students?” Charles summed it up, when he said:

I would have much rather had a classroom of differences as opposed to everyone walking to the same ‘tone.’ That, to me, was interesting. I was not so much taken by the diversity perspective as I was taken by the age perspective. Being older than everyone else gave me a difference perspective than anyone else. For all of them, they were looking toward the future and creating or adding to a foundation of knowledge. I was in a completely different world than they were.

Age, race, social issues, and social class can create unfamiliarity for individuals. For Juliana, she found significance in a recent happening with a good friend. Her friend grew up in a small middle class Caucasian neighborhood, while Juliana grew up in an urban inner city housing project. She related:

I have always lived in the inner city and my friend was uncomfortable coming to visit. I had a hard time understanding her reluctance. It was actually that she was in a different setting that was outside of her frame of reference and it made her feel uncomfortable. I never thought about it before. These experiences that can be unfamiliar to us keep us from trying new things and going new places. I had a

hard time understanding why would my friend felt so uncomfortable because I went to her neighborhood often. There are places that I feel uncomfortable. Now I see that learning different things and taking that into the professional setting was such an asset for us. Learning about and from people regardless of where they live or what they look like means there will be times when you will feel different or uncomfortable. For me, I just wanted to try to find a way to be comfortable and help my guest feel comfortable.

Getting to know each other meant working together in the cohort and using members' strengths.

Working Together by Utilizing Each Other's Strengths

In appreciating similarities and valuing differences, cohort members discovered that they could work together by utilizing each other's strengths. By exploring new ideas together and examining negative practices, they found solidarity in their commonalities and appreciation for their differences. For instance, Charles reported, "In this cohort, there was never a sense that you were treated negatively because of who you were. I think that our collaborative spirits enhanced group work, even though it might not be that measureable in a real world sense." Likewise, James, the other African American male, said:

I think the thing that was the most significant about the differences in the group was the fact that we all knew differences were there, but it was not something that we had to address. You know, it was just, 'Ok. We're different. That's fine.' If we had a group of three people who were all Black or a group of three people that

were mixed in race or gender or age, it simply did not matter. We worked together to produce the best assignment we could.

Janice reported that “Each of the individuals in the cohort was so unique in their own manner and I have had the opportunity to work with every last one of them. Each had strengths that influence me and made want to work harder.” In a very similar line of thought, Kimberly explained:

Everybody brought their own culture into one group and showed how each person was unique and different in a positive sense and how we worked together or how we lived together with our cultural ways and network of learning how to understand and respect each other.

Finally, Juliana related an incident about a group assignment that demonstrated this very principle of capitalizing on each others’ strengths, when she said:

We went to the Women's Shelter as our project. Our group consisted of one guy and five women. When we showed up there, the shelter staff said that our group was going to make the residents and staff lunch (laughing). We were not told this in the beginning. We were told that we would just come and do volunteer work. We explained to the supervisors that we were not chefs. We're used to making lunch for like our kids (laughing). Of our group, most were pretty young. One member was single with no children. Two more, including me, were young but had young children. We could make macaroni and cheese (laughing). Together, we were supposed to cook for the women at the shelter who were so diverse. We struggle to complete the task. We went to the big pantry and together we said,

‘What do we do?’ So we're all looking at each other and we're looking in the pantry. I said, ‘They have some onions. I can make some pepper steak.’ My classmate added, ‘I can make gravy.’ It was just an interesting learning experience since we came from different backgrounds and we had different tastes. We were definitely not cooks. We pull out our interpersonal skills, got it together, and mapped out a plan. We cooked for a large group of people we did not know. We ended up making them pepper steak, rice, green beans and fresh gravy. The gravy was so good. It was amazing how we come together as a group based on what we were good at doing. It was one of my favorite memories of the cohort.

Recognizing similarities and valuing differences lead to the promotion of learning in the culturally diverse cohorts based on the members’ perspectives.

Promoting Learning in Culturally Diverse Cohorts

Learning is not a solo activity, but a social endeavor, in cohorts. The act of learning together week after week with the same people in and out of the classroom built reliance and personal growth. This theme focuses on the elements that promoted learning in these culturally diverse cohorts: honest and open conversations, the role of prior experiences, and the power of the teachable moment. First, students reported a new level of trust never experienced before their membership in this culturally diverse cohort based on honest and open conversations. Even with significant differences among them, cohort members were very willing to be sincere with each other about their feelings and opinions in meaningful classroom discussions. Next, students viewed the role of previous experiences as another paramount factor in promoting learning in the cohorts. Students

used the role of past experiences in learning in the cohort to illustrate the interplay between everyday life and the classroom. The small snapshots of life experiences supplied meaningful impact on member's learning process. Finally, the power of teachable moments made a recognizable difference in the learning for both cohorts. Teachable moments were demonstrated through professor(s) to student(s) and from student(s) to student(s) interactions. In all, the learning endeavor occurs in multiple ways in culturally diverse cohorts.

Honest and Open Conversations

For the students in the cohorts, the promotion of learning had a great deal to do with how they related to one another in the classroom, mainly through honest and open interactions with each other. For example, Juliana said, "The discussion in the classroom made me grow so much as a person and made me more willing to open up and put myself out there." For the bachelor's cohort, Matthew felt that even when topics were uncomfortable a great deal of learning took place. He explained, "The exchange among students pushed us outside of our comfort zone and for the good." Likewise, Kimberly said:

There was a lot of raw conversation that we never experienced in any other classroom before. We felt close enough and trusting enough to share private information. For example, I talked a great deal about my childhood sexual abuse. I think it made others look at things in a way they never did before. I never would have been this open in an education setting outside of this cohort.

Similarly, Virginia concluded about the nature of the dialogue:

I think the richest thing from our experience as a cohort in discussion with each other is that it happened naturally and so honestly. The learning experience came from just openly relating to each other in normal conversation. What an opportunity to learn while being part of a conversation where we engaged differently than ever before. Everyone in the class had so much to offer to the conversations. I think everyone found a great appreciation for the link between our discussions and the learning of relevant concepts.

As for the master's cohort group, they also experienced an incredible depth and breadth of dialogue among themselves.

Honest and open dialogue created demonstrated deep growth. Lauren expressed: Through all of it, we had a lot of classes that touched upon topics that for a lot of us we had never really explored before. Whether it be life in general, or with the group specifically, it opened us up to a lot of raw emotions that you don't normally express even with your family and closest friends sometimes.

As for Kate, she found classroom exchanges to be significant as well. She recalled:

My classmates helped me to look at things differently across cultures and across ethnicities. My talks with them helped me to listen to other viewpoints and learn from them as we connected, and at times, did not connect on so many topics.

Similarly, Desiree exclaimed, "I was so surprised how open people were willing to be about their lives across the board." Indeed, Charles reflected and said, "The openness of discussions enhanced the learning process just by getting to know people. The people

were honest about everything so I really got to know them and it helped me to understand people better.” Likewise, Nicole explained:

Our exchanges among one another made a difference in that I felt the classroom discussion were so much more meaty than I ever experienced before. I don’t know if it was because it was a graduate program or the nature of our program of study or something more powerful, but we all came with a willingness to open ourselves to the cohort so our discussion were really juicy and I felt like I was actually learning at a great pace. I had an opportunity to see other people’s points of view and different walks of life. The learning was with each other and it was unique to me. We got personal, open and honest.

For some of the students, dialogue was really about having a platform to share and appreciate their voices. Janice said, “We all became so comfortable in sharing our voice over time. It was so meaningful and powerful to my learning experience.” Finally, James summed it up in saying, “The discussions with each other were so good and so impactful. It was relevant to people, not just fodder to fill class time. The topics were relevant and our voices were really heard.” By sharing and really diving into conversations, students were able to share not only their personal feelings and opinions, but also their prior experiences and life stories. The role of past experiences was significant to the students and is the next topic.

The Role of Prior Experiences

Most learning theories in adult education are rooted in constructivism and place great value on prior experiences (Imel, 1998; Kasworm, 2003). The cohort students in

this study confirm that the role of prior experiences in the way of their sociocultural backgrounds is an important ingredient in the learning process. For example, Matthew said:

We all grew throughout the process and I think there were times where our prior experiences in our personal life and our work life really came into play in class. It was an opportunity for all of us to help work through the cohort program together and give real solid examples to help us remember things.

Similarly, Kate said of the learning process:

We really went into depth on the important stuff. I think I learned so much more than I would have learned in the traditional on-campus program where classes are 15 weeks long and the people are never the same. Through our past experiences, we shared everything and the interactions of those experiences and our past professional lives that made learning much more valuable.

Students felt that the use of prior experiences gave them a deeper understanding and integration of the material in the learning process. For instance, Desiree explained:

These memories or experiences coming into the classroom from our past were almost the staples of the overall time together. The lives of the classmates were so powerful. When I think of learning concepts and themes, there was always someone's personal or professional example that pops into my head and reinforce the learning concept to me. It made learning tangible and meaningful to me.

For Juliana, she thought:

Those little stories that we shared and the experiences gave us a different perspective. Those types of stories made us say, ‘Yeah, I have learned something new today.’ I think all of us sharing what we have been through in life helped us make the conversation not only rich, but the learning so much more important.

Students really value the use of real-world examples especially when it came to work life.

For instance, James added:

The greatest learning did not come from the classroom, so to speak. It came from those life situations and the work experiences and just plain living day-to-day that teaches all of us. Since I was working in the field, I could bring a lot of perspective about the jobs, duties, expectations, and what was realistic according to what our program theoretically said as opposed to what we really do out on the job.

Matthew appreciated how other students shared life situations and how they handle the experiences in their lives. He said, “Our profession is about people in difficult circumstances many times. It is nice to get pointers that have worked for others.” Finally, Tammy concluded, “We learned from each other’s experiences. It was nice hearing what somebody else went through and how they handled a situation. I use these things in my current job all the time.” As students interacted with each other in meaningful ways using valuable personal and professional examples, teachable moments struck many of the cohort participants in powerful ways.

The Power of Teachable Moments

In learning, ‘Aha’ moments or teachable moments are valuable learning tools (Imel, 1995; Kasworm, 2003; Knowles, 1980). For the cohorts in this study, teachable moments were paramount in the promotion of learning throughout their time together. This section on teachable moments can be categorized or demonstrated two ways. First, students spoke about the value of the teachable moment in general terms and its impact on learning. Second, students used specific examples of actual teachable moments to demonstrate how these moments promoted learning in their particular cohort setting.

First, the power of the teachable moment was a theme throughout the students’ recollections when thinking about their learning experience. For instance, James declared, “The impact of the teachable moments influenced our learning far beyond the books and the classwork.” Desiree said, “There were milestones for me. These milestones stand out to me like memories of seeing real growth in others and in myself. I kept a journal throughout the cohort and there were so many teachable moments for us.” For Lauren, teachable moments abounded and were capitalized on by the faculty. She remarked:

Every single class was an open discussion. And that was the one thing that amazed me the most about the professors. When they were teaching us material, they looked for teachable moments within our conversations that naturally just progressed from the topic. It was subtle and amazing but, wow, so much learning!

Janice summed up the general view on the teachable moments when she said:

The learning was phenomenal because there were so many teachable moments through our journey together. My teachable moments in the cohorts reinforced to me that I want to be able to learn from other people and use that to get results whether academically or professionally.

Second, students shared very specific teachable moments that inspired their learning in the cohort. For example, Desiree said:

The awakening moment for me was when I realized that the color of the skin does not define the person. It made me look at everything different. I don't think that if we were all Black or all White in the classroom we would have walked away with that. I was always so concerned with making sure that my Black voice was heard that I never stop to look beyond. I look beyond that now.

As for Tammy, she realized that the greatest impact for her was when she really understood the many misconceptions she was living by. She said:

I remember every time I heard from my classmates, 'I cannot believe you think this!' I was the one whose eyes were open the most. I really realized that I cannot automatically assume things about people. I cannot assume that a White people and Black people cannot be close friends. I cannot assume that because someone is in a certain profession that they will be wealthy and a snob. Most of all, I cannot assume that my way of thinking is the right way of thinking.

Likewise, Kimberly reflected:

The biggest learning experience of my life to date was this cohort and all of the learning moments that came with it. Virginia taught me patience. Matthew taught

me to trust my opinion and share it. Juliana taught me to open my mind to new way of thinking. And that is only what I learned from a few of the other students. The impact of the teachable moments with faculty is far too many to count. I am reminded on a daily basis in my profession to use those learning moments and grow from them.

These teachable moments were quite profound among students. Some students even used teachable moments to educate one another. Nicole, an African American master's students, related a story of a powerful inter-racial experience that served as a valuable teachable moment between two students when she said:

I am really good at reading people. Once I saw a White classmate negatively reacting with her nonverbals to a Black student. I pulled her to the side and I said something to her about it and she was shocked that I, first of all, noticed it and that I called her on it. She was like, 'I don't know what it is but I just don't like her.' It was so funny and I could tell you that by the end of the cohort they were on speaking terms and respected each other. She ended up liking this individual and I helped her to see her through a different lens. I know what it (the negative attitude and reaction) was. It was the typical 'this is how African American people are' attitude. They are loud. You know, they are always talking. They are real confrontational. In fact, she (the Black student, in reference) was someone like that but the girlfriend was on point. She knew her stuff. She was good. She did speak her mind and she spoke up constantly in class. By talking with the White student about this, we got really close because of this moment or conversation or

example. This is actually how our friendship was forged from me noticing her nonverbal behavior and capitalizing on it.

Likewise, Virginia felt that some of her specific teachable moments in class showed how all the learning in the cohort program came full-circle and intertwined with all of the connected pieces. She credited that powerful connection to her fellow cohort members. She said, “I learned from other classmates. I learned quite a bit about different cultures and about different diversities. There were so many things that I have never known before this cohort. Most of all, there were so many things I took for granted.”

Furthermore, James remembered:

All of us commented on how we loved the way everyone thought differently and had so many ideas. The learning experience was so positive and I think we all look forward to the exchanges because that is what learning is really about, the teachable moments when someone said, ‘Oh, I get it!’ There were so many of those moments. Anyone can read a textbook to have new ideas and new perspectives on things but we learned from each other in profound moments!

Finally, Janice said:

I can still hear some of their stories. Some stand out so vividly to me because they made me say, ‘Gee, I never experienced anything like this. I didn’t come from anything like that in my background. I never knew the work was really like that.’ You know, there were teachable moments all the time.

Just as academic and professional learning was essential in cohort experiences, the next section reveals how cohort members expressed the personal outcomes and reflections of

their experience in a culturally diverse cohort. “There are many by-products that come from learning,” as Juliana put it.

Outcomes and Reflections of Cultural Awareness in Culturally Diverse Cohort Experiences

For cohort members, the experience of ‘being’ in a culturally diverse cohort left lasting impressions. Although learning was essential to the cohort, the outcomes or changes that happened within the cohort members made just as much of an impact on their memories. Their reflections of experiences centered on the cross-cultural exchanges that influenced the way they saw the world, themselves, and stereotypical situations. First, students reported looking at the world with new eyes. Many adopted a more inclusive worldview and a greater voice, which influenced the interactions with their peers. Second, students felt that the interactions among peers, faculty, and content material gave them a greater self-awareness and critical reflection. They reported a change within themselves as a result of the social, cultural, and academic aspects of cohort membership. Finally, cohort members identified a reduction in biases. They came to know that stereotypical assumptions were unfair to themselves and others.

More Inclusive Worldview and Greater Voice

Just as students spoke about the depth and breadth of learning in culturally diverse cohorts, they also spoke about some of the intangibles or the by-products of the learning process. Students recognized a change or transformation of being more aware of the world around them and the many perspectives people possess. They reported becoming more inclusive in their worldview. For example, Lauren said, “I ended up really

appreciating everyone for the way they dressed, the way they talked, and the way they thought. This experience taught me about people. I grew to love them and I saw the whole person.” Similarly, Virginia said, “I learned from the make-up of the group. It was a different kind of learning but it was an acceptance of something I hadn’t experienced before. I learned to listen to other points of view and try to understand what it is that makes them think that way. In doing so, it made me question why I think a certain way. I found that the cohort help me to broaden how I looked at the world.” Kate, also, reflected about the group make up and reported:

In the beginning, my thought process about the make-up of the room could be characterized by apprehension. I did not know if I was going to like it. It did not seem like there were people like me. In fact, over time, there were fewer Caucasians in the room and I came to like being different. The experience of being a ‘minority’ so to speak made me like differences in all people.

Likewise, Charles said, “I think everyone saw the diversity in the room and learned from it. It really was a learning experience in itself. We came to a place where we would more inclusive in our views.” For Nicole, she experienced a real cultural shift and explained:

We (African Americans) were there in numbers and we had a voice. Our multiple perspectives enhanced the experience for us, the African Americans, and for the Caucasian students, I believe. I know, for a fact, that the relationship that I had with one of the females, a Caucasian, was influenced by the African American voice. She made reference many times regarding how she really appreciated the openness and honesty that I shared. She said that she learned from things that I

brought to the table. She had never really been exposed to minority students and the different viewpoints they bring. I think a lot of her perceptions changed about African American females and males. Having the two African American males in the cohort showed others that male stereotypes were unfounded. They did not come in with pants sagging. They came in ready to do the work. I really believe that we educated the Caucasian students in such a way that changed their entire point of view, but also made them felt comfortable and included in discussions.

Furthermore, Tracy, also an African American student, commented that the cohort gained a real gift with the wealth of perspectives. She said:

Everyone really tried to see each other's point of view. The Blacks in the room would share their unique stories of growing up, things that happened to them, and traditions. The other White people in the room learned more about Black culture and the reality of how hard and how much more of a challenge it is in the world to be a person of color.

There was reciprocity in the exchange of cross cultural perceptions. For instance, James reported that the "experience was so unique and it allow me to share a lot of things and gave perspectives to people. I like that I could be a part of changing someone's mindset but the benefit was also changing my mindset to be more inclusive in belief."

Finally, Kimberly summed up her feeling about the other cohort members when she admitted:

I know you as a person and I'm learning even more because I really want to listen to you. I have respect for your opinions even when I may not agree totally. The

cohort experience forced me to shape myself into doing things that I was not comfortable doing. It really made me become a more diverse individual.

With a more inclusive worldview and greater voice, students came to see the world differently. They also saw themselves differently. Many cohort members reported a greater self-awareness.

Greater Self-Awareness and Critical Reflection

In cohorts, there is a great attention given to the group and what is good for the group. Decisions, many times, are made for the majority. Sometimes, what is missing is the individual and what happens to the individual in such a group endeavor. Many students touched on the individual effect of being part of a culturally diverse cohort, in term of self-awareness and critical reflection. For instance, Desiree put it this way:

Your personal growth, along with your perceptions right or wrong, are really about confronting issues from your past and learning from them in this cohort. You ask yourself through reflection, ‘How have I changed because of these issues?’ Even in arguments and conversations when I find myself upset, I have to ask myself, ‘Am I upset with the person because I am really upset with them or am I upset with them because they are touching on something inside me from my past that I have not dealt with.’ It is such a new way to look at self and the way you process change.

Similarly, Janice said, “Every class was such a growing experience. I watched myself come alive with a new awareness.” Charles added:

It was important to reach a point in this cohort where you were not judging people and you were really conscious of differences among others. You came understand all the different perspectives and respect them, but also you came to recognize the changing views in yourself and others. That was my self-growth in this cohort. I really opened myself to this philosophy.

Likewise, James said, “The cohort taught us so much about ourselves. We learned who we are growing with and what ways they are growing. I am so much different than when I started the program.”

Important in this self-awareness and reflection was the social and cultural aspects of diversity. For example, Mike explained, “It made me more aware, a little more culturally aware and that is just something that I continue to develop thanks to these people and the experience with a diverse group of people.” For Tracy, she said:

I learned pretty much a whole new way of thinking and looking at things. I was so close-minded when I came to this cohort. I contribute that change to every single one of these members. They taught me so much about myself.

For the youngest member of the cohorts, Kimberly, she struggled in her growth. She admitted:

It was challenging to me until I understood why I would feel the way I felt. I tried to understand why they felt the way they did and I learned from that. There was a change in me and a new found respect for all my fellow cohort students.

Sometimes, things said in class would be very raw and people’s feelings were hurt, but we grew from that. What an awareness for me! These are things I will

have to confront in my profession. I am so lucky to have witnessed and experienced such awareness.

Similarly, Virginia said:

I think I became quite self-aware mostly because I could take the experience back into my life and apply it immediately. I took new ways back to my employment. I found new ways of defining everything. I thought about how I could use these new perspectives at work and with my family. This cohort was so much about 'how can I take this away from here to my life'. Talk about a life-changing event. I was able to do this because of the people I was with and their authenticity.

Finally, Juliana said it best when she explained, "I have to say that the cohort made us better. Maybe I cannot speak for everyone but I think we are better people for this experience. I know I am a better person just being a part of this group." Connected to this thought of greater self-awareness was the realization that personal prejudices were diminished. A final point about being in a culturally diverse cohort was the reduction of biases by the cohort members involved.

Reduction of Biases

With greater self-awareness, comes action to reduce the biases and stereotypes that have been long held by cohort members. Participants reported doing this very thing from the small, everyday slights to unconscious, taken for granted, biases. For example, James said:

Until you get to know people and meet them on their terms, you really do not know the person. You tend to rely on a categorization of people. We know that

stereotypes are wrong, but still we all hold them. This cohort changed that for me. I consciously started to identify my long standing biases and questioned why I had them and how I could rid my mind of thinking that way.

Likewise, Lauren said:

In the beginning of this cohort, I really did not know a lot outside of my own cultural stance. I held biases based on race, gender, age, religion and so forth. Knowledge from my classmates, the content material and the professors pushed me past those misconceptions. This knowledge showed me that these biases were values and perspectives that were not appreciated or respected.

Similarly, Kate, another Caucasian student, explained:

Because there were times that we would disagree or someone would have a viewpoint that was of a more sensitive or controversial nature you could see that the class started to go back into their biases. It was so eye-opening as those biases were revealed and shattered long-held beliefs. It was so powerful. Everyone spoke up and even though it was challenging to do so, we overcame the uncomfortable moments for real growth.

Ironically, Kimberly, from the other cohort, mentioned much the same thing when she said:

Sometimes someone in class would be talking and their words set off a fire storm, so to speak. The classmate did not know he or she said something that could be offensive. You could see confusion and discomfort on his or her face. It was interesting to watch as the whole class and the professor shattered the prejudice

belief. The classmate came to understand why it was wrong and was grateful for the experience.

Student's revelations and reflections about biases were powerful and influential to all involved. For example, Nicole said:

There were times that I did challenge them (other cohort members) on the certain opinions. I would ask them to view it from a different perspective or look at it from a female perspective or even a minority perspective. My classmates were open to that and I think they appreciated me doing so. It never shut down conversation or discussion but opened up new avenues to examine things just believed for the sake of believing. I was so proud of our group.

Charles gave a great example when he commented:

Many of us, African Americans, have come to think that White people grow up privileged. We have come to understand that White people do not all grow up in big houses or in happy-go-lucky family units. This allowed us to see different parts of other cultures, examine them and understand that a lot of stereotypes and prejudices we have that are so far from the truth.

Similarly, Matthew said:

I learned that there were topics that brought out biases that people were completely unaware of many times. These conversations could be very complicated and difficult. There were also dynamic and powerful because we became a little more culturally savvy and less ignorant in our views or biases.

Finally, Desiree summed up her reflections of biases when she expressed:

I think everyone learned about their hidden biases, even the most subtle ones. We looked at how people perceived biases and discussed this at length. There could be uneasiness for some but all appreciated the discussions and I think we all changed a great deal.

Reducing biases was more than an action item for some. It was an on-going conscious effort to incorporate this new awareness into work life and personal life. Cohort members knew they still had a long way to go. Tracy painfully explained, “Boy, did I realize that I make decisions about other people that are wrong. I did not mean to be hurtful. I just did not know. Now I know and I hope I can help others in my professional role understand and learn from this.” Janice said it best, “I understood more how to put myself in someone else’s shoes and that’s what it is all about.” Finally, Juliana revealed, “I know I still have biases but I have to say that I have far fewer than when I started this program.” Reducing biases and prejudices did not eliminate friction and stop gaps in the learning and the social experience in cohorts. Just as cohorts could be quite liberating, there were limits to the experience. In the next and final section, observations of the limitations are revealed.

Relational, Institutional and Confrontational Limitations of Cohort Learning

There is a great deal at play in a culturally diverse cohort such as social feelings, cultural sentiments, biases and stereotypes, interpersonal relationships, classroom atmosphere, and a plethora of personal, academic, social, and professional expectations. All of these factors can place limitations on the learning in culturally diverse cohorts. First, there are definite barriers in peer interactions because of these above conditions,

which manifest themselves interpersonally. Cliques form. Slackers skate, and outcasts emerge, while strong personalities overrun. Expectations by all change and morph. In addition, there are also institutional effects resulting from the nature of off-campus locations. Distance, lack of visible presence, little student service support, and faculty issues set certain parameters on such relationships that are difficult to surmount. Finally, limitations take the form of conflict and resistance. As in any group that spends a good amount of time together, frustrations, cultural and social conflicts, and outright resistance come into play as the group wrestled with many topics. This theme divided into five subcategories (Clique Effect, Slackers and Outcasts v. Strong Personalities, Expectations, Institutional Realities and Faculty Relations, and Conflict and Resistance) and reveals issues and difficulties that stop or hinder learning.

The Clique Effect

Limitations in culturally diverse cohorts were identified by cohort members regarding interactions with peers. These interpersonal limitations may be linked to social feelings, cultural sentiments, interpersonal relationships, and classroom atmosphere. Cliques form and outsiders are clearly not welcome. The social dynamics of peer interactions impact the group learning, classroom balance or harmony, and feelings of belonging. Although cliques are quite common in cohorts, they seem particularly strong in these culturally diverse cohorts. For example, Matthew said:

There were little cliques just like there were cliques back in the high school lunch room. People formed affiliations based on common traits, attributes, and interests; sometimes it was race or geographical convenience for carpooling together or a

previous association. I think cliques limited the possibilities to learn from more people especially those different than you.

Similarly, Kimberly speaking of the bachelor's cohort explained:

Our cohort had its own sub-groups or cliques, I guess you could say. These small groups usually sat together, went to break together, and did things outside of the cohort together. I know some of them talked on the phone quite a bit and socialized with each other. It was difficult if you were placed with one of these subgroups for a class group project. They thought alike, and worked well together. It was hard to be a part of that.

As for the master's cohort, Kate reported, "Just as in any situation where people spend a lot of time together, small cliques form. Sometimes they reform with other people. We were together for almost four years. A great deal can happen over four years. People change." Likewise, Janice added:

There were cliques. You definitely saw it over the lunch break. Every Saturday the same people went to lunch together. I think those small group really started to think alike and in some ways were not as open to other's opinions at times.

These cliques and the closeness and togetherness of the group as a whole made it extremely uncomfortable to outsiders. There were times when a student outside of the cohort was allowed to join a particular class for a reason deemed appropriate by the faculty or administration. These instances appeared most in the master's cohort. For instance, Tammy reported:

We have a very hard time accepting new people who came to our group for just one class. I am sure they (the outsider) did not like how we all meshed together and had all of our inside jokes and such.

Likewise, James said:

There were students who were allowed to join us from the outside. I tried to be neutral about it, but it was hard. The other members of the cohort were very harsh to outsiders. It was almost like a big pack of Alpha males marking their territory.

The leader of that pack, Desiree, had this to say:

Since I was always the outspoken one, I would question a new student to our group. I would say, ‘What is up with you? Why are you here?’ I would also let them know where they could sit because we all had our own seats. Don’t you dare sit in one of our seats.

Just as these social dynamics played out with the cliques, the classroom atmosphere of the defined group could produce limitations through strong personalities and slackers and outcasts.

Strong Personalities Versus Slackers and Outcasts

After spending week upon week together, the classroom atmosphere could be marked with two opposing limitations, strong personalities who at times dominated the discussions and slackers and outcasts who at times were marginalized by the others. For example, Desiree, the self-proclaimed outspoken and dominate personality in the master’s group, said:

Discussions could be very challenging experiences at times. A few dominated the conversation and a few never said a word. I was one who took things over and I never backed down. Looking back it must have been hard for a few of the others in the class.

On that topic, Nicole confirmed, “Sometimes when the strong personalities got going in the discussion, no one could get a word in. I think we missed some good opinions or perspectives due to egos sometimes.”

Just as there are always strong personalities in every group, there is also a slacker or two. For example, Desiree said:

Being put in groups, you had slackers. Those slackers would ride you're A grade but not do any of the work. It was so irritating. Even when you went to the professor, he would say, 'Make the person step up.' I think in cohorts the problem with slackers was harder to deal with because you knew you would have to work with them over and over. I just expected it to be different. I expected people to be different.

In addition, Lauren added, “We always had a slacker in group work. It was hard to deal with at times. The dynamic in the group could be very problematic.” Along with slackers in the classroom, there were outcasts.

Some of these students, outcasts, who did not get to add their voice to discussions felt either marginalized and in opposition of the group. Desiree, the strong one, identified the occurrence. She commented, “We would come together in discussion and there would always be one who chose to disagree. I think it sometimes felt like the cohort against

one.” Indeed, Tammy confessed, “The negative of it was when you go against the group with your opinion, you can be the outcast. I have felt it. It is not a comfortable feeling.”

Likewise, Kimberly of the bachelor’s cohort, added:

I have to say that I was definitely the outcast. I don’t know if it was that I was young or that I didn’t have children or a lot of experience, but I was made to feel that I just was not part of the group sometimes. I did not fit in.

Finally, Charles concluded, “You have to go with the grain or you are against the grain, not a fun place to be in a cohort.” Connected to those social dynamics and feelings were the expectations that formed in cohort. They could be seen as limitations.

Expectations

Interpersonal relationships in so many ways were seen as positive functions of culturally diverse cohorts as demonstrated in earlier sections for their liberating features. However, in some ways personal, academic, social, and professional expectations in interpersonal relationships limited the depth of learning together. For example, Kate reported:

When it came to those I was closest to in the cohort or I considered my dear friends, I sometimes felt like I could not say what I felt as freely because we were so close and I did not want to hurt them. If I did not agree with them or I did not like the way they handled a project, I did not want to risk losing them or getting into a confrontation with them.

Relationships among cohort members and the balance of the whole group could be negatively affected at times. Virginia said:

There were times when people were hurt by comments that were made. It took time to repair that and bring the group back together. In cohorts, there is not a lot of time to spend on that kind of stuff. We have too much to do.

Finally, Matthew commented:

It was nice to be with the same people, but after two years I was getting sick of them. I mean that in a nice way. Everyone had their stance on topics. I could recite what people were going to say. It was getting stale with the same people.

Students in the cohorts expected certain behaviors and competencies. At times, expectations were compromised and cohort members felt cheated or robbed of a learning experience. For example, Kimberly commented:

I think there was always a struggle, and I don't mean it in a completely negative way. I think with us being a diverse cohort and everybody being from all over the area, we were expected to be flexible. Sometimes, I think that flexibility was to our detriment. I think we compromised our personal standards.

Finally, Janice summed up the expectations of her group:

I think sometimes our expectations for the group did not match the reality. The frustrations were because of these expectations. It was not all hunky-dory with this group. Sometimes I think we missed great growing moments because we were too caught up in our expectations.

These barriers among peer interactions were apparent limitations, but there were also institutional barriers when it came to program and university policy and faculty relations.

Institutional Realities and Faculty Relations

In the cohorts studied, students identified barriers in faculty and institutional relations as limitations to learning and interactions. When cohorts are separated from the main campus, the only ties to the academy are the faculty. In addition, there are institutional policies, culture, and procedures that may limit the functionality and potential of cohorts. For example, Kimberly commented on the constant changes made by the faculty and administration to keep the cohort intact. She said:

I do like helping others and there can be learning in doing like, like a one room school house mentality. However, there were times I felt that they were too lenient on some while the rest of us were busting our butts to succeed. It left a bad taste in our mouth.

Also, when it came to faculty, students quickly developed preferences. It could be difficult for students whose personalities did not mesh with a certain faculty member, especially when that faculty member taught repeatedly in the program. James commented:

I think at times, it may have gotten a little dicey, because we definitely had our preferences for faculty. You would hear, 'Oh such-and-such is going to be with you for the next eight weeks teaching' and we were like, 'No! Not him!' We did not have any say in the matter. We had to accept it. I think some faculty really understood our cohort and some faculty did not. For this particular faculty member, I accepted him for who he was and let it go from there. It turned out that

I had a pretty good relationship with him in the end, but it took a lot of work on my part.

Cohort members felt they could have learned more from certain faculty members.

They also felt they could have benefitted from alternative assignments. For example,

Virginia explained:

Some of the assignments I felt were for traditional students on campus, not for us.

They were a waste of our time. Those kinds of misjudgments made us wonder if the department and university knew what they were doing. How hard is it to think about the population you are dealing with and give projects accordingly?

Likewise, Janice said:

I was a catalyst to buck the system the most when assignments were inappropriate for working adults. I would remind the professor that we were not the kids on campus. I think the professors were taken aback by this. I don't think they normally get any push back. I would say, 'Don't limit our learning with a syllabus meant for 20 year olds.'

A few misjudgments by faculty left a lasting impression on cohort members.

Desiree identified a dramatic example that she related a very emotional situation:

One of our classmates had a baby. Three days after getting out of the hospital, she came to class because our faculty member said, 'Be there or fail.' I felt because he did not have any kids, he did not understand the dynamics of childbirth. The class was pissed. We thought the professor was being culturally insensitive, meaning the culture of childbirth, to our classmate. It was so heart-wrenching. It is an

eight-hour day in uncomfortable chair. What about breast-feeding? Come on! He was one of my favorite professors, and he let us down. I told him how disappointed I was in him. I think that incident impacted our classmate's learning. It impacted the entire group's learning. It was something that was so negative that we saw happen to a cohort member who we thought of as family. It changed our whole perception of the faculty member and how we treated him. He would bring candy to try to make us like him. I told everyone not to eat his candy. Maybe that was petty, but he just did not get it.

Finally, as a last limitation to the cohort learning in regards to faculty and institutional practices, faculty and administration did not always culturally represent the population of the cohort. Although the faculty in the bachelor's cohort was very diverse in race, gender, and age, the cohort faculty for the master's group was all Caucasian, all middle-aged, and heavy on the male representation. Nicole, Tracy, and Charles made reference to the inequality in representation. Nicole said, "I would have liked to have had a more diverse group of faculty. It would have been nice to have exposed to some more diverse perspectives since there were so many Black students in the room." In conclusion, Charles explained, "I think our faculty, while highly trained and competent, could have represented our population better. It was one of the only down-sides to our cohort instruction. I think we would have just benefitted more from diversity in the academic instruction." Barriers in peer and faculty relationships proved to limit some instruction and growth among members. Conflict and resistance among the group was a final limitation to the culturally diverse cohorts involved.

Conflict and Resistance

As in any group that spends a great deal of time together, there was conflict and resistance. Sometimes, conflict could be seen as petty arguments, whereas at other times, there were all-out wars. Topics such as religion, homosexuality, slavery, and politics could bring out very heated exchanges. For example, Juliana said:

In some of the discussions, people had very pointed differences of opinion like when it came to religion or homosexuality. You could tell conversations were getting very heated. Most of the time, we had to agree to disagree and move on. There really was not any resolution, just awareness that we had different views. At the end of the day, it was just a discussion and we moved on.

Likewise, James agreed about the topic of conflict when he remarked:

That's where it became dicey. I think some of our most uncomfortable times centered about three things that you rarely talk about in any type of social circle without sparking a debate. These topics were race, religion and politics. When it came to religion, there was so much conflict that the discussion came to a stop. You were not going to convince anyone to believe differently.

Similarly, Matthew said:

When it came to homosexuality, most could debate in an adult manner, but a few really took offense to the entire conversation. One person would just grunt. You could tell everyone wanted to turn around and tell her to either shut up or make a point.

In addition, Virginia commented that “there were some who seemed to make it a point to get into very heated exchanges and it was just not productive. It seemed like they just wanted to argue. It was more harmful to our group and learning.” Indeed, Kimberly agreed:

We were at racial war at times. A few African American students told the White students that they did not know what poverty was or what discrimination was. It was a huge fight that I don't think those involved ever got over and it hurt possible friendships. Most of the class would try to work together but sensitive issues would repeatedly be brought up and I think it definitely damaged the learning process for some.

Because of the instances of conflict, there was resistance within the group as well. Many wanted to avoid difficult situations and discussions altogether; others tried to minimize the occurrences. For example, Nicole explained:

People felt a little uncomfortable at times with some of the discussions that had to do with the background of people in class. I think we tended to tread lightly around subject or try to skirt the issue. We did not want to offend anyone. Topics like slavery could be problematic because it was such a part of who we, as African American, were but almost taboo for Whites to talk about.

Not only did students want to tread lightly as Nicole put it or avoid topics completely, but also students resisted some points of contention because they thought the discussions were pointless and negative. For example, James commented:

It was so uncomfortable when students would be so unwilling to even listen to an opposing viewpoint. They were not accepting of change at all on some topics even when we told them that they would be doing their future clients an injustice by not being at least open or knowledgeable of various views.

Likewise, Janice said:

There were times everything stopped. Some of the cohort members literally had to walk away from it and then regroup. We had to say, 'We are not getting anywhere on this particular topic, so let's just leave it where it is. You feel the way you feel and other people feel the way they feel.'

Finally, Juliana gave a detailed example when she said:

There were certain classes or discussions where we had a lot of opinionated people so we went into very dark areas at times. There was a girl in the cohort who was really open about how she was molested as a child. It was very scary to many of us. We would be in a discussion and she would go there and it was such an awkward conversation and no one really knew how to move past it. Everyone would shut down and just let her talk, but really everyone was thinking, 'I really don't want to hear about this again.' This is horrible, but we would tune her out. That definitely impeded the discussions and put a damper on the night's class. No one wanted to go any further.

Conflict and resistance made learning and interactions not only difficult but also could be identified as marked situations where the learning stopped completely as seen from these examples.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to explore how diversity, as manifested by the divergent or heterogeneous backgrounds of fellow cohort members, informed the learning experience in cohorts. In essence, I sought to understand the nature of membership of a diverse cohort and its influence on learning. This final chapter explores the analysis of the findings related to the experiences in the culturally diverse classroom in the context of the adult cohort. The analysis and its relationship to the various bodies of research relevant in this study are covered in five points of discussion which also include implications and recommendations for practice. I concluded with sections that explores the suggestions for further research, limitations of the study, and reflection of the research experience and conclusion.

The study followed three research questions:

1. How does the nature of being in a culturally diverse cohort inform learning and social interaction? Or what is the relationship between diversity in cohort membership and learning in cohorts?
2. What elements of culturally diverse cohort learning environments impede and enhance adult learning?
3. How do culturally diverse cohort members perceive the context of learning?

The qualitative research findings were based on the data from one-hour interviews, along with follow-up emails or phone calls for clarity and elaboration, with 12 adult students from two recently graduated cohorts at an off-site urban location of a state

university. The research participants explored the nature of membership in a culturally diverse cohort. Several themes that emerged from the research are as follows: (1) cohort members develop powerful bonds with peers; (2) deep relationships with faculty are forged; (3) deep-seated stereotypes are realized within themselves; (4) an appreciation for similarities and differences occur; (5) learning transpire through inclusive practices; and finally, (6) greater cultural awareness emerge. This research study drew upon several bodies of literature and the findings confirmed, extended, and informed the literature in several key areas. These bodies of literature most impacted by the findings of this study are those related to cohort programming in adult learning, diversity in higher education, culturally diverse cohort education, culturally relevant learning, and intergroup dialogue.

The analysis of the findings is broken down into five points of discussion and are as follows: (1) a new generation of cohorts within the dimension of ever-increasing diversity in adult education; (2) the problematic nature of positionality or the predetermined place each individual holds in cohorts from a student perspective, an institutional perspective, and a researcher perspective; (3) the theoretical interpretations of culturally diverse cohorts from a sociocultural perspective and framed by the Hays (2008) ADDRESSING Model; (4) the reframing of cohort models through an analysis of the discourse and models on culturally diverse cohorts; and finally, (5) implications and recommendations for practice that inform and are informed by the individual and collective responses to culturally diverse cohorts.

New Generation of Cohorts

There is a new generation of cohorts based on the ever-increasing diversity in the adult education classroom in which members possess a wide-ranging degree of differences in age, ethnicity, race, gender, disability, nationality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. Cohorts were popular in use from the 1940s to the 1960s; they regained favor in the 1980s and have been in place within adult education to the present (Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Literature abounds on the benefits and challenges of cohort educational models (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Basom, Norris, & Barnett, 1995; Reynolds & Herbert, 1995; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). As noted throughout the findings of this study and confirmed in the literature, cohorts assume a continuity that builds a stable community, which often makes cohort programs successful in adult learning environments (Lawrence, 2002; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Tisdell et al., 2004). What is clear from the findings is that students in this study confirmed the benefits of cohorts in that membership affords a sense of community, support, and a secure learning environment. The study also cautions that cohorts may be places of power struggles, clique mentality and marginalization, which is well documented in the literature (Barnett et al., 2000; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). However, there is much more to consider than just the benefits and challenges of cohorts from sociological and psychological perspectives, which fail to take into account sociocultural perspectives. Considerations of sociocultural approaches foreground cohort member's predetermined social markers (race, gender, age, etc.) in the learning and interaction exchange.

This point of discussion deconstructs the generations of cohort research in light of the findings in terms of what members believe and feel about cohorts. First, there are myths and realities in diverse cohort membership. Second, discussions of cohorts in adult education must take into consideration the myths and realities regarding access to culturally diverse cohorts. Cohorts, just like the higher education institutions they represent, are subject to gatekeeping or the act of granting or restricting access to educational opportunities. The nature of adult education is increasingly diverse in people, ideas, and information, which affects students, educators, and the institution in terms of access, curriculum, and culture (Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, 2003). Adult cohorts continue to evolve and influence the individual experience, the programmatic endeavors and the institutional culture. The new generation of cohorts must be considered in light of the emerging recognition of diversity in the membership and its impact on the institution.

Myths and Realities in Diverse Membership

What are the myths and realities of cohorts? A myth is what one believes or thinks is true about a phenomenon. A reality is what one feels is known about the phenomenon. In the simplest of terms, when it comes to cohorts, myths and realities depend on the perspectives of participants. It is clear that benefits and challenges are included in the myths and realities of cohorts, but also included are cohort experiences in terms of what was constant, what was changing, what was difficult and what was powerful. Member perspectives not only affect how members perceive the experience, but also the institution at large. A significant factor for the new generation of cohorts is

that they are constantly changing and greatly influenced and are influenced by the multicultural landscape of adult education. This discussion point, new generation of cohorts, examines the ways in which cohorts affect the education of diverse adults.

According to Norris and Barnett (1994), members influence each other through interactions. In this study, the findings from student interviews confirmed a shared belief that cohorts were socially constructed and determined by the actions and interactions of those involved – students, faculty and administrators – intentionally and unintentionally. Although there are several studies regarding cohort members' perceptions of supports, challenges, benefits, and drawbacks, what is missing is the nature or process of interactions in cohorts and how they inform and influence the experiences of cohort members. Membership in a cohort assumes that a context existed in which social support nurtured learning (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Barnett et al., 2000; Harris, 2006). Members of the two cohorts taking part in this study felt strongly about the role of social support and interaction. For example, comments described support as “critical, helpful, and necessary to the learning process.” Members described interactions as “deep, insightful, sometimes hard, and varied in nature.” Most of the literature from the 1990s and the early 2000s framed cohorts in a culturally neutral stance. In essence, cohorts were a particular way of grouping students in an effort to create a learning environment that enhanced and increased the effectiveness of participants' efforts and commitment to the educational endeavor (Nesbit, 2001; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Satiel & Russo, 2001). What is clear from this study is that participants' perspectives of their experiences in the cohort were continuously shifting as they struggled to understand what it meant to be a

member of a diverse cohort. Emerging out of the findings are issues of diversity and its impact on the social support structure cohorts provide and the interactions that take place within the classroom.

The significance of this study rests clearly in the way in which members perceive the learning experiences in light of their cultural, social, and historical backgrounds. Findings suggest the diverse membership in cohorts provided a complementary mix of experiences and backgrounds that may maximize the learning process and experience. For example, study participants remarks included:

‘I know I learned more than I ever would have if my class members were all White.’ (Matthew)

‘I looked forward to hearing from older students who had such a wealth of knowledge and a different way of looking at the world.’(Kimberly)

‘Having a majority African American presence in the classroom gave me a whole new knowledge base.’ (Kate)

In terms of these learning experiences, the students’ understandings consist of how they constantly negotiated a complex social structure of cohorts while exploring the individual endeavor, the interactions among peers, and a deeper relationship with the world around them.

The results of this study confirmed findings in the historical literature on cohorts from the 1990 into the early 2000s. First, cohorts provided significantly greater interaction as demonstrated by the students as they came together to provide comfort, acceptance, and cohesiveness with cohort members regardless of their differences.

Similarly, participants perceived the interactions and experiences among members based on how they believed cohorts worked (myth) and over time how they felt cohorts worked (reality). Clearly, what the findings add is a multi-dimensional look at cohorts over time as diverse membership impacts their lived experience, their perspectives and their profession to varying degrees. For Matthew, the process of changes was significant. He professed, “I am a different person, a different father, a different husband, and a different worker because of what I learned from my classmates, my professors, and my class content.”

These varying learning experiences within cohort membership are constantly changing. Some students in this study admitted really not knowing what a cohort was upon entry or how it would function. In fact, it really was not until the first semester was underway that they realized that they would be with these same people for the entirety of the program of study. It was only with time that students discovered a level of intensity and exclusivity that comes with cohort membership and interaction. For instance, Saltiel & Russo (2001) maintain that cohorts create a sense of community that is not attainable in typical open-entry or open-exit educational programs. The findings in this study clarify that in the beginning students did not believe there was a significant difference between their early experience in the cohort and in previous classroom experiences. However, over time their perceptions changed or how they felt about the experience heightened as they realized the intense and exclusive act of working and communicating with each other. There is significance in ascertaining what makes the connections happen in cohorts, especially when membership is characterized by different backgrounds and

intersections of race, gender, and generational divides. Although the students in this study confirm findings in the cohort literature that credits the cohesiveness and strong supportive atmosphere to an increase in retention rates (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Nesbit, 2001; Saltiel & Russo, 2001), what is significant about the new generation of culturally diverse cohorts is the process in which socially and culturally determined differences (race, class, ethnicity, gender, etc.) among members influence the learning environments and the community building over time. Blended together, the many realities of cohorts influence member perceptions and the process to which members feel the affiliations and commitment to each other, the program, and the institution.

For certain, the perceptions of students in these cohorts strengthen previous empirical research and conceptual literature on cultural diverse cohorts. Culturally diverse members in the cohorts in this study characterized the cohort structure and its membership as supplying them with group collaboration, community, affiliation, mutual learning, collective decision-making, collegiality, bonding, support, cooperation, sense of belonging, and a desire to be connected. However, missing from this study, as is in nearly all studies, are the voices of those who dropped from the cohort or self-selected to not take part in the study. The missing voices would help to give a more complete analysis.

The most striking finding reading the learning environment is the process and nature of the trade-off that occurs in favor of the group at the expense of the individual in a cohort. Is there a sense of self that one forfeits when joining a cohort in an effort to find balance and harmony? Could this be why students drop from cohorts? In this study, not only did students feel that the group endeavor sometimes overshadowed and

overwhelmed individual needs and desires, but some students suggested that sometimes group efforts or decisions inhibited creativity, individuality and expressions of differences. For instance, Kimberly, Desiree, Kate and Janice felt group projects stifled their potential and grade at times. Although this compliment is common about group work, from the cohort learning experience and member perspectives, we gain some new insight into these unintentional realities of cohort. Because cohorts are closed-learning environments and group cohesiveness is of paramount importance, group balance or lack of balance between the individual and the group is key to success. In this study, members struggled to keep that balance. In Kate's words, "Sometimes for the good of the group, we compromise our point a bit." Missing from the discussion about group cohesiveness versus individuality is the faculty point of view. Faculty are instrumental as facilitators of group work, and their point of view could be instructional. Another aspect that is explored in detail next is that many scholars and practitioners perceive cohorts as gateways for adult education, but we must not forget that cohorts can serve as gatekeepers as well. Therefore, myths and realities exist in regards to access to cohorts.

Myths and Realities in Access to Cohorts

For cohorts, access represents the cultural values and political systems of society. What students think and what students feel about that access is reflected in the way access impacts and is impacted by the learning process and the sociocultural make-up of the group. Historically, access to higher education has been an issue of contention for diverse population because of hegemonic practices present in institutions of higher education that manifest acts of gatekeeping. A gatekeeper is someone who helps or

prevents one access to something. Gatekeeping can manifest itself in unequal treatment of others based on race, gender, age, and other socially constructed factors. “A gatekeeper can be of any gender, race or class, but what they share in common is an educational practice and content that limits and stifles the full potential of adult students” (Greene, 2007 p. 2). Therefore, gatekeepers exist in the institution in which cohorts reside.

In these institutions, adult students bring a wealth of knowledge, prior experience and potential to adult education, and they are coming in ever-increasing numbers. In terms of gateways, Saltiel and Russo (2001) contend that “education for many adults is governed by collaborative professionals who are leaders in their field and affect change in their organizations through the use of cohorts” (p. 11). Those who are successful are seen as change agents. Many of these change agents, according to Saltiel and Russo (2001), have experienced the power of cohorts and acknowledge the total education experience as giving greater opportunity for all. However, cohorts have an administrative organizational structure that reflects a mission, culture and reality of their institutional constituencies, which may or may not be adult or cohort friendly.

Although cohorts can be seen as liberators of adult students, they also can be viewed as gatekeepers or controlling agents, such as faculty, administration, or other staff, who stand directly in the way of the full potential and development of the adult student in the educational system. The major consequence of gatekeeping is that individuals can be constantly underestimated and underserved based on race, gender, nationality and class. In consideration of cohorts, the social, economic, and political

systems work to create limitations. Yet, cohort structures seem to provide a place of consciousness raising and knowledge production that may be freeing as well (Greene, 2007; Ramdeholl et al., 2010). Therefore, the discussions and growing understandings of the myths and realities of access to cohort education raise issues that those involved in cohorts must ponder regarding gatekeeping in cohorts and the culture of the institution. Does the institution really embrace and support the cohort model? The findings from this study suggested that, overall, students felt supported by the faculty and institution and commented on the ease of access.

The state university at which the study took place offers low tuition and, therefore, receives many first-generation university students. However, the university at which this study took place remains a traditional university serving mainly students aged 18-22 years. The culture is very slow to change to include adult-friendly policies. Adults are not a priority. Although there have been strides to change procedures for adult students, the findings in this study also suggest much more work is needed. Much of the current research reflects institutional practices that result in a devaluing of cohort experiences (Cunningham, 1996; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). The participants in this study agreed that the cohort model played an important part in the reason they were academically successful, but they also admitted that there were aspects about cohorts that created hurdles for them such as confusion in the admission process, lack of responsiveness from financial aid and other student services offices, and inconvenient faculty and administrative office hours. It is clear from these findings that much more can be done to help transform institutions where cohorts reside

into more adult-friendly places. Issues of access in cohorts inform and are informed by the myths and realities of gatekeeping in institutions. Similarly, building on this notion of inequality and equity, no study on cohorts directly researches the pre-conditions needed to foster the culturally diverse cohort, the climate of the classroom, or the mission. Although it was not the intent for this study, the findings indirectly confirm the need to be mindful of your audience in creating institutions, classrooms, and cohorts that not only attract and retain culturally diverse students but also incorporate inclusion and preservation for cultural heritage and dedication to diverse communities for greater access and success (Bynoe, 2007; Hall & Closson, 2005; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2002).

This notion of a new generation of cohorts is tied directly to the need for consideration in forming, fostering and maintaining cohorts with members' sociocultural differences in the forefront. Emerging from the findings is the recognition of diversity and its impact on cohort learning by considering the diverse contexts that influence the learning environment in which participants engage. Although diverse membership in cohorts is not a new phenomenon in many cohort educational programs, it is now a predominant factor in the educational experience as institutions, faculty, and peers grapple with inclusive practices from recruiting to teaching that are friendly, appropriate, and empowering to the wide-ranging complexities of today's diverse student body. For some programs, such as those located within rural institutions, greater diversity in membership is a new phenomenon, exactly the case of this study.

The reason I chose this investigation into culturally diverse cohorts was because the two cohorts investigated represented a new generation of cohorts for the state

institution, ones in which diversity was in the forefront and where recruitment represented a more accurate representation of a diverse adult population at large. Administration and faculty commented on the new multicultural landscape of the cohorts and were excited about the new configuration of cultural diversity in the classroom. The administration and faculty directly involved with the two cohorts were aware of the new phenomenon for this rural homogeneous small state university. However, those involved also recognized that difficult institutional conditions and hegemonic practices existed in long-standing practices that affect cohorts, which is consistent with the literature. In addition, a belief existed among some that cohorts require a softening of academic standards and that cohort students are not as strong academically as traditional students (Barnett et al., 2000). Another institutional condition is apparent in the fact that cohort student or adult students, in general, are not mentioned in the mission or objectives guiding the institution studied. Therefore, there is no incentive to change culture and policies that may prevent or restrict adult students. To date, there has been little dialogue around the myths and realities regarding the cultural boundaries facing adult students, which continue to stratify the cultural, political, and social gateways to education. Clearly, the institution, as so many universities, operates on the bottom-line principle where the profitability of cohorts or the old way of looking at cohorts as one-dimensional units of measurement is the norm. As long as the benefits out-weigh the barriers, students will come with tuition dollars.

My study presents an argument that cohorts have entered a new generation where recognition of the emerging predominance of diverse people, ideas and information must

be in the foreground of education experiences and opportunities for all students, including cohort students. To remain a permanent fixture in higher education for adult students, the findings raise the need for greater considerations and transformations in inclusive practices in cohort programming. The findings from this study suggest that students were quite conscious of access or lack of access, especially from a racial perspective. One cohort groups consisted of a nearly equal split in membership of African American and Caucasian students. A few of the African American students voiced suspicion of the institution's motives and asked whether they were being studied or manipulated for some reason. This suspicion reveals that there is a need to investigate culturally diverse cohorts and issues of access as a counter discourse to the dominant, mainstream research. As for the future of cohorts, institutions need to ask the following questions: What are the roadblocks, challenges or disincentives that potential students encounter? How can the system support the cohort mission? Is there a cohort mission? There is much to consider for these new generations of cohorts. Another related aspect of cohorts is the problematic nature of positionality in cohorts.

The Problematic Nature of Positionalities in Cohorts

Positionality influences what is communicated and not communicated in a cohort learning environment. Positionality refers to “the place one assigns to a person based on his or her membership in a group, with the major categories being gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and age” (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p.59). The findings from this study suggest that there is need for greater consideration and acknowledgement of the positionality of the participants, the faculty, and the administration. Every cohort program

in higher and adult education is governed, meaning that “someone or something is conducting the policies, actions, and affairs of that cohort” (Ramdeholl et al., 2010, p. 59). Cohorts, too, are a reflection of the greater power structure in the dominant culture. Relations in cohorts are characterized as dynamic and fluid. Therefore, the findings inform and are informed by what was spoken and not spoken in the cohort setting. Therefore, in this point of discussion, first, power and positionalities are discussed. It is assumed that both power and positionality exist in cohorts. In this consideration, it is important to look at positionality from within (students and faculty), and positionality from the outside (institutional and societal), and the impact on relationships and interactions in cohorts. Also, important to this discussion is also the positionality of the researcher in general, and myself as research in this instance. Second, “the spoken” is explored in terms of the communication struggles as related to people’s position within the cohort. What is spoken affects interactions and experiences in cohorts because of these intentional and unintentional constraints. Finally, there is “the unspoken” where silence may serve to control or perpetuate silence of others. The field of adult education has worked hard to better understand how positionality affects practice. Of great significance, there remains little research regarding the exploration of positionality within cohorts. Although this research study did not directly address issues of positionality, the findings do shed light on problems of positionality.

Power and Positionality

In what ways are cohort members affected by power structures and the positionality of cohort members? It is impossible to talk about education, even adult

cohort education, without discussing issues of power and positionality. Students in this study offer insight into meaningful and complex understandings of positionality and power structures which influence the institution, the teaching-learning exchange, peer interactions and the research process. Several issues of power and positionality emerged from the findings of this study.

First, the findings raise questions as to whose interests are served or not served in cohorts. According to Ramdeholl et al., (2010), power and systematic barriers impact traditional institutions working in the adult education arena. From a program and institutional standpoint, decision-making, policies, and procedures are not always consistent. In fact, students in the study confirmed that the cohorts were fraught, at times, with changing and inappropriate requirements, assignments, and qualifications to keep the group intact. Specifically, students questioned the lack of attention to individual preferences, the quality of facilitation, curricular choices and changes, and perceptions of abilities.

Second, among students and faculty, there are ways that their positionality affected each other's position, role, and responsibility within the cohort. For instance, students spoke of a pecking order that existed in the cohorts. Each student literally held a place within the classroom from where each member sat in relation to each other and who spoke in which order in discussions. The findings suggest that there is a rationale as to how these groups saw their own and other positions in the group at large. Indeed, students were conscious of their place of power or lack of power. For example, Kimberly, the outcast, felt that her marginalized place negatively affected her ability to negotiate in

group decisions. She felt disadvantaged in her role in the cohort. Students, such as Kimberly, revealed the ways in which marginalization affected their experience as they sacrificed their voice to keep balance and harmony with all. Clearly, for some members, positionality affected peer interactions and the learning experiences. The findings suggest that cohorts, too, represent a duplication of the power structure of the dominant culture.

Third, my own positionality as the researcher as a middle-class, educated, Caucasian female affects this research. I am also a stakeholder in cohort programming and a member of a cohort as well. I assumed because of my “Whiteness”, I would have difficulty recruiting students of color students for this study. However, it was the opposite. I had more difficulty recruiting Caucasian students. Once the research study began, I found that students of color were much more open and willing to talk about issues of diversity. Caucasian students seemed to quickly answer with superficial responses. When pressed for clarification, Caucasian students were physically uncomfortable. These responses may be explained in the ways positionality are reflected and exist in the dominant culture. Caucasian students, comfortable operating in a classroom characterized by the status quo, experienced counterculture where priority was given to a “culture” that did not represent their values, expectations, or norms. Students of color, alternately, gained a forum where they were confronting and voicing issues, diversity, and power, just as they had done their entire lives. Findings revealed that for students of color in this study, the cohort represented a place where they were relatively safe to assert shared group affirmation and community. The interactions within cohorts

are quite telling of positionality as witnessed in the findings of what was “spoken” in the classroom communication struggles.

The Spoken: Communication Struggles in Cohorts

Emerging from the findings are issues revealing communication struggles in which intentional and unintentional constraints of their positionality offered some telling insights regarding member differences of race, age and gender. Students in this study spoke of cohort communication affected by internal and external conflicts, group desire for consensus, group perceived goals, passive and dominant members, changes in membership, lack of commitment by members, and inability to meet member expectations. For example, students of color harnessed a collective voice as they sought out other students of color for academic support and a cultural community, but also they found an obligation and agenda to educate Caucasian students on issues of diversity and build bridges through cross-racial friendships. Caucasian students, conversely, resistant at first, developed a sense of cultural knowledge and comfort level for discussing difficult topics such as racism and discrimination. It was not just about race, it was about being able to be heard, respected, and engaged through active participation in cohort conversations. Similarly in conversations struggles, younger students and older students bridged generational gaps by learning and working together in groups. Finally, male and female roles were also areas of communication concern as members reexamined issues of gender positionality in society. For instance, a Caucasian male student talked at length about his journey of realizations of sexism in society and media and how it changed him forever as a parent and a professional.

Participants in this study offered responses and insights regarding issues of diversity that demonstrated their journey through conversation or the “spoken” and the power of its context. Clearly apparent from discussions within the cohort groups is that communication can be difficult, but the results can be liberating and life changing. Conversations that influence learners’ participation are at the core of cohort success (Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Yet, cohort environments are characterized with issues of diversity and power inequity. Member differences create cultural boundaries in cohorts that are initially exclusive and hold potential through communication over time to become more inclusive. The unintentional and intentional constraints as named in this study as conflicts, lack of commitment, and passive and dominant members supports that culturally diverse cohorts may be a platform for investigation of issues of diversity through the tensions of conversation. Ngatai (2010) suggests the use of cohorts as a way “to broaden and deepen that which it marks by welcoming change and diversity” (p. 89).

Milem (2003) contends that people are influenced by their interactions with diverse people, ideas, and information. It is the interaction between different learners that this study sought to explore. The “spoken” in cohort learning, communication and participation contributes to higher levels of social thinking, critical thinking, greater understanding, and learning of other’s perspectives, greater levels of satisfaction, persistence, and cultural awareness (Milem, 2003; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Students in this study indicated all of the above effects to be true. Yet, the process by which participants were able to communicate and actively participate was a key contributing factor. “Participation is impacted by expectations, prior knowledge, expertise, time,

effort, and a willingness to engage the process” (Ramdeholl et al., 2010, p. 60). The willingness and ability of cohort members to engage the process of what is spoken in diverse cohorts was significant, but just as significant was what was not spoken. Student perceptions reflect the omnipresence of power and privilege that are rarely recognized and even less often acknowledged. In this last point, the unspoken is explored.

The Unspoken

Silence, according to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1997), is a position in which people “experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority” (p. 15). In cohorts, why do students stay silent on issues? In this study, students used silence in ways that reveal problems related to positionality. For example, students’ comments demonstrated silence in the following ways:

‘I was unsure how to get my point across without seeming prejudice and that was not my intent.’(Kimberly, Caucasian female)

‘There were times that there was a real power differential in the room based on race. Everyone felt it. Sometimes, it was a place where we all learned something new but sometimes it was almost a racial war. I don’t think we accomplished much when it went there. By that point, all were silent but a few hot heads.’(Juliana, Hispanic female)

‘There was a student who sat in the back of the room and she would grunt or roll her eyes regarding topics such as religion or sexual orientation. She never voiced her opinion beyond her nonverbal responses and a short grunt. I would have much

rather heard what she had to say. I guess we will never know.’ (Matthew, Caucasian male)

These findings raised some valuable questions such as: Do people honor the lived experience of all members in cohorts? Do people feel supported or engaged enough to grapple with what was happening? Do faculty want to invest and interrogate the charged nature of the unspoken space in the classroom?

Findings in this study not only address member perceptions but also offer significant insights. Belenky et al. (1997) found that students use silence to maintain the status quo and tranquility. Similarly, many of the Caucasian students in this study admitted using silence because they did not want to hurt other’s feelings, or because they lacked a frame of reference to understand some of their differences, or because they simply wanted to avoid engaging in certain uncomfortable conversations. Furthermore, two Caucasian students in the study admitted that they waited until the end of discussion points in class to speak and when they spoke, they were cautious to keep comments culturally neutral. These findings also suggested that students were conscious of how conversations can destroy residual feelings of community in cohorts. Students in the cohorts felt that there were certain conversations sparked intense conflicts and heated conversations and that once things were said, they could not be undone and resolution never occurred.

This study also suggests that positionality among students, communication struggles, and silence reveal hierarchical structures and relationships of groups such as cohorts. In addition, members’ lived experiences, members’ lack of cultural tools such as

a shared language, and members' connections through relationships impact silence in the culturally diverse classroom. Yet, there is little research on the voices left out or excluded from cohorts because the members dropped out or members who self-selected or used passive silence. Although this study did not directly inquire about the silence in cohorts, it does offer some insight on issues of community, marginalization, and dialogue.

Hearing the silence in cohorts may help to understand issues of marginalization, in which a student, regardless of social markers, could feel lost and alone in the academic world of cohorts. Hearing the silence also may help members change their perceived notions to a new awareness that brings understanding through relationship building and open and honest dialogue. The silence also may help students develop an awareness of positionality and how it shapes the learning environments. Finally, breaking through the silence may shatter the assumptions of the dominate culture.

Theoretical Interpretations of Cohorts

Power and positionalities affect the nature of cohorts and the educational system. Some perspectives on cohorts recognize this and some do not. Theoretical perspectives from cognitivist, sociological, psychological, social constructivist, sociocultural, and critical theories offer unique understandings regarding cohorts. Cohort experiences inform and are informed by various ways in which adult members function within their learning, their interpersonal space, their professional work, and sustained engagement. In this point of discussion, theoretical interpretations assess and reveal the research on culturally diverse cohorts within the field of adult education. In the first topic of analysis of this section, I conduct an exploration of culturally diverse cohorts from a sociocultural

perspective and offer comparisons to the findings. Through an analysis of cohorts, I explore cohort learning and interaction by looking outward and inward through inclusive practices of dialogue and critical reflection. Next, I examine the controversial intersections of the diverse information, ideas and people in cohorts through the ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2008) as a method of change and transformation.

Sociocultural Theory: An Exploration of Culturally Diverse Cohorts

Much of the prior and present research on learning in cohort settings comes from traditional cognitive, sociological, and psychological perspectives (Drago-Severson, 2004; Hill, 1992; Potthoff et al., 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). For instance, in social support theory, Maguire (1983) contends that social support is characterized as “the feeling and the attitude, as well as an act of concern and compassion” necessary for the success of cohorts (p. 51). Although support is instrumental in cohorts, this and similar theories have a one-dimensional focus on the individual and the passive transmission of knowledge. Indeed, findings from numerous studies confirm that cohorts create a context in which social support nurtures learning, but there is so much more. For example, the findings suggest that diverse membership in cohorts provide learning and interaction constructed by members’ cultural backgrounds and experiences, members’ interpretations of the context, and the ways they make sense of it all.

Foundational to discussion on cohorts, Norris and Barnett (1994) developed a cohort model based on individual and group development. The model is cyclical and reciprocal, reflecting a hierarchy of cohort needs and goals. It contends that as the group is impacted and empowered, it in turn impacts and empowers the individual. The results

of this study support the model in the ways cohort members utilize group work to build tolerance, appreciation, awareness of diversity, and new ideas and opinions. However, this model, along with most cognitive and psychological models, is void of cultural contexts. They simply do not address the cultural aspects of acquiring knowledge in cohorts through interaction and the multi-dimensions of member's backgrounds and experiences.

Sociocultural approaches contend that development and learning is embedded within one's social and cultural processes, which moves the focus of learning from solely centered on the individual to an emphasis on the inclusion of the mediated nature of historical, cultural, and social experiences of the individual (Alfred, 2002; Edwards, 2006; Neiwolny & Wilson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). In an effort to bring the richness of differences and the complexity of understanding from participation and interaction among diverse peers, I turn to a sociocultural perspective to explore the findings through the research questions of this study.

Sociocultural theory deepens and structures the analysis of the findings and understandings of contexts of culturally diverse cohorts. To demonstrate the analysis and understanding, I frame the research questions of this study in light of the description and discussion of sociocultural theory as it pertains to cohorts. The first research question asks, "How does the nature of being in a culturally diverse cohort inform learning and social interaction?" Cohorts are microcosms in the context of a learning environment whereby students live, act, and learn. The sociocultural processes of learning through interaction with diverse ideas, information and people influence the motivations, needs,

and goals of the individual and the group (Guy, 1999). This study was about people's interactions and sustained engagement in context. The findings suggest and confirm that emerging issues of multiple and diverse voices in the classroom influence social interaction and learning. Kimberly's words embody this when she said, "Being in the presence of so many differences makes you a more diverse person." The findings in this study add to the body of knowledge on the sociocultural benefits in the classroom as it pertains to individual and group learning.

Benefits from a sociocultural perspective in regards to cohort settings explore how members' differences such as gender, age, and other sociocultural markers, as well as values, beliefs, and experiences, influence meaning-making, interactions, and learning. Findings suggest that the relationship between the diversity in membership and learning in cohorts focused on how members influence interaction, use active participation, and create a process of learning that included a greater understanding of self and appreciation of differences. For instance, members of this study reported that being in a diverse cohort meant stronger and more meaningful interactions with others, more familiarity with cultural, social and historical differences, greater appreciation for different perspectives, and an increased ability to navigate unfamiliar social networks. Kate, a Caucasian cohort member, not only walked away from the experience with a Master's degree, but also with two dear life-long friends, both African American. Kate and others gave numerous examples of how members shared in activities in and out of the classroom to create long-lasting relationships. Members reported that learning from others' lived experiences evoked more effective ways of interacting and participating in the classroom.

From a sociocultural perspective, the second research question asked, “What elements of culturally diverse cohort learning environments impede and enhance learning?” The twelve participants in this study offered understandings as to what their interactions brought to the classroom in terms of how they communicated with each other in ways that deepen or prevented learning. Findings of this study confirm that contextual elements through socially constructed notions of sociocultural factors such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, along with past and present experiences, influence learning. This finding also suggests that members’ sociocultural backgrounds and experiences, their interpretations of the context, and the way they make sense of it all enhance and impede educational and personal experiences in cohorts. This interpretation can be individual. For instance, one student believed that she was educating and empowering others in the cohort by sharing her personal experiences of childhood sexual abuse and her interpretations of events. For her, it was a liberating experience that enhanced her learning. However, many of the members in this study found her sharing such personal and descriptive stories impeded their learning, particularly because most of the students were not comfortable talking about this topic in such depth in a social setting. Many reported shutting down when she would share her trauma.

The findings of this study identified that the major elements of a cultural diverse cohort learning environment that enhanced their adult learning experience rested in the inclusive practices of dialogue and critical reflection. Students in this study struggled to find common ground and beliefs through history, prior experiences, life stories, and perspectives. Dialogue and reflection shaped their personal or collective views on

learning as cohort members examined their assumptions about each other. This dialogue may either limit one's worldview becoming a barrier to greater expression of ideas and learning or it may liberate and empower the learning experience (Blue, 2000; Monzo & Rueda, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 1990; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007). The findings in this study revealed that it was this interplay, intersection, and tension that members continued to grapple within the multifaceted nature of discussing (dialogue) and analyzing (reflection). The results of this study also suggested that members engaged in dialogue and reflection to achieve higher levels of social and critical thinking, greater ability to see other perspectives, increased attention to diversity and its challenges, and heighten commitment to the educational process in terms of satisfaction, persistence, and achievement. For example, findings revealed that intergroup interaction validated the learning climate whereby students' lived experiences were shaped by their cultural backgrounds, which made the learning more effective. Gurin et al. (2002) contend "a diverse student body is clearly a resource and necessary condition for engagement with diverse peers that permits higher education to achieve its education goals" (p. 360).

In addition to dialogue, students internalized the context of learning through critical reflection. Critical reflection consisted of listening to experiences, feeling, and pondering what members learned from their interactions with other people, ideas, and information. For instance, emerging from the finding are the realization among cohort members of the connection between looking inward through critical reflection and outward through dialogue as the group came together in a context that nurtures learning. Comments such as "we are better people through this experience" (Lauren, Caucasian),

“we are mindful of our change” (Charles, African American), and “we are completely different people” (Desiree, African American) suggest that members acknowledge a growth from the construction of meaning through interactions. By comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities among the group members, students seem to have “reframed and reconceptualized experiences” that expanded their individual accounts of the learning world (Sheared, 1996, p. 14).

How did the cohort students internalize these interactions? Although this study did not directly address cohort learning to this degree, there are some important implications to point out. For example, the story of the student who used her personal trauma in dialogue sometimes negatively affected the group. It would be interesting to know post-cohort how dialogue and critical reflection has shaped members’ individual and professional lives and lived experiences. In cohorts, people share an understanding through the mixing and blending of ideas through participation and interactions.

Sociocultural understandings through participation and interaction of dialogue and critical reflection are necessary as members co-construct and make meaning of knowledge. The individual and the group uncovers and discovers a greater knowledge and respect for each other sociocultural backgrounds and experiences by co-constructing meaning through interaction and self-reflection. As Desiree in this study concluded it really is about “us”!

For the final research question, I ask, “How do culturally diverse cohort members perceive the context of learning?” What is the meaning they place on the perceptions of the experiences and social interactions with each other? The findings reveal that cohort

members perceive that there were cultural ways of knowing as illustrated in the ways they co-constructed knowledge. For example, cohort members spoke of the importance of active involvement in discussions, the integration of their prior experiences, the collaboration among members, and their vastly different cultural backgrounds and experiences that helped them make sense of their learning. One member commented that still today when she thinks of a concept she can see cohort member's explanation as an example. Findings regarding social processes in cohorts suggest and may be seen as an extension of the knowledge on the interplay of members' cultural backgrounds and experiences, the social interaction, the participation, and the context in the culturally diverse classroom. Understanding the contextual nature of learning gives voice to cohort members. Therefore, for these members, interpretations and how they internalized the experiences varied dramatically. The social process of learning is the process in which socially, historically, and culturally constructed beliefs are utilized within an interaction to make meaning. For instance, Kimberly's perception of the social process of learning regarding her childhood sexual abuse was far different than the perspective of her peers. For instance, Juliana spoke of the context of this learning experience as one characterized by avoidance and flight when she said, "I longed for her to stop talking about the topic. I shut down and went somewhere else in my mind."

From a sociocultural perspective, cohorts provide opportunities to create a rich and fuller environment for growth among members. However, the question remains as to how to achieve such results. Findings from this study and previous studies on culturally diverse cohorts suggest an importance on building appreciation for differences in the

curriculum, the instruction, the assessment and the funding, just to name a few. The next topic on theoretical interpretations focuses on the controversial intersections in cohorts or the sociocultural differences in membership to help explain the complexities of the culturally diverse cohort learning environment.

ADDRESSING Model

Hays (2008) contends that high-quality programs have the ability to recognize complexities in the diverse make-up of participants and to promote their potential for personal growth, creativity, and deeper human connections. Do controversial intersections among members of culturally diverse cohorts affect the way they view each other and their differing perspectives? What do they not see or what do they chose not to see? Building upon the sociocultural understanding of the sociocultural value of individuals and the interaction between them, this study was also framed by the ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2008). Using the ADDRESSING acronym, this framework looks at contexts through the categories of Age, Developmental disabilities, Disabilities acquired later in life, Religion, Ethnic and racial identity, Socioeconomic status, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, National origin, and Gender in an explanation of the interconnectedness of diversity's impact on individuals. Used in the counseling field with practitioners, its principles are highly adaptive to the adult education field and cohort groups within a sociocultural framework. These conceptualizations inform the foregrounding of cultural differences to help cohort members recognize the complexity of human experiences and cultural differences.

This study explored the ways in which members interacted with social and cultural contexts beyond their own personal sociocultural make-up and it is in this analysis of Hays' ADDRESSING model that students' perceptions can be seen over time. For instance, what happens to Caucasian students when they come into a closed learning environment such as culturally diverse cohorts? What happens to students of color when they come into a closed learning environment? What happens when a member with multiple ADDRESSING factors comes into such a culturally diverse classroom? For example, Charles was an African American male in his sixties among a predominately female group. His ADDRESSING factors limit and/or enhance his knowledge and experience in the learning exchange. According to Charles, who did comment on this very subject, "I had a very different perspective than the rest due to my age, race, gender, and life experiences. I think I helped others see new things and I know I felt refreshed learning from their perspectives." The significance of the ADDRESSING framework as a unit of analysis in cohort research rests in the assumption that learning in diverse cohorts is a process in which culture and language are ever-changing. Members, therefore, must be willing to "seek out information about the broader cultural meanings, seek out information about the group-specific meanings, listen to each member's individual perspective and when appropriate ask for clarification" (Hays, 2008).

Cultural markers and contextual influences bring realities of individually and socially constructed labels and biases, cultural values, and power structure to the forefront of the classroom. The findings offer insight into controversial intersections in cohorts. Controversial topics such as inequity, discrimination, and marginalization based

on individual positional markers such as race, gender, and class exist in the discourse of adult education and higher education. However, in-depth investigation into controversial topics is still fairly limited in the cohort literature. To understand cohort learning and diversity in this context, it is important to look at the intersections and impact of contextual factors in light of socially constructed notions of individual positional markers (age, race, gender, sexual orientation) or through the use of the ADDRESSING model. Indeed, Kaufmann's (2010) words speak to members of cohorts when he writes, "Race, class, and gender influences who spoke, what was spoken, what was not spoken and in what contexts" (p. 466).

Adult cohort classrooms, like other adult education classrooms, are places where students negotiate daily interactions with other people (Tisdell, 2001). Controversial interactions are contextual bound. For example, back to Charles, the African American male in his sixties, he was described very differently by his classmates. He was admired for his intelligence and leadership. Yet, he was feared and disliked for his profession of attorney. It is the way students treat each other and the way they are treated by others that influence their place in the classroom. The interplay and intersections of sociocultural factors assume significant effects in the classroom (Chang, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, 2003). Interaction diversity, which is the informal student- to-student cross-racial or cross-cultural contact in terms of frequency (Chang, 1999; Denson & Chang, 2009; Gurin, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002) is magnified because of the closed climate and the duration of interactions in cohorts. Therefore, findings from this study reveal that controversial intersections impact the experiences in a cohort learning environment in

varied ways. Although the findings validate that controversial intersections of members' life experiences and cultural markers offer a platform for examining and challenging biases, stereotypes, and power structures, each person, in light of their contexts and the interaction, internalize meaning differently.

Biases, stereotypes, and power structures perpetuate the dominant society where some students are better equipped and more open to breaking them down. For instance, one student came to the cohort with a racial agenda. She was Black, female and proud, and all would know it. From her controversial intersections, she came to know that she was "more than just the color of her skin." She could go beyond the fight for awareness. Desiree and the other students of color were much more adept at examining how sociocultural factors impacted their learning and personal spaces. Caucasian students were not as free or astute in their examinations of these controversial intersections. Why was that? The findings would suggest that Caucasian students in the comfort of the dominant discourse were less open to look at their own individual experiences and compare them with experiences of others in the class to create a shared culture and engage in greater learning(Sealy-Ruiz, 2007).

In a broader perspective, educators and scholars in adult education look to understand and effectively combat marginalization, stereotyping, and discrimination in the classroom. How and in what ways are sociocultural positions connected? Why are some sociocultural dimensions at the forefront of conversations among students in this study, whereas others were muted from conversations? Students in this study engaged in discussions regarding race, age, gender, and sexual orientation. However, they neglected

to include issues that involved religion and disabilities beyond a superficial mention. Misawa (2009) found that often students need to work at one perspective at a time. Is this what was happening for some members in this study? Students grappled with the sociocultural factors that were concrete and visible in the classroom. Why did students in this study not look closer at power and positionality as they recounted how they interacted with each other? Why did they not talk about some of the invisible sociocultural positions or markers? Although students in this study felt there was a degree of openness in their relationships to engage complex social thinking, engagement, and evaluation of some contexts, they were ill-equipped or unwilling to explore some contexts. It could be that they did not have the resources necessary to interrogate the new context to move beyond their individual account to a more complex and empowered view.

What is clear from this study is that individual perceptions do shape the perceptions of climate and interactions across differences. The answers rest in the process. Students in this study did engage in dialogue and critical reflection in regards to learning and what they gained through interactions with diverse cohort members. Clearly, some socially constructed sociocultural factors were of importance, whereas others were discounted. For culturally diverse cohorts, discussions validate that there is a relationship between the complexities of diversity in specific adult learning contexts in light of sociocultural factors and the learning environment in terms of participation and quality of the experience.

Reframing Cohort Educational Models through the Lens of Sociocultural Adult Education

Sociocultural views of learning in cohorts focus on centering the sociocultural backgrounds of the members and how they impact, change, and reframe the way in which adults learn. In cohorts and education, in general, “each person is born into sociocultural predestined positions, such as race, sexual orientation and gender, which influence his or her life” (Misawa, 2010, p. 188). In this point of discussion, I, first, explore how the discourse on cohorts may be analyzed and expanded in light of the findings. By examining and reframing the discourse on cohorts, the role and the impact of cohorts on adult education practices and knowledge production informs different understandings of contextual nature of learning in cohorts. Next, I examine a paradigm shift for the purposes and goals of cohorts. A paradigm is an analytical and interpretive frame in constructing the context of the discourse that looks at the impact on learning in cohorts. Is there a multi-dimensional view of cohorts?

Analysis of the Culturally Diverse Cohort Discourse

Sociocultural views of learning in cohorts acknowledge the context in which learning takes place. The context of learning rests on mediated activities and social processes such as participation and interaction (Alfred, 2002; Niewolny & Wilson, 2009; Wang, 2007). Therefore, how do we frame cohort interactions in a way in which assumptions regarding the prevailing views of cognition, problem-solving, knowledge construction, and every day experiences move beyond individual accounts of learning? The findings from this study suggest that there is a willingness to engage an empowered

view of learning where group climate, the role of individual participation, communication, group problem-solving, and inclusive practices reframe discussions regarding the challenges of culturally diverse cohorts. The emerging issues from the findings reveal the ways in which this empowered view of learning may facilitate an analytical framework that expands an understanding within the sociocultural view of learning regarding the impact on cohort experiences and the practice for adult educators. It is imperative that adult educators expand the discourse by initiating discussions on the ways cohorts operate in shaping members' experiences and influencing adult education practices. Examining the sociocultural understandings of co-construction of knowledge in cohorts would also facilitate an analysis of the impact of cohorts on personal and professional lives, thereby reshaping the context and goals of adult education and its practices and research.

When cohorts are seen for their heterogeneous make-up, culturally relevant approaches deepen the understanding of individual and collective responses in cohort research. The culturally diverse cohort encourages an awareness of cultural difference and the meaning of intragroup and intergroup realities (Haertel et al., 2008; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). The findings suggest that the emphasis in cohorts should shift to the ways in which cohorts engage active involvement, integration of learners' experiences, collaboration among all students, and group identity by focusing on the sociocultural context of each learner. This study's findings suggest that there is a need for additional integrated inclusive analyses or interpretations that adequately frame the ways

in which culturally diverse cohort members' experiences have had an impact on the adult educational landscape.

In cohorts, members engage in interactions with one another generating varying perceptions and understandings, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. Wang (2007) contends that the more student engagement, the greater the learning in cohorts. Cohort learning environments may be viewed as places in which adult change and effect change as witness by these findings. Drago-Severson et al. (2001), found that culturally diverse cohort members possess wide-ranging backgrounds, and the interplay of interactions helps each member understand those who are different. The challenges of these relational contexts rests in what it means to learn in sociocultural experiences that provide better and richer understandings of learning by theorizing mediated activities and social processes such as learning in culturally diverse cohorts as a new unit of analysis for adult education practice. This new unit of analysis leads us to the examination of a paradigm to provide guidance for effective, responsible, and authentic learning engagement in cohorts.

Understanding Culturally Diverse Cohorts in Adult Education through Two Dimensions of Individual and Group Development Models

A more inclusive view is needed for the new generation of cohorts, one that is more accurate and appropriate in understanding the lived experiences, concerns, and roles of culturally diverse cohorts for current and future adult learners. The philosophical and conceptual elements of this paradigm affirm the roles of culturally diverse cohorts and support the goals of optimal functionality and actualization of its members. By providing

a structure for examining the meaning making and an expanded interpretation of reality, the paradigm provides a deeper understanding of the human condition in culturally diverse cohorts or a glimpse into the nature of being in a culturally diverse cohort.

The findings suggest that the discourse on culturally diverse cohorts accounts for aspects of learning that support persistence and success as it pertains to the need of communities and underrepresented populations. The findings also indicate that explorations of cultural diversity and social interactions shape the learning process and validate the experience of the culturally diverse learner. I propose an additional way of viewing the new generation of cohort. Although Norris and Barnett (1994) built a foundation for understanding cohorts in adult education through a cohort model of individual and group development, there is another level of needs, motivations, and goals to take into consideration in a day of ever-increasing diversity in the adult education cohort classroom.

In Norris and Barnett's (1994) *Individual and Group Development: A Cohort Model*, three cornerstones exist: purpose, interaction, and interdependence. Within the interconnectedness of these cornerstones exists a hierarchy of needs; starting at the bottom and working up are support, security, friendship, knowledge and personal dream. Individual must meet one need before moving up to the next need or goal.

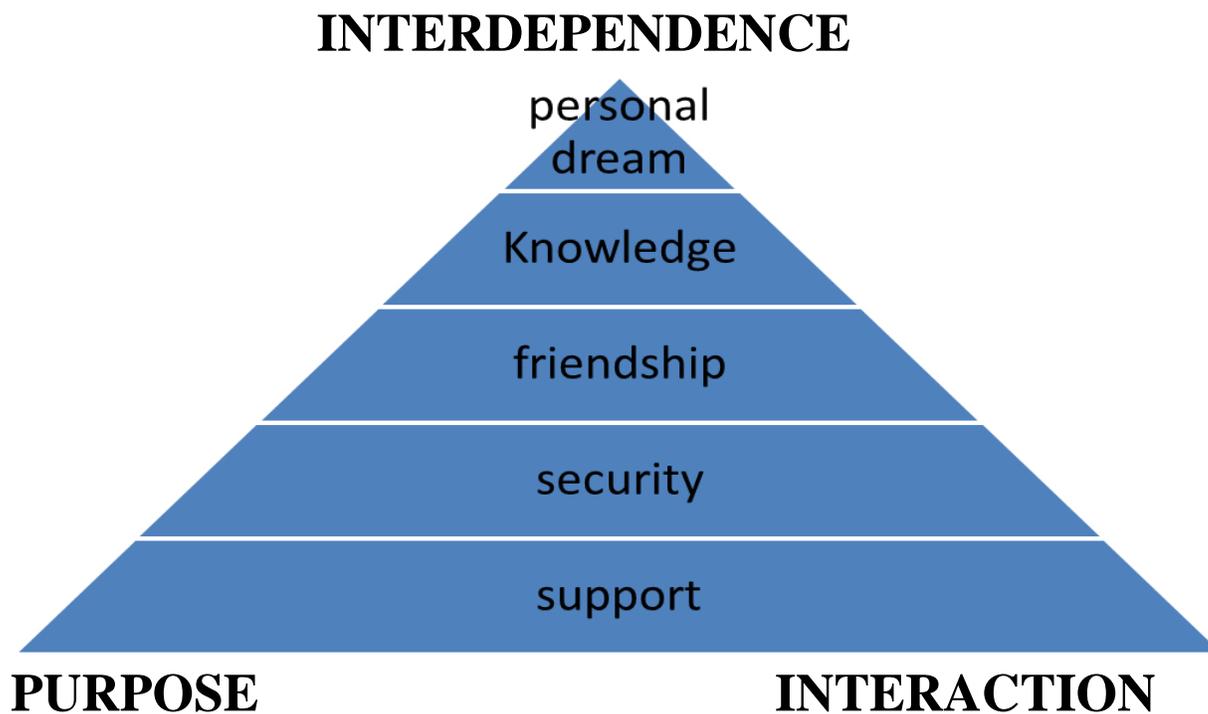


Figure 2. Individual and group development: A cohort model (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p. 34)

Norris and Barnett (1994) found that cohort involvement led to significant positive effects such as group bonding and group cohesiveness. This cohesiveness reflects the importance of the group's interactions and the interdependence cohort members build in a context or climate promoting both group and individual growth. This foundational model contends that the individual growth contributes to the development of the group.

Although it accounts for the relationship and the development of the individual and the group, the model is culturally neutral and says nothing about the sociocultural differences, the lived experiences, and the cultural context of cohorts. Norris and Barnett fail to address the cultural aspects of acquiring knowledge in cohorts through interactions and the multi-dimensions of members' backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, I

propose a second dimension to this triangular model in an effort to account for the cultural aspects of cohorts. By layering an additional set of needs and goals within an additional set of cornerstone, a more complete view of cohort learning begins to appear. This new generational view of cohorts that foregrounds members' sociocultural backgrounds is interconnected and interactive throughout and in conjunction with Norris and Barnett's (1994) model.

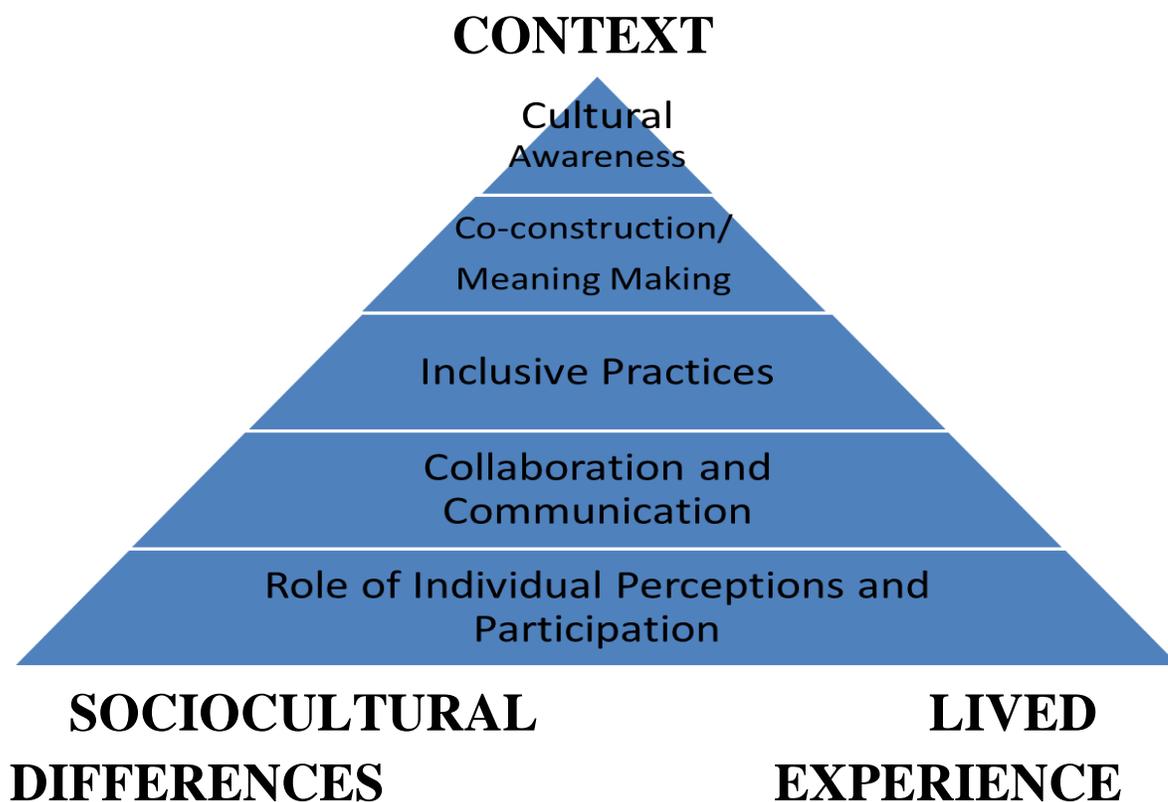


Figure 3. Sociocultural dimension of culturally diverse cohorts (Callaghan)

In this additional dimension for cohorts, there exists a relationship that is reciprocal and cyclic of lived experience, sociocultural differences and context. Again, a

hierarchy of needs occurs and is at play: working up from the bottom is role of individual perceptions and participation, collaboration and communication, inclusive practices, co-construction or meaning making, and finally, cultural awareness. The interplay and the interconnectedness involved are critical for the optimal development of individual members of the group as well as for optimal development of the group itself as is the case for Norris and Barnett's model.

Because Norris and Barnett's (1994) model represents a group view of cohorts, this added dimension rests on the role of the individuals and their perceptions of the context, the cultural backgrounds of the other members and their lived experiences. Students' lived experiences when shaped by sociocultural factors make learning more effective. Therefore, the individual has a role in the learning through participation. It is the extent of that participation in the cohort that affects the collaboration and communication among the group. This communication and collaboration builds community, affiliation, a sense of belonging, mutual learning, collective decision-making, cooperation, and problem-solving. Next, inclusive practices in groups provide rich and extensive sets of resources that impact and create learning through dialogue and reflection just as the findings revealed in this study. Students in this study identified effective inclusive practices to include active involvement, integration of learner's experiences, intergroup dialogue, and analysis of their experiences through critical reflection. Students work together to build a group consensus, group identity, and cross-cultural and cross-racial relationships by co-constructing knowledge and making sense of their experiences together. This focus is on the sociocultural contexts of the learners

involved. Finally, cohort members who have moved from individual accounts of their learning world to a more empowered way of knowing through their interactions with other members' sociocultural backgrounds and experience gain a sense of cultural awareness as an optimal developmental stage. The goal is for culturally diverse cohort members to look at their individual experiences, compare those experiences with others in the class, and create a shared culture that foster greater learning.

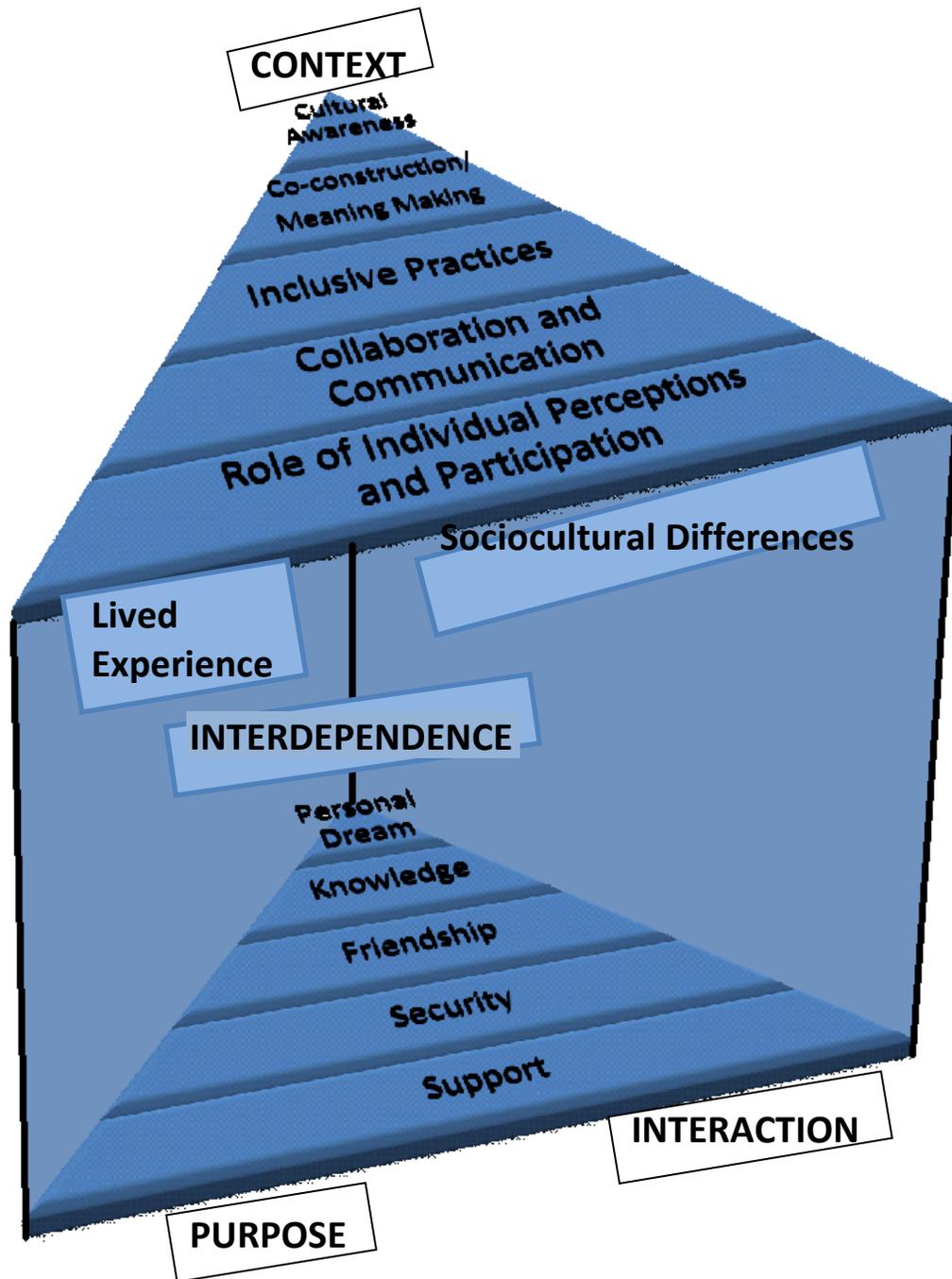


Figure 4. Three-dimensional progression through the Individual and group development: A cohort model categories (Norris & Barnett, 1994, p. 34) and the Sociocultural dimension of culturally diverse cohorts categories (Callaghan)

As a legitimate addition to a solid conceptual framework, this added dimension of the model visually represents our conceptual knowledge on culturally diverse cohorts to date by examining and understanding the membership elements within cohorts to better understand and generate empowered responses to issues surrounding cohort educational models. Operating, interacting, and learning within the two dimensions makes voices in cohort understanding more welcoming, vibrant, and alive as the two dimensions are in constant interplay.

Implications for Practice: Individual and Collective Responses to Culturally Diverse Cohorts

Today, institutions of higher education have an ever-increasing need to finding cost effective ways to deliver programs. With the ever-increasing diversity within higher education, cohorts continue to be a popular delivery mode of programming for adult students. In addition, cohorts provide institutions with ways to examine new programs, formats, and strategies. For some institutions, cohorts continue to operate as incubators for the development of new methods, curriculum, and policies. More importantly, cohorts continue to provide pathways to increase retention, graduation, and satisfaction rates mainly because of the formation of social and academic networks (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Dorn, Papaluis & Brown, 1997; Hill, 1992; Nesbit, 2001; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). The findings of this study offer important implications for practice regarding the individual and collective context of cohorts.

The intent of this study had been to reveal through exploration of the meaning cohort members attach to their experiences that they can create new opportunities to learn

with one another. In practical terms, the findings of the study suggest that if members are willing to be open and engage in a climate that at times may be difficult and uncomfortable, there are opportunities for experiences that are meaningful and life-changing. Therefore, the implications for sociocultural views of learning in cohorts constitute a useful avenue for gaining more detailed insights into the specific reasons why the culturally diverse cohort experiences are so meaningful and life-changing.

The first implication for practice is that the cohort becomes a site of learning no less important than the regular classroom and remains a legitimate educational strategy. Needs of cohorts are completely different from the needs of the traditional college student. Therefore, mindful considerations regarding resources should inform the roles and responsibilities of cohorts. Cohorts involve different demographic profiles for participants, different marketing strategies, varied courses and lengths of study, and different sets of resources and student service needs. Attention to retention, graduation, and success rates regarding adults is paramount to cohort success.

Second, cohort programming must be designed to encourage learning as situated, participatory, and socially mediated activities, and social processes. It is important for cohort members to gain a greater understanding of self, appreciation for others, and the ability to engage in an empowered and culturally responsive learning environment. In addition, assessment of student learning must focus on outcomes in line with this view. Culturally relevant curriculum based on the cultural aspects of acquiring knowledge in cohorts can positively impact learning, higher student achievement, and cognitive development.

Third, students should be oriented and educated with the necessary tools to enhance the potential of cohorts learning and success from sociocultural perspectives. Cultural context have a significant role and emphasis on developing different ways of knowing. Reducing biases, fostering openness to multiple perspectives, building cross-cultural and cross-racial relationships, and teaching to a cultural awareness aids cohort members in constructing new ways of learning based on their own cultural backgrounds and experiences, their interpretations of other's backgrounds and experiences, and the ways in which they make sense of it all.

A related implication for practice involves how members convey meaning of the social constructs of cohorts while exploring the individual, the interactions among peers, and the deeper understanding of the social world. This exploration involves implications of positionalities and the systems that support or fail to support cohorts. Cultural values and political systems in education impact the learning processes in cohorts. Administrators, educators, and students should be careful of the ways in which these systems hamper learning such as external conflicts, lack of commitment, lack of multiple methods of instruction, and changes in policies and procedures.

Another implication for practice is how to integrate and embed this sociocultural paradigm into cohort program planning, curriculum, resource allocation, faculty use, teaching exchange, community, and workplace. Although this study involved student learning in cohort from a student perspective, there are certainly implications for the program planning, curriculum content, resources, faculty use and exchange, and community and workplace endeavors. In terms of program planning and development,

the findings inform multiple delivery methods including blended and online classroom. Tisdell et al. (2004) contend that cohorts based on technological advances and delivery methods provide “collaborative learning and knowledge construction grounded in participatory education principles that works in spite of the constraints of technology” (p. 125). Cohorts, in multiple forms, offer a space where there is potential to serve as a learning laboratory in the closed-learning environment. Better programs and planning with emphasis on the individual and the group in mind hold great implications for practice. The balance or lack of balance in regards to individuals and the group trade-off affects learning in cohorts. There is great potential for developing adult education programs for the multicultural landscape of today’s adult learners.

For faculty, this exploration of students’ perceptions offers several implications for practice. First, faculty must believe in the cohort education model and its mission. In addition, faculty must understand how to teach adults and what motivations, needs and goals they bring to the class. Teaching eighteen-year-old college students is not the same as teaching adults. For example, students in this study were quick to identify projects and assignments that were not appropriate for adults. In addition, when teaching in a multicultural landscape, diversity in faculty is helpful. For one of the cohorts in my study, findings indicated that the lack of diversity in the faculty limited their educational experiences and overall satisfaction.

Finally, adult educators should include formal and informal socially mediated activities that represent the sociocultural realities and lived experience of the students. When educators who teach adults facilitate a learning environment foregrounded with

students' sociocultural differences, there is greater potential for meaning-making centered on all members' values, beliefs, and knowledge. When educators include members' lived experience, there is greater potential for growth, learning, satisfaction, and success.

The findings in this study inform other educational environments. Cohort models have become popular in the diverse world of the workplace. Employee training and development programs involving leadership and teamwork development are adopting the use and principles of cohorts. Likewise, community organizations such as movements, alumni groups, and orientations use cohort principles. Interestingly, Saltiel and Russo (2001) noted that "the layers of generations of cohorts and their networks will create a chain of knowledge of process and of content" (p. 109).

One of the study's most interesting and unexpected finding offers significant implications and recommendations for practice as we, as educators and practitioners, try to answer how to serve culturally diverse cohort students better and how we hear all voices in a cohort. Belenky et al. (1997) explored ways in which community institutions foster the development of individual and collective voice to challenge and transform the status quo. Why do some members stay silent? How can we hear all voices in cohorts? "Voice is related to the means whereby teachers and students attempt to make themselves present in history and to define themselves as active authors of their own worlds" (Weiler, 1988, p.xiii). Cohorts possess great potential as inclusive spaces to hear all voices. Yet, at the same time, cohorts can silence of some members if not properly managed.

Implications and recommendations for the culturally diverse classroom involve ways in which institutions, educators, administrators and students engage in interactions that respect and value the lived experience of all cohort members. All students, faculty, and administrators need to be equipped with a general knowledge and common language to begin such inclusive learning exchanges. Faculty must set ground rules. Students and educators must be willing to share and hear all voices in the room. Attention to silence, marginalization, power, and control must be quickly addressed. The classroom should be a place of empowerment for all. Finally, cohorts offer greater access for diverse adult learners. Informed by the literature and the findings, I recommend building cohorts models that embed considerations based around diverse ideas, information, and people to ensure social thinking, critical thinking, satisfaction, persistence, and cultural awareness.

Suggestions for Future Research and Limitations of the Study

The findings from this study suggest several areas for future research. Post-cohort studies might investigate whether cohort friendship and professional bonds last long after graduating. For instance, do the bonds formed in cohorts remain in 5 years, 10 years or 15 years? If so, how have they changed? Are these friendships cross-cultural or cross-racial? Related to this ideas, are members of cohorts more successful in their professional lives than students who are not members of cohorts? Are former cohort students more likely to gravitate to team membership roles in companies? Do they join professional networks and associations that act to extend cohort membership benefits?

Future research should continue to investigate the roles of professors and curriculum content in cohort education. Although this study did not investigate the

faculty perspective, students offered insight into teaching-learning exchanges that provide personal academic benefits such as culturally relevant practices. In what ways might culturally relevant practices in culturally diverse cohorts foster greater learning by reframing and reconceptualizing faculty experiences regarding the role of facilitation and curriculum? Findings in this study suggest that when faculty actively engage in intergroup dialogue, students reported higher level thinking, greater critical reflection, and increased achievement and satisfaction.

Future studies should seek to find further support for phenomena of cliques, silence and voice, and identify to what extent these phenomena are present in other population groups. For instance, do cliques form along racial, generational, or gender lines in culturally diverse cohorts? Future research should attempt to identify other individual difference variables that impact interactions, learning, positionalities, and drop-out rates in cohort and non-cohort comparison groups.

Finally, future research should examine pre-conditions for fostering success for cohort groups with members' sociocultural differences in the foreground. Should cohort educational programs offer orientation sessions focused on diversity training and cross-cultural or cross-racial relationship building? This particular study, drawing on sociocultural views of learning, the ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2008) and Norris and Barnett's model (1994), begins to make a contribution to these considerations. Yet, further research must be done on the ways cohorts can better serve the needs of adult learners and provide them with a quality education.

There are several limitations of this study that merit attention. First, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalizable because they are limited to two specific programs at one institution and had a limited number of respondents. The study examined only students' perceptions in culturally diverse cohorts and not the actual curricular content or the faculty input. A cohort is only as good as its facilitators and curricula. It is possible that the interpretation of the findings may be different if layered with faculty voices and analysis of course content. Although I did use informal consultation with faculty and program coordinators, I specifically elected to look solely at cohort peers and the perceptions of their interactions.

Another limitation of this study involves the nature of the cohorts examined. The study considered two cohorts in the human services field where diversity is embedded throughout the curriculum. It is possible that interpretation of findings may be different if cohorts had been from engineering, math, or science fields where there is less emphasis on diversity.

As another limitation, the study relied entirely on self-reporting by cohort members and it is not possible to check the veracity of their declarations regarding certain aspects. Reliance on self-reporting can be problematic and may threaten the validity of the findings. It is possible that the participants were biased in their responses or they may have felt uncomfortable answering questions.

Finally, another possible limitation may have existed with the research design. Qualitative research is very limited in its ability to generalize findings. Although the data are descriptive and rich in nature, they are individualized to two cohorts at one off-site

location for one institution. One final thought is that addressing all of the limitations in future research could further the work of the research study.

Conclusion and Reflection of the Research Experience

The findings of this study show that sociocultural views of learning in cohorts are useful for investigations surrounding the interactions among cohort members. The emphasis that these views place on social context permit an understanding of learning as a social process in which students engage in learning through cohort membership. Learning in cohorts takes place through participation, mediated activities, social processes, and peer interactions. The culturally diverse classroom centered on the sociocultural context and the impact on learning represents an interplay and interconnectedness that when interacted upon sheds light on how members make sense of their experiences. The experiences in the culturally diverse cohort classroom represent a context of learning characterized by moments that are powerful, meaningful, marginalizing, and difficult, just to name a few.

This dissertation began in chapter 1 with a personal glimpse of a powerful cohort moment in that I encountered within my cohort experience.

In year one of my doctoral program, a fellow student reported recent experiences of racism and the effect it had on her as a multiracial female. She gave examples of racist comments made by her faculty, staff, and students from the university. In response, a few cohort members and the instructor said she must have interpreted the situation incorrectly. There was an assumption by some in the classroom that faculty and administration could not be racist or guilty of making such in appropriate and ignorant

comments. I, along with many in the room, remained silent. Tensions in the classroom, emotional reactions, and unfamiliar territory (discussions of diversity, power, and positionality) were preventing my willingness to speak out. The few who attempted to wrestle with the subject only managed to make additional inappropriate and marginalizing remarks. Internally, I longed to scream, "She has every right to feel the way she feels and interpret the situation the way she did!" Why did this well-intentioned cohort minimize her feelings by the comments from a few and the silence by many? Why did they assume her interpretation must be wrong or misconstrued?

Easy, we live in a world that feeds the dominant society, and cohorts are no different. Most cohorts are not equipped to handle such discussions. Although we may say that an educational department is obligated to be liberating and free from racism, discrimination and marginalization, as findings from this study support, we all bring to the classroom our stereotypes, bias, and prejudices. Had this even happened today knowing what I know, I would not have stayed silent. I would have supported my fellow cohort member because I was influenced by her perspective. I could have questioned the status quo. I could have brought into question the assumptions others were making. My years with my cohort, indeed, made me a better person, and I am the person I am today because of the interactions with the cohort. I learned to look at things differently just as participants in my study reported. A moment like this will never again happen in my life because I have the words and understanding to speak out.

I also advocate an individual understanding of the impact and influences of these cohorts within my educational and professional practices. I possess a commitment to my

practice by introducing this additional analytical and interpretive frame of cohorts in program planning, recruiting, assessing, and funding. The discourse on cohorts and my dedication to this study and its rich findings helped me to recognize viable options to understand the importance and impact of cohorts on the individual as well as the collective group. How have I changed as a result of my interactions with my cohort and this research process on cohorts? I accepted and embraced my journey through the role of individual participation and perceptions, communication and collaboration, inclusive practices, co-construction of knowledge and meaning making, and cultural awareness. I could not have come to this higher level of awareness without first having support, security, friendship, knowledge, and a personal dream (Norris & Barnett, 1994). I am committed to my work with cohorts.

Cohorts hold defining moments for their members. Permeating each area of the findings are the realizations I gained by conducting this in-depth study with cohort members, being a member of a cohort myself, and working with cohorts in my professional life. Indeed, cohorts provide a context in which members can examine their core values, assumptions, and knowledge base. The space in which cohorts live is collective, individualized, and all about the responses to the context. There is more than self in cohorts, there is also us.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE - Culturally Diverse Cohort: Learning in Context and Community

Setting foundation and background

1. Briefly, please provide some background information about yourself
 - Occupation (upon entering the cohort and now)
 - program of study
 - length of time in the cohort
 - previous educational programs (associates degree, undergrad, other colleges)
2. When you hear the word cohort, what comes to mind?
3. Tell me about what brought you to this cohort program at this university.
4. How was the cohort program described to you, either in an information session or orientation, by this university?
5. Describe your first initial experiences with the faculty and other members of the cohort. Again, this may be in the information session, orientation, or the first class.

Cohort Experience

6. Tell me about your cohort experience.
7. How was being in a cohort different than previous academic programs and experiences?
8. Was this experience what you thought it would be like? How?
9. What were your reactions to the cohort method?
 - Anything negative about the cohort experience?
 - Anything positive about the cohort experience?
10. In what ways, if any, did your feelings about the cohort evolve or change over time?

Issues of Diversity in Cohorts

11. When you think of cultural diversity, what does it mean to you?

12. Tell me about the group make-up in your cohort in terms of diversity (age, race, ethnicity, disabilities, religion, nationality, socioeconomic status, etc.)? Do you consider your cohort to be culturally diverse?
13. If yes: What was the most significant about the diversity or what strikes you most about the diversity?
14. What was your initial reaction of being in a diverse cohort? What was it like to beone of two males ...a student of colora White studentetc. Were there certain members you identified with or did not identify with?

Learning in Diverse Groups

15. What was it like to learn in a diverse cohort? (classroom discussions, online discussions, group work, outside of class work)
16. In what ways did the cohort impact the learning?
- Positively
 - Negatively
 - Examples of challenging experience in discussions.
 - Examples of multiple perspectives shared?
17. Have I missed anything?
- Please describe any further aspects of your experience that you felt would be important to this discussion.

Demographic Questionnaire

Gender Male Female

What is your age? _____

What is your ethnicity? Hispanic or Latino Not Hispanic or Latino

What is your race? Mark one of more races to indicate what you consider yourself to be.

White Asian Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Black or African American American Indian or Alaska Native

Other:

What is your current marital status?

Divorced Remarried/living with another partner Married

Separated Single/never married Widowed

Do you have any children? If yes, how many and ages?

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Professional Experience

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- Coordinator of Off-Campus Programs**, Shippensburg University, Office of
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- Career Advisor**, Medical Careers Institute, Office of Career Services, Newport News,
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- Executive Director, William and Mary Tax Conference**, William and Mary School of
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- Assistant Director, Office of Career Services**, William and Mary School of Law,
Williamsburg, Virginia, May 1999 to August 2004

Professional Memberships/Leadership

- University Continuing Education Association (UCEA)
Awards Committee-2007 to present and Co-Chair, 2008; Chair, 2009
- Shippensburg Rotary Club
Advisor to Rotaract Club (University chapter); and Chair Rotary-Rotaract
Outreach and Support – 2007 to present

Presentations

- Fall 2009 Cumberland Valley Women's Consortium**
Yes, you really can go back to college
- December 2010 Adult Education Symposium**
Culturally Diverse Cohorts: The Exploration of Learning in Context and
Community
- December 2011 Adult Education Symposium**
Culturally Diverse Cohorts: The Exploration of Learning in Context and
Community