

IDENTIFYING THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED ADULT STUDENTS IN  
PERSISTING TO EARN THE GED CREDENTIAL

by

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APPROVAL

The abstract and dissertation of Sam May-Varas for the Doctor of Education in Leadership were presented April 2015, and accepted by the examining committee.

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on documenting the stories of adult General Educational Development (GED) students enrolled in a GED preparation program. The study addressed the following question: What factors contribute to the success of adult GED test takers earning the credential? Using Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, the study documented the stories of six adult students. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group were utilized to collect data. The data were analyzed and the themes of relationships and extrinsic motivation/future goals emerged as important factors in students earning the credential. The students in this study experienced disorienting dilemmas and critically reflected after engaging in dialogue with fellow students, instructors, and family members and friends. These factors contributed to the adult students earning the GED.

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## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this research project to three amazing individuals. For all the love and support my wife, Carrie, offered me throughout the process-thank you. The inspiration and love provided by my children, Sarah and Nicholas. Without my wonderful family, none of this hard work would have been possible.

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH STUDY

An individual's future success in the workplace heavily relies on postsecondary education (American Council on Education, 2010, p. 2). The General Educational Development (GED) test offers students a chance to earn a high school equivalency credential to pursue postsecondary education. This credential, originally released in 1942, provided military personnel returning from World War II the prospect of earning a high school equivalency credential and continues to provide many individuals this opportunity (Reder, 2007, p. 3). This credential may assist students in accessing higher educational institutions, especially if they followed non-traditional paths. This study documents stories in order to critically examine the factors that lead adult GED students to earn the credential.

The 2002 GED test series utilized a five subject area test to assess the knowledge equivalent to that of a high school graduate. These subjects included reading, writing, science, social studies, and math. In response to changing labor market demands, the test was recently rewritten. The 2014 GED test series consists of four subject area tests which include English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. The literature review in this study addresses the 2002 GED test series. Students who participated in the interviews and focus group completed the 2014 GED test series because at the time of this research, the new version of the test had very

recently been implemented. This new version also allows adults to show their readiness for college and careers. The GED provides high school dropouts a gateway to higher education and preparation for the labor market.

“In 2013, more than 848,000 adults worldwide took at least one of the five GED content area tests, also known as subtest” (GED Testing Service, 2014, p. 2). These adults seeking a high school equivalency often experienced numerous challenges both in life and in educational settings. “Their most prevalent reasons for not completing school were absenteeism, difficulties in math, dislike of school, or pregnancy” (Quigley, Becker-Patterson, & Zhang, 2011, p. 6).

Although they may have faced challenges and barriers, those who persist may offer some insight into how individuals can succeed in earning the GED credential. As a former GED instructor for 8 years, I worked with a diverse population in both the community college and high school settings. The GED groups in these settings included males and females from different ethnic backgrounds and age groups. In the community college setting, my class was primarily comprised of male and female white and Hispanic students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds ranging in ages from 16-55. Below I share two stories of my former students that set the stage for my research.

### **Sonia’s Story**

Sonia experienced many difficult moments as a white female high school student from a lower socioeconomic group. Sonia began high school attending classes

and making adequate progress. When she entered her sophomore year, life changed both academically and socially.

The classes began to overwhelm her and making decisions to be with her friends versus school severely affected her academic success. Sonia's math class became a significant hurdle because she lacked foundational math skills. Eventually, she stopped attending and fell behind in her schoolwork. She became pregnant at age 16, dropped out of high school and began a different phase of her life.

The life-changing event of becoming a mother caused her to look for work and start the next stage of her life. Sonia continued raising her child and working as a daycare worker until her late twenties when she was faced with possibly losing her job because she lacked sufficient education. This lack of a high school diploma or a GED caused her to reexamine her decisions and explore options. Sonia committed to continuing her education by pursuing the GED. The GED path would prove to be a crucial yet difficult journey.

Sonia desired to complete her GED as quickly as possible and pursue further education. As her goal of completing the GED in 10 weeks extended to 20 and 30 weeks, she became discouraged. She never gave up because she was focused on her goal. Sonia possessed sufficient reading and writing skills as well as very basic math skills. She would continue to build her math skills, despite the anxiety caused by engaging in math lessons. We continued to work together and she eventually mastered the math necessary to pass the GED and enter Portland Community College (PCC) as a full-time student.

Sonia completed her associate of arts degree and transferred to Portland State University to study early childhood education. Her experience in the GED preparation program transformed her life and she attributes her success to the support, encouragement, and focused math instruction she received.

### **Bob's Story**

Bob experienced a very challenging life filled with numerous high and low points. He was willing to share his life story and journey from dropping out of high school to successfully completing 4 out of 5 GED tests (2002 Series) as an adult in his 50s.

Early in his life, Bob struggled with schoolwork and needed significant reading and math assistance, which filled him with frustration. Bob's academic challenges continued throughout high school. He finally dropped out to pursue full-time work. After many years of working in low paying jobs and battling alcoholism, he decided it was time for a change. He could not advance in jobs or find any work at times because he lacked a high school diploma or GED. This is when he decided to enroll in the GED program at PCC.

At the age of 58, Bob realized it was time to complete his education and obtain the skills needed, he believed, to pursue better employment options. When he finally entered the GED program he had completed 3 of the 5 tests (2002 Test Series) needed to earn the credential. The final areas would significantly challenge him and his efforts to succeed proved to be a very frustrating time in his life. He struggled with mastering the academic skills needed to pass the writing and math tests.



Similar to many adults, Bob's life experience and several years of fighting his way through challenges would pay off. Bob was not going to give up. Although he continued to struggle with attending class because of employment obligations, he devised a schedule and made it work. Each day Bob would submit some form of writing activity and complete a plethora of math questions. Slowly he worked through each area and eventually passed his writing tests. When I left my position within the GED program, he was still working on his math classes and staying focused on his goals. I know one day I will hear about his success.

These stories represent a snapshot of the many adult students participating in GED preparation programs to develop the academic skills needed to earn the GED. The credential offers these adult students the option to pursue further education or move on to improved employment opportunities. While the GED credential provides individuals a path to postsecondary education or additional employment, it also offers both additional non-economic and economic benefits to the individual and the larger community.

### **Benefits of More GED Completers**

Song and Hsu (2008) found major differences, on non-economic factors, between adults with GED credentials and adults with less than a high school education or a traditional high school diploma. The following categories represent these differences:

1. GED credential recipients show a higher level of political and social participation than adults with less than a high school education, but generally lag behind adults with high school diplomas.

2. GED credential recipients have a better family literacy environment than do adults with less than a high school education and a comparable environment with high school graduates.
3. GED credential recipients reported themselves in “excellent or good” health more than adults with less than a high school education but less than adults with high school diplomas.
4. GED credential recipients have a comparable percentage of having health insurance with adults with less than a high school education but lag behind traditional high school graduates, particularly in having employer-provided insurance.
5. GED credential recipients obtain information on public events as well as health issues more often than the adults with less than high school education, and comparable with adults with high school diplomas through every source surveyed. (pp. 33-34)

Although these non-economic factors are meaningful and may offer the larger community some benefit, my research focuses on the economic benefits of earning the GED credential.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census there are more than 39 million adults 16 and older who lack a high school credential (American Council on Education, 2011). This number represents a loss of \$315 trillion in lost wages that are not being spent by consumers or taxed (GED Testing Service, 2014). The New York Post (Staff Reporter, 2013) reported that high school dropouts cost society approximately \$1.8 billion annually in lost tax revenue.

In Oregon, the 389,000 Oregonians without a high school diploma represent a loss of approximately \$2.7 billion in lost wages not being spent on consumer products and taxes (GED Testing Service, 2014). This demonstrates the societal need for

developing a deeper understanding of the success factors leading to adults earning the GED credential.

As adult educators learn more about these success factors, programs and support services can be enhanced, potentially leading to an increased number of adults earning the credential. The increased number of credentials will add to the national and local economic base by potentially filling numerous open positions.

Unfortunately, unlike Sonia and Bob, many students do not complete the GED. Understanding the lived experiences of students, like Sonia and Bob, who earned the credential can assist postsecondary institutions in providing more intentional and purposeful support for adult students reentering the educational system to develop college and career readiness skills.

### **Reasons for Reentering Education**

The labor market will continue to require more and more skilled workers and high school dropouts will need to pursue postsecondary education as adults in order to fully participate in the labor market. Adult learners will require additional academic support because they may possess gaps in their academic skills (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011, p. 90). This skill development is one of the reasons adult students return to an educational setting to remain competitive in the workplace.

### **Federal and State Influence on the Educational System**

Over the next several years, our society will be affected by changing labor market demands and both federal and state initiatives. These demands will have an impact on the opportunities available to high school graduates and GED credential

recipients. “By 2018, nearly two-thirds of the nation’s jobs will require some postsecondary education . . . while demand for other workers will stay flat” (Kelly & Strawn, 2011, p. 1).

The United States, including the state of Oregon, is committed to providing every citizen with the education necessary to achieve academic and economic success. “This [education] can be a community college or a four year school, vocational training, or an apprenticeship” (United States Department of Education, 2010, p. 1). This national attention creates an opportunity for researchers to develop a better understanding of students, especially the students who struggle most.

The Oregon Legislature has set an ambitious goal to ensure students are better prepared by 2025, therefore, achieving Oregon’s 40/40/20 goal. Specifically, the Oregon Legislature:

has set an ambitious goal to ensure that by 2025:

- 40 percent of adult Oregonians have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher;
- 40 percent of adult Oregonians have earned an associate’s degree or postsecondary credential as their highest level of educational attainment; and
- 20 percent of all adult Oregonians have earned at least a high school diploma, an extended or modified high school diploma, or the equivalent of a high school diploma as their highest level of educational achievement. (Oregon State Office of the Governor, 2011, p. 1)

The goal is to make individuals become more competitive and productive in the workplace. Community colleges play a significant role in providing students with academic opportunities to develop the college and career readiness skills necessary to remain competitive in the workplace.

## **Labor Market and Education**

The educational system plays an important role in preparing adults for college and careers. According to Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010), approximately 63% of job openings in 2018 will require workers with at least some college education or higher. This number has dramatically increased from 28% of jobs requiring some college education or higher in 1973 (p. 14). The sharp increase in the percentage of jobs requiring some college or higher highlights the importance of students, such as GED completers, being prepared for postsecondary education. As more students become prepared and remain in postsecondary education, Oregon can achieve its goal: “to become one of the best-educated citizenries in the world” (Oregon State Office of the Governor, 2011, p. 1).

Currently, the number of Oregonians with some postsecondary training or higher ranges from approximately 27-29% (Oregon University System, 2011). These numbers indicate an increased need for preparing students to persist in postsecondary education to achieve Oregon’s 40/40/20 goal and potentially improve Oregon’s economy. Adult Basic Education (ABE) students and programs that prepare these students play a critical role in meeting this goal. GED instructors assist students in earning the credential and therefore have an excellent opportunity to support Oregonians in achieving the 40/40/20 goal by preparing the adult GED student population for postsecondary education.

Oregon, however, faces a tough challenge because differences exist within the GED population. For example, according to 2004 GED Cohort data, students 35 years

and older enroll in college at a lower rate of 26.7% when compared to 16- to 24-year-old students, who enroll at a 46.8% rate (Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011, p. 10) immediately after earning the GED credential.

These data present a serious issue for all GED completers and the postsecondary educational system because although these completers pursue postsecondary education they are not enrolling at a very high rate. This demonstrates the need for research to better understand the factors that led adult GED students to earn the credential. By developing a deeper understanding of successful GED completers, the system can provide more purposeful support.

### **Problem Statement**

The literature on GED students has often focused on documenting the percentage of test candidates and test passers. Though we know much about how many students enter, how many take the test, and how many pass (American Council on Education, 2011) we know much less about the lived experiences of students in the GED programs. Only a small number of studies focus on these stories. Even fewer examine why some of these students are successful in completing a GED program and why others are not. In fact, Quigley et al. (2011) recently reported that the stories of GED students “have yet to be told” (p. 2). Such studies are crucial to help researchers and practitioners understand how to best support adult learners who select alternative pathways for their education.

### **Purpose Statement**

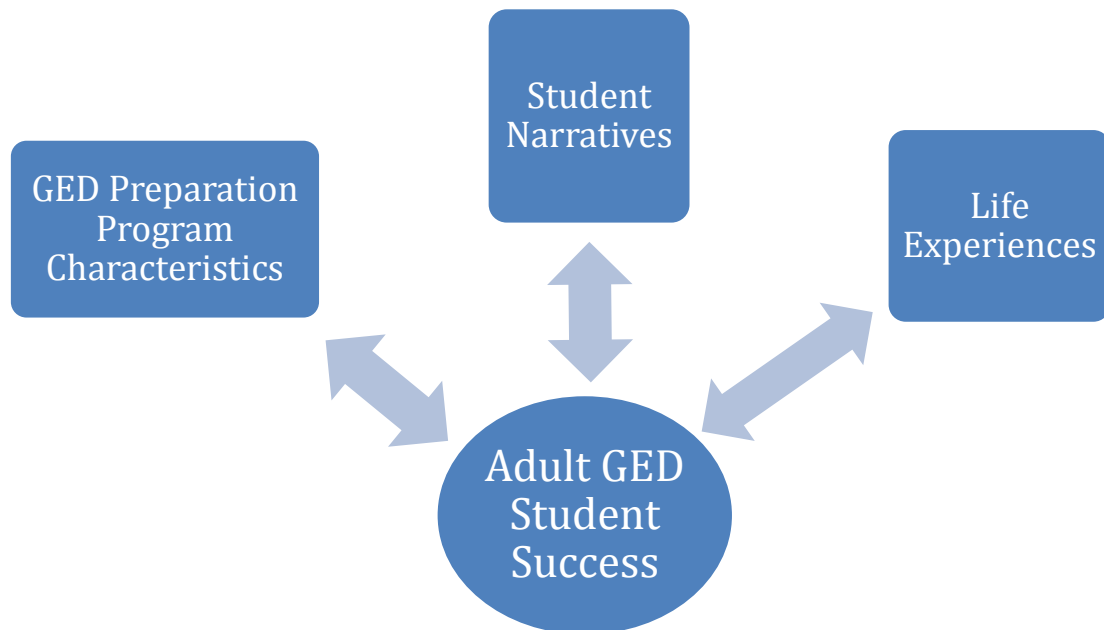
The purpose of this study is to document the narratives of adult GED students' experiences from entering a GED program through earning the credential.

Stories offer individuals an opportunity to provide in-depth information about how they experience life.

Merriam (2009) stated that understanding lives from the perspective of those being researched allows for the greatest opportunity to affect change in people's lives (p. 1). The stories of successful students can help programs replicate the services that allowed these completers to meet their goals.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Figure 1 graphically demonstrates key concepts that impact the success of a GED student including life experiences, narratives, and the impact of their enrollment in a GED preparation program. Although each of these areas greatly affects the GED student, it is the constant interaction among them that influences the students' decision to stay with the program or leave. I review each in turn.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework.

### **Narratives**

Narratives provide a deeper understanding of the human experience (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). Adult GED students return to educational settings with numerous stories or narratives that have assisted them in understanding their lives. Merriam (2009) writes that “stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand our world” (p. 32). GED instructors hear many narratives about how life has affected an individual’s perspective and choices, especially related to educational pursuits. Mullet, Akerson, and Turman (2013) described how everyone brings different experiences that may impede or enhance academic and social growth (p. 72). These encounters are valuable learning tools and may help guide individuals in making life decisions. “Narrative users believe



that people give meaning to their lives and relationships through stories” (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1034).

Hughes, Gibbons, and Mynatt (2013) described narratives as a “platform” for individuals to explore the many issues affecting decisions (p. 43). Adult educators can better understand learners and therefore develop learning situations to assist students in reframing the stories that can support learning (Mullet et al., 2013, p. 74). The “story or narrative can be defined as a collection of lived experiences . . .” (Stebleton, 2010, p. 65). Although adult educators are not therapists, the use of narrative techniques allows students to explore issues in their lives and use the positive components to work toward achieving goals.

When adult GED students reenter the educational system, they may enter with a significant level of anxiety and apprehension. Past experiences, such as failing classes and not developing relationships with teachers, often result in students being nervous about school and doubting their ability to be academically and socially successful. As students share narratives, they are able to reframe their experiences, which offers them the insight into what held them back, such as anxiety and doubt. By sharing narratives in groups, students can hear multiple perspectives and consequently rethink their future and academic ability (Mullet et al., 2013, p. 75). Exploring narratives and life experiences continue to be an extremely beneficial strategy in working with adult learners to support transformation.

### **Life Experiences**

Students' life experiences are very likely to play a role in their lived experiences as GED completers. Adults experience numerous opportunities to learn new skills, grow both academically and emotionally, and make life changes. The most relevant adult learning occurs informally through life experiences (Merriam & Clark, 2006, p. 30), though a significant number of adults also pursue education through formal routes.

Adult learners return to school for a variety of reasons, although job-related incentives appear to be the most prevalent (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 62). There are many adult workers in the labor force who either lack a high school diploma or postsecondary education. According to the 2010 U.S. Census there are more than 39 million adults 16 years and older who lack a high school credential and are not enrolled in any educational program (American Council on Education, 2011). Enrollment in a formal educational setting may assist adults in developing the college and career readiness skills necessary for postsecondary and workplace success. The changing labor market demands necessitate that individuals earn postsecondary credentials to obtain family wage earning jobs (Carnevale et al., 2010).

Additional support is needed for adults returning to education to develop college and career readiness skills. Not all adults have achieved academic success by earning a high school diploma or a GED credential. "This means high school dropouts and graduates without some level of postsecondary education or training are at risk of being left behind as the economy plods forward" (Carnevale et al., 2010, p. 5).

Although many adults will engage in postsecondary education, some adults may continue encountering barriers to progressing in formal education.

High school dropouts encounter numerous phases and barriers as they return to a formal education setting as adults preparing for the GED. Goto and Martin (2009) acknowledged that the challenges faced by adult learners make it difficult to utilize education as a life-changing event (p. 10). Many of these life situations and barriers may keep adults from pursuing further education. Quigley et al. (2011) reported that these barriers include situational, institutional, and dispositional challenges (p. 3). Each of these barriers represented different obstacles faced by GED students. The specific barriers are:

**Situational barriers:** home and life situations—lack of family support, lack of child-care, illness, lack of transport, pregnancy, etc.

**Institutional barriers:** systemic barriers created by the institutions themselves—geographic inaccessibility, “red tape”, credit transfer issues, ineffective teaching, educational cost, etc.

**Dispositional barriers:** individual perceptions as developed through past experiences which, in this case, influence participants’ view of formal education. These can create, for instance, concerns over the ability to succeed in education. (p. 3)

As can be understood by these barriers, adult students experience many life situations that affect their decision to engage in preparing for and completing the GED. Pursuing further education tends to be a choice and a life-changing event for adults (Kasworm, 2008, p. 27). Although many adults have strong reasons for returning to education, adult learners continue to experience barriers that will need to be acknowledged and addressed with specific support systems.

Goto and Martin (2009) reported individuals frequently cite childcare, health problems (including mental health), and physical problems as issues preventing advancement in life (p. 14). Although adult students face many different barriers, Quigley et al. (2011) reported the experiences most affecting GED students were situational barriers, which include pregnancy, drug use, and the need to work (p. 8).

Although adults tend to have a purpose for pursuing further education, many will face the challenges of navigating institutional procedures (Kasworm, 2008, p. 28). These institutional barriers may include admissions processes or where to find academic and non-academic support. This lack of understanding may stem from anxiety about the new experience or feeling unsure about their ability levels and may cause “emotional chaos” (p. 28).

Dispositional barriers, feelings about ability to complete school or feelings about academic skills, may create anxiety for many students, although most of these adults continue to pursue postsecondary education. The pursuit continues because of the belief that they (adult students) have the ability and intelligence to achieve their goals (Goto & Martin, 2009, p. 15). Many of these barriers discussed are also greatly influenced by the role of key individuals in their lives who provide guidance and mentoring (p. 16).

These life experiences and situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers may impact adult GED students’ ability to earn the GED credential and pursue postsecondary education by creating scenarios which block the ability to stay engaged in a formal educational setting. Although 43% of interviewees in Quigley et al.’s 2011

study stated enrolling in 2- or 4-year institution was the goal, 5 years later one third of these students had yet to enroll (p. 6).

Even though these adults are not currently engaged in formal education, when they do return to a formal education setting these life experiences will continue to add value to their educational experiences. Belzer (2004) explored the relationship between past life experiences and learning and how it affects current learning (p. 42). The research highlighted that adult students' previous educational experiences impact current learning (Belzer, 2004, p. 47). "Any life experience, then, has the potential to be a learning experience" (Merriam & Clark, 2006, p. 30). These experiences can provide adults with the incentive to reengage in formal education.

### **Program Characteristics**

The specific characteristics of a GED program and students' perceptions of the program are likely to play a role in their lived experiences as successful GED completers. GED preparation programs provide curriculum designed to support adult students in preparing for postsecondary education and the workforce. These adult GED students may benefit from this preparation by potentially increasing wages and career advancement opportunities (United States Department of Education, 2010). Yet, only a small percentage of adult GED students who enroll in postsecondary education are completing a degree or certificate. High school dropouts who enter classes to earn the GED credential possess a better chance of securing jobs with higher wages and workplace advancement. The most recent 2010 data show that of the 71% of 2004 GED test passers a mere 12% earned a postsecondary credential while 26% of

this 71% were still enrolled. This means a shocking 62% of these GED students dropped out of postsecondary education institutions or never started (Zhang et al., 2011, p. 20).

GED preparation programs may have a positive impact on the persistence rate of GED students by offering courses with the goal of developing college and career readiness skills. “College readiness can be defined operationally as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution” (Conley, 2007, p. 5). This college readiness preparation helps create a roadmap for success in both the college and career setting. Students who move through the postsecondary educational system, with a plan, remain more focused on goals and have an increased chance of persisting and earning a degree or certificate.

Community colleges offer students courses focused on planning and preparing for college and career. A variety of transition programs also provide students the opportunity to develop college and career readiness skills. Numerous bridge programs exist to assist students in achieving college and career readiness skills. Many of these programs focus on adults with low academic skills, such as ABE students attempting to earn the GED. These programs mainly focus on “integrating basic reading, math, and language skills with . . . professional career skills, including working in teams, self-management, project management, and workplace communications” (Alssid, Goldberg, & Klerk, 2011, p. 10).

Although programs provide students with opportunities to develop the skills necessary in achieving college and career readiness, the persistence rate remains low. This study is designed to provide information to enhance the work being done which may assist in increasing the persistence rate of this adult population. My research highlights a specific student population attending PCC's GED program.

### **Contextual Framework PCC's ABE/GED Program**

PCC offers College Success and Career Guidance (CG) courses to all students, including ABE/GED students. According to Fall 2010 PCC (2011) data, an average of 81% of all students enrolled in a basic career guidance and college success class (CG 100C) demonstrate success by maintaining enrollment beyond two semesters. These basic career guidance and college success courses provide instruction in time management, goal setting, and communication skills. PCC offers ABE/GED programs at four main locations.

These locations offer different types of classes to support all students in earning the GED credential. Each location either provides comprehensive GED courses, which means students can study all four subject areas of the GED from one teacher or blocked classes that focus instruction in two separate independent blocks: English Language Arts/Social Studies and Math/Science. Data do not exist to demonstrate which type of instruction better supports students. My research was conducted on two separate campuses, which offered me the opportunity to access students who participated in both single teacher and blocked (multiple teachers)

classes. These students were able to provide information about each of these experiences.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guides my study: What factors contribute to the success of adult GED test completers earning the credential? By learning more about the factors that led to the success of these adult GED tests passers, I can contribute to the information needed to determine possible strategies to support student success.

### **Significance of Study**

Multiple experiences influence adult GED students' decision to obtain additional education for either enrollment in postsecondary education or career advancement. This education may assist a portion of these adult students in preparing for and persisting in postsecondary education.

ABE/GED programs and community colleges will benefit from this research because little is known about the factors leading to adult students earning the GED credential. By knowing the experiences and success factors of adult GED students, community college programs can design more effective support services to meet the unique needs of this population.

### **Limitations**

My research was conducted in a community college environment and has the following limitations:



1. The adult GED tests passers were drawn from one institution focusing on two out of four locations and thus limited the number of students available for interviewing.
2. The adult GED tests passers were only PCC students and the data gathered were solely qualitative; therefore the results were not generalizable to other community colleges or university settings.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study have been imposed to focus on a very specific aspect of adult GED tests passer. The following delimitations were imposed:

1. Ages 25 and older.
2. Currently enrolled in PCC GED program.
3. Completed at least 3 out of 4 tests (2014 Test Series).

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My literature review considers five areas as factors that contribute to adult students' success in completing the GED test and earning the credential. These five areas were chosen because adults have many different experiences that offer them the opportunity to develop as individuals. Adults experience a disorienting dilemma and critically reflect on how to navigate this situation and make meaning as they dialogue with family members and fellow students. The students continue to develop the skills necessary to achieve their goals. These areas include: constructivism, adult learners, adult learning theory, transformative learning theory, and resiliency.

#### **Constructivism**

“From the constructivist perspective, meaning is understood to be the result of humans setting up relationships, reflecting on their actions, and modeling and constructing explanations” (Fosnot, 2005, p. 280). Individuals have numerous experiences throughout their lives. Each experience builds upon another as people interact with each other because humans are social beings. “The idea of a social self means that all of our learning takes place in an interaction between ourselves and others (Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2003, p. 40). Dewey (1938) supported the idea that learning is based on experiences (p. 25). These interactions offer individuals the opportunity to think and understand a situation. As Piaget (1961) stated, “to think

means, above all, to understand and to understand means to arrive at the transformation” (p. 275) which allows someone to continually construct meaning from his or her experiences.

Mezirow (1997) reported that one thing that defines us as humans is the idea that we must understand the meaning of our experiences. This is related to adults who have gathered many different experiences which have defined their world (p. 5).

Bridwell (2013) further supported this when he stated that individuals construct meaning from experiences based on their orientation to knowledge (p. 137).

Individuals are oriented to knowledge in three different ways. Instrumental knowers want to know what is in it for them. These knowers may be looking to achieve a specific goal. The social knower is concerned with what do others believe they should know. This type of knower may base what is learned on external forces. The last knower is the self-authoring knower. These knowers are learning because they want to learn (Bridwell, 2013, p. 137). This may be evident in self-directed learners that guide what they learn for the sake of increasing their knowledge. These orientations may impact how an individual will persist in education.

My research is focused on the encounters of adult GED students and how they construct meaning from their experiences as they reflect on a variety of social situations. Understanding this adult learner population may assist adult educators in better understanding the success factors of adult learners who earn the GED credential.

### **Adult Learners**

Society continues to evolve and the needs of our citizens change over time. The demographics of the adult learner population are also changing. Our adult population is increasing and will continue to do so well into the future (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 8). This increase in adult population will require special attention to the needs of adult learners as they make up a larger percentage of the population seeking additional education to participate fully in the labor market. Carnevale et al. (2010) reported an increased need for workers to obtain further education to remain competitive. This includes the millions of adults in need of a high school diploma or GED.

Merriam et al. (2007) stressed the importance of understanding and honoring the prior knowledge and experiences of these adult learners in need of a high school diploma or GED. This allows educators to assist adult learners in seeing themselves as active learners (p. 27). By offering them opportunities to actively participate in the learning process, adults can realize that learning occurs in various settings and can bring these experiences to the classrooms and create a smoother transition to a variety of learning environments.

“Approximately 63.8% of all candidates indicated they tested [took the GED] for educational reasons . . . while half of candidates 51.2% identified employment reasons” (American Council on Education, 2011, p. 3). According to Merriam et al. (2007), 85% of adult learners identified some form of career transition as a reason to participate in higher and continuing education courses (p. 63). As these adult students

enroll in higher education they will require support to reach their goals. My study provides GED preparation programs with the information necessary to develop support services aimed at increasing student persistence.

Understanding adult learners has become more important since the recession of 2008. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) stated that workers who lost their jobs, veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, and adults who recently earned their GED are enrolling in postsecondary education (p. 88). Adult learning theory allows adult educators a meaningful way to learn more about the adult learning population.

### **Adult Learning Theory**

Adult learning theories provide a theoretical framework to better understand the adult GED student population. “Adult learners themselves view learning to think as autonomous responsible persons as an important educational objective” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 8). Knowles (1950) stated that learners must have an objective to learn and a desire (p. 21). It is important for adult educators to know this objective and be able to respond with the most appropriate instruction because this may be a key factor contributing to student success. Educators rely on understanding ways to engage and motivate students. Unfortunately, utilizing the same methods that work with youth does not meet the needs of adult learners.

Knowles (1980) stated that pedagogy (teacher centered), the art and science of teaching children, was not sufficient when working with adults because adults wanted more than drill, quizzes, and rote memory (p. 40). This was apparent as I worked with adult GED students because they were interested in learning how a particular topic

related to their goal of earning the GED and made sense of the content by connecting it to real world experiences. Adults have had different types of experiences than children, for example, working or being responsible for others (p. 50). This means that adult educators will need to rely on a different set of strategies to assist the adult learner.

Transformative learning theory supports the development of an “autonomous thinker” because learners make their own meaning from their experiences versus relying on others to interpret their experiences (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This learning theory offers the best framework to discuss the GED students’ journey because it refers to the similar process of experiencing a dilemma and the need to determine a path to achieve a goal and potentially transform the students’ perceptions about their abilities and their life path leading to earning the GED credential.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Adult GED students perceive their experiences through a variety of lenses. Mezirow (2009) identified several phases of learning in the transformative process. The key areas which most closely relate to my research are an individual experiencing a disorienting dilemma, critically reflecting, and engaging in dialogue with others (p. 19). These relate best to the adult GED student population because students do not always complete programs in a timely fashion because a disorienting dilemma may occur. They may dropout and return at another time (Quigley et al., 2011, p. 12) because dilemmas exist, such as, losing childcare, which become the main reasons for leaving an educational program (p. 3). This stopping out process occurs when

students' life experiences become unbearable and something must change and school may become the activity that ceases to continue. It is encouraging though because this population tends to return to school later versus fully dropping out of the educational process (p. 12).

Transformative learning theory highlights how individuals attempt to make meaning of experiences and this is what adult GED students may be attempting to accomplish as they continue with a program or stop out and return to school at a later time. "To make meaning means to make sense of an experience; we make an interpretation of it" (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 1). As I listened to the stories of adults continuing to pursue their GED and later postsecondary education, I was able to provide documentation of these adult learners' stories and how they were impacted by decisions and experiences which support students in earning the credential.

Adult GED students may have experienced a dilemma, which led them to enroll in a GED program. These students' experiences impacted how they progressed through a GED program. The main core elements related to my topic of study include a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, and dialogue (Taylor, 2009, p. 4).

### **Disorienting Dilemmas as an Individual Experience**

Dewey (1938) believed education should be based upon actual life-experiences (p. 25). These experiences provide opportunities for individuals to create meaning by reflecting and engaging in dialogue with fellow adult students prior to making a potentially life changing decision. Goto and Martin (2009) shared numerous stories of students explaining how previous experiences, such as being told "I wasn't very

smart,” negatively affected their self-esteem (p. 15). Other students described how an encouraging word from family members or mentors created a feeling of self-confidence (p. 16). Experiences offer individuals the chance to learn by developing a new interpretation of an event which will guide future understandings and actions (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 1). “Transformative learning theory is based on the notion that we interpret our experiences in our own way, and that how we see the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences” (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 5). This is further supported by Piaget’s 1961 idea around developing an understanding of experiences to arrive at a transformation (p. 275).

Adult GED students may encounter this learning through new experiences in GED programs. These various encounters continue to allow learners to reflect on what they can learn to use in future situations. Therefore, critical reflection becomes key to transformation.

### **Critical Reflection**

Adults engage in critical reflection to better understand all the elements of a situation. “Self-reflection can lead to significant personal reflection” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). “Critical reflection, a distinguishing characteristic of adult learning, refers to questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience” (Taylor, 2009, p. 7). During their school experiences adult GED students will likely engage in reflection on many levels. Dirkx (2012) recognized that the self-formative process is ongoing and as students struggle with life experiences they deepen their sense of meaning (p. 404). This reflection coupled with interacting with



fellow students or supportive individuals may support adult learners in processing life experiences. Mezirow (2003) highlighted that “transformative learning involves critical reflection . . . in group interaction or independently (p. 61). This thought supports the practice of engaging in dialogue to make sense of experiences. Adult GED students engage in one-on-one dialogue as well as group discussions as they tell their individual stories. These stories are pivotal to my research because they highlight factors that affect student success.

### **Dialogue**

Storytelling becomes a valuable instructional tool in working with adult GED students. One key proposition in transformative learning theory is communicative learning. Mezirow (2003) stated, “communicative learning refers to understanding what someone means when they communicate with you” (p. 59). “Stories are a natural approach to communicative learning based as they are in language, which renders them highly symbolic” (Tyler, 2009, p. 136).

Transformative learning theory utilizes discourse as a means to developing a deeper understanding of the disorienting dilemma, which leads to a transformation. Individuals learn “together by analyzing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). Stories allow students to express themselves and consequently learn from each other when used in conjunction with critical reflection. “It is within the arena of dialogue that experience and critical reflection play out. Dialogue becomes the medium for critical reflection to be put into action . . . and habits of mind are ultimately transformed” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9).

## **Critiques of Transformative Learning Theory**

### **Rationality**

Rationality is an element of Mezirow's theory that receives attention and places storytelling in a different light. The nature of storytelling can be that it comes from the heart, which is filled with emotion and lacks rational thought (Tyler, 2009, p. 138). For storytelling to work as a component of transformative learning theory certain conditions need to be met. Mezirow's conditions include that storytellers will:

1. Have access to their complete experience as they recall it and have the ability to fully address clarifying questions
2. Be free from coercion and distorting self-deception
3. Be open to alternative perspectives
4. Become critically reflective
5. Have equal opportunity to participate
6. Have the ability to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity. (Tyler, 2009, pp. 139-141)

The interpretation of storytelling does present a weakness in this theory as related to adult GED students. Many of these conditions assume trust is present. For example, the fifth condition is only possible if an individual can trust that those in positions of power view them, adult GED students, as equal partners in the decision process. Often adult GED students are marginalized, which does not afford them the ability to equally participate; therefore they may not participate, or may feel they are not trusted or respected.

In my research project, I must continually realize that someone's transformation may be due to an increased exposure to education and academic growth and may not necessarily be a long-term transformation. This long-term transformation would imply that individuals have been adequately prepared to persist in postsecondary education. The data do not support this high rate of persistence in adult GED students, so questioning true transformation versus growth may be something to consider in examination of data. As students experience numerous issues during their time in a GED program, several factors offer students the ability to stay focused on goals and dreams.

### **Resiliency**

“A resilient individual is one who can draw on his or her own resources to enact effective interventions to find solutions to problematic situations” (Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 127). An individual's development of resiliency is multidimensional because a variety of behaviors are associated with resiliency. Several of these factors may include maintaining good relationships, setting goals, and taking action to achieve these goals. (Newman, 2005, p. 227). Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, and Sawyer (2003) discussed that while a person may be working on developing individual resilience by enhancing internal resources, such as how a person might react to adversity, it is also extremely valuable to focus on changing the social environment because social interactions support resilience growth (p. 4). By working closely with adult GED students, individuals may realize what skills and strategies they possess to be resilient.

Marttila, Johansson, Whitehead, and Burstrom (2013) described resiliency as a process “encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 3). Adult GED students continually experience challenges. As these students engage in dialogue with fellow students and mentors regarding challenges being experienced, this interaction may influence whether students remain engaged or drop out. Kefallinou (2009) described the support provided to adult GED students experiencing life challenges and described how creating flexibility and focusing on goals assist students in succeeding (p. 106). This environment demonstrates how support services and meaningful relationships help students persist. Marttila et al. (2013) further described how important it is to remember resiliency is not an individual event but is related to an individual’s environment (p. 3).

Willans and Seary (2011) noted the importance of numerous networks with family, peers, and teachers (p. 128). Although these connections and supports affect student behavior, students will ultimately need to utilize their own skills to stay connected and develop resiliency. GED programs serve a diverse population so the support needed will vary.

The age of adult GED student populations ranges from 16 years through adulthood. Therefore, this environment provides an opportunity to interact with students in varying stages of development and experiences. Gooding, Hurst, Johnson, and Tarrier (2011) compared the resiliency of students greater than 64 years old and students less than 26 years old (p. 262). These researchers discovered older adults possessed greater resilience in relationship to emotional regulation and problem

solving although younger adults demonstrated higher resilience related to social support (p. 268). Social support was an issue identified by my former adult GED students because, as they expressed, they felt more isolated from social groups because of the various responsibilities linked to family, work, and school.

Kenamer and Campbell (2011) suggested focusing on specific strategies employed, such as moving the GED program onto a community college campus to create a sense of community (p. 47). This sense of community supports adult learners by offering a seamless process to enroll in community college courses directly after completing the GED test. An important factor highlighted by Newman (2005) is that “everyone can build resilience” (p. 227). Developing resiliency skills is important because it helps individuals in successfully negotiating learning environments, relationships, and workplace environments, ultimately leading to achieving personal and professional goals such as completing a degree or advancing in a career.

Adult GED students experiencing various situations may continually become resilient through both individual and group experiences. Life experiences shape an individual and provide scenarios, which affect how an individual interacts with the educational setting (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 5). My research focuses on an adult GED population which encounters complex life situations and interacts with diverse groups, including family, peers, and co-workers. These students develop resiliency and utilize these new skills to earn the GED credential and ultimately find solutions to problematic situations. This research may assist with identifying various supports

within the community college system that support resiliency and may be replicated in GED classes to support student success.

### **Summary**

My research focuses on how individuals construct meaning from their life experiences. Fosnot (2005) explained that a constructivist perspective focuses on the idea that individuals construct meaning through developing relationships and reflecting on their experiences. Jarvis et al. (2003, p. 40) built on this idea when they discussed that humans are social beings and learn from interactions therefore further developing meaning from a particular situation. Mezirow (1997) expanded upon this thought as he stated that humans must understand their experiences (p. 5). These ideas support why constructivism provides an overarching view of my research as I learn more about how adult GED students understand and make meaning from their experiences and share success factors leading to earning the GED credential.

I can better understand this adult population by learning more about adult learners and more specifically the adult GED population. By knowing more about adult learners, I can begin to view their development through an adult learning theory lens.

Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory is the most applicable theoretical framework for my research because it focuses on individuals experiencing a disorienting dilemma, critically reflecting, and engaging in dialogue (p. 19). These key elements offer a situation that may potentially allow a student to develop

resiliency skills that may possibly lead to greater persistence in postsecondary education.

## CHAPTER 3

### QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 provides the rationale for using qualitative methodology as a means for collecting data through the use of individual interviews and a focus group. The experiences of these early school leavers have yet to be explored (Quigley et al., 2011, p. 2). The purpose of this study is to document the stories of adult GED students' experiences from entering a GED program through earning the credential.

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Study**

As Merriam (2009) stated, "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). Therefore, I conducted my research using a general qualitative methodology that focused on the narratives of adult GED students attending GED classes to learn how they interpret their experience. "Qualitative methods are often used in evaluations because they tell the program's story by capturing and communicating the participants' stories (Patton, 2002, p. 10). This methodology is particularly suitable to my research questions because I am interested in learning how GED students describe their experiences in GED programs leading to earning the GED credential. "By knowing the participants' stories, programs can make decisions to improve programs" (Patton, 2002, p. 10).



This research is situated in the constructivist paradigm and assumes that the people involved in the research construct meaning from their social interactions (Mertens, 2010, p. 16). Lincoln (1998) explained how “constructivists have, as one of their major goals, the understanding of how much of social life is created . . . by the social constructions of participants (p. 16). The basis for my research is the active participation of individuals through interviews and a focus group where the students described their life experiences. Merriam (2009) has the belief that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives (p. 1). The epistemological assumptions I am recognizing are that to understand my problem of study, I must hear the lived experiences of GED completers.

Interviews with my participants were the primary instrument of data collection and analysis because the interviews produced an understanding through specific interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 30). My study focused on learning more about the experiences of students throughout their attendance in a GED program. Through a general qualitative methodology I aimed to provide a clearer understanding of what factors led to students earning the GED credential. The most effective methods to utilize consisted of individual interviews and a focus group.

## **Data Collection**

### **Interviewing**

In this qualitative research study, I used interviewing as a central approach to documenting the stories of adult GED students because interviewing may discover

“opinions, perceptions, and attitudes toward something” (Glesne, 2010, p. 80). Rubin and Rubin (2012) described how “qualitative interviews let us see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen” (p. xv). This description highlights what I was attempting to uncover in my research:

“qualitative research relies on interviews with participants. The data collection method is the most effective way of soliciting and documenting, in their own words, an individual’s or group’s perspectives” (Saldana, 2011, p. 32). The stories or narratives have rarely been heard and the experiences of adult GED students have been defined by quantitative data (Quigley et al., 2011). Therefore, interacting with these students was important to truly understand what adult GED students experience in GED classrooms to enhance or influence the development of support systems, such as counseling/advising services and curriculum designed to develop the academic and social skills necessary to persist in life and postsecondary education. It is also important to know what support is needed to assist students in developing resiliency to persist.

Although questions were established before the interview began, other topics emerged as each interview progressed (Glesne, 2010, p. 79). Therefore, a semi-structured interview process was utilized to further explore an individual’s responses. By asking clarifying and probing questions as a follow-up to an individual’s answers, I was able to fully examine and document the narratives of my select group of adult GED students and their experiences. This type of qualitative interviewing allows

researchers to explore the detailed experiences of individuals and how they perceive the world (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3).

I used semi-structured interviews and a focus group to document the experiences of the students that were interviewed. These two styles of interviewing best fit my research because they offer students the opportunity to explore themes and topics that emerge from our discussions.

### **Semi-Structured Interviewing**

Adult GED students interpret life in a variety of ways influenced by what they have experienced. The semi-structured interview provides researchers the chance to allow the participants to explore how they interpret their lives and experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Semi-structured interviews investigate topics in a more open-ended and less structured way and assume participants make sense of their worlds in unique ways (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). The use of this particular interview structure best fit the purpose of my study because this line of questioning allowed me to request more explanation, clarification, or description before moving on to the next question (Glesne, 2010, p. 96).

### **Focus Groups**

GED classes may provide an opportunity for students to develop relationships and engage in dialogue as part of the classroom structure. “Since the data obtained from a focus group is socially constructed within the interaction of the group, a constructivist perspective underlies this data collection procedure (Merriam, 2009, p. 94). Because GED classes are social experiences, the use of a focus group allowed

me to utilize dialogue to gather data and develop a deeper understanding of experiences. Focus groups bring a group of individuals together to discuss and explore a particular topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 30), therefore providing individuals with the opportunity to construct meaning from their situations. The use of a focus group fits well with my target population because the group environment fosters interactions where participants can respond to other students' ideas and experiences and utilizes dialogue as a way to gather insight into a life experience.

This interaction is a key element in adult education. Critical reflection based on dialogue with other students is a main component of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61). Focus groups offer an excellent venue to engage students in learning new perspectives as they listen and respond to other students' narratives. "Group members respond to each other's points, agreeing, disagreeing, or modifying in any way they choose" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 30) which allows individuals to potentially develop new perspectives. Any themes that emerged allowed me to further investigate student perspectives.

The purpose of the focus group is to elucidate and make meaning out of the themes that emerged through the individual interview process of data collection and data analysis. The students received their interview transcripts to review and then the focus group focused on themes that needed further explanation, clarification, or expansion.

Krueger and Casey (2000) discussed how focus groups provide an interactive environment allowing individuals to influence each other which is very similar to life

(p. 11). Glesne (2010) described that focus groups are useful when attempting to affect policy or curriculum (p. 102). Because I was attempting to record experiences to possibly impact policy, curriculum, or program structure, the focus group assisted in achieving this goal because individuals selected shared experiences which provided valuable insight into programs.

### **Participants**

The qualitative research approved required access to a group of adult GED students attending PCC's ABE/GED programs. PCC serves more than 94,000 students with an average age of 34 years and is the largest institution of higher learning in the state of Oregon. The ABE/GED students enrolled represent some of these students. The most recent ABE/GED enrollment for the PCC Spring 2014 term and the demographic data for GED (2013) candidates both nationally and in the state of Oregon (Brown & Blackmer, 2013) are displayed in Table 1.

The data in Table 1 were chosen from the GED Testing Service (2014) and PCC (2014) to represent individuals who have either taken at least one of the GED subtests or are currently enrolled and preparing to take one or more of the GED subtests. This is the most appropriate comparison of the data because no individual in these populations would have completed the full battery of GED tests.

The participant pool I recruited from was significantly different in the area of ethnicity. The Hispanic, black, and white categories varied between PCC's ABE/GED programs and the national data. This will play a role in how the data could be utilized by community colleges in other states. Despite this, I believe the data can be useful

because the national data were also different in various categories. PCC served as a meaningful test site because it is the largest higher education institution in the state of Oregon.

Table 1

*Comparison of GED Candidate Demographic Data*

Categories	National <sup>1</sup> 2013	Oregon <sup>1</sup> 2013	PCC <sup>2</sup> (ABE/GED) Spring 2014
Female	48.3%	44.3%	52.5%
Male	51.7%	55.7%	47.5%
Hispanic	24.9%	24.7%	30.1%
Black	26.4%	6.0%	14.9%
White	43.3%	62.5%	34.7%
Age: 25-29	15.3%	12.1%	14.3%
30-39	18.0%	16.4%	18.9%
40-49	8.5%	8.4%	11.2%
50+	4.4%	3.8%	7.1%

<sup>1</sup> GED (2014)

<sup>2</sup> PCC (2014)

PCC was selected because I have a professional relationship as a previous GED instructor and was able to access a large population to interview for the purpose of this study. I worked with two college representatives, a Dean at the Rock Creek Campus and an ABE/GED Faculty Department Chair from the Sylvania Campus, to identify GED students to interview. The dean and department chair sent a letter requesting that interested individuals respond directly to the researcher. By being intentional about my site and participant selection, I was able to interview the most relevant group of individuals.

I chose to use purposeful sampling. Merriam (2009) stated purposeful sampling is the most appropriate form of sampling for qualitative research when the researcher seeks to gain insight and must select a sample from which the most can be learned (p. 77). I developed a set of criteria to focus my selection of interviewees. My criteria were as follows:

1. 25 years and older.
2. Currently enrolled in PCC's GED program.
3. Completed at least 3 out of 4 tests (2014 Test Series).

#### **Data Analysis/Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research involving interviewing requires the collection of large amounts of data that need to be organized to ensure proper analysis later in the process. Merriam (2009) reminded researchers “without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material to be processed” (p. 171).

As I conducted interviews, I utilized audio recording to document all aspects of the discussion. I documented keywords on a note pad because this practice ensured that I captured multiple aspects of the interview which I used later to analyze the data (Saldana, 2011, p. 39). At the close of each day, I listened to recordings and documented my initial findings.

After the individual interviews were completed, I had the recordings transcribed by an outside service (<http://www.transcribe-now.com>) to provide me with a written documentation of what was said to allow for deeper analysis. This offered

me the opportunity to carefully examine what was actually said versus relying on memory that may have biased my results (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 190). As I reviewed transcripts, I looked for areas needing clarification and when appropriate, I initiated a follow-up interview to ask for clarification. I clarified the postsecondary goals of two interviewees.

The next step in the process was to supply the interviewees a copy of the transcripts for review. After I received the transcripts, I sent each individual participant their transcripts to review for accuracy. This offered the students an opportunity to edit and make changes that accurately reflected their intended comments. The use of this type of member checking allowed participants to verify if the overall account was realistic and accurate (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

An additional phase of the review process included sending the transcripts to a colleague for review. This offered me the opportunity to ask an outside individual to provide me with insight about connections that could be made between interviewees.

The next step in the data analysis process was to code the data. Saldana (2009) stated “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assign a summative . . . attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Although numerous codes could have emerged from the interviews, I chose to code for words or phrases that best answered my research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 192). The words and phrases focused on the factors that led these adult GED students to earn the GED credential.



These codes allowed me to move from concrete statements to making analytical interpretations (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Coding occurred in several phases. Initially, open coding was the best process because I was then open to any possible ideas (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted that “open coding requires a brainstorming approach to analysis because, in the beginning, analysts want to open up the data to all potentials and possibilities” (p. 160). After the initial coding, a second level of coding occurred to refine the codes or ensure the data were fully analyzed. This process allowed me the flexibility to reconfigure codes and to dive more deeply into the data (Saldana, 2009, p. 3).

Coding the data also allowed me to arrange ideas in an order. Saldana (2009) highlighted how coding arranges things in a systematic way allowing for categorization (p. 8). This categorizing enabled me to discover patterns and themes in the data. “A theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and the analytic reflection” (p. 13). By learning these themes, I was able to further examine these as individuals met in a focus group. This provides PCC with specific information that may enhance programs to better serve the adult GED population.

The next step in the process was to utilize a focus group to further validate the data and examine themes by engaging three of the six individuals interviewed in a group dialogue. The students were provided with copies of their interview transcripts prior to the focus group meeting so they could review the topics discussed. These topics and themes served as discussion points when the focus group convened to

engage in dialogue about experiences and what factors positively influenced participants to earn the GED credential.

The use of a focus group in conjunction with individual interviews offered the students the chance to dialogue and share life experiences potentially resulting in perspective transformation. The combination of both these scenarios is supported by transformative learning theory and the elements of dialogue and critical reflection (Taylor, 2009, p. 4) because by discussing thoughts and feelings students can reflect on their reaction to situations and possibly adjust these reactions to achieve their goals.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The intent of this study was to document and highlight the narratives of adult GED students returning to school to pursue the GED credential, and successfully doing so. The stories presented in this chapter provide an overview of the students' reasons for returning to school, how they are different from the way they were during their younger years, and what assisted them in remaining motivated to earn the GED credential. This research may assist policy makers, community college leadership, and instructors in the development of policies, support programs, and curriculum to meet the needs of adult GED students and to increase their chances of successfully completing the GED credential.

This chapter initially provides an overview of the participants and then shares the narratives of each student and how these stories connect to the identified themes. The results represent the thoughts of 6 students as they reflected on their experiences. The number of students represented in this study is small and it is not intended to generalize to a larger population. Rather the intent is to identify themes that can later be more fully examined. Table 2 highlights the demographic data and pseudonyms for the participants and Table 3 shows the Spring 2014 enrollment data for students 25 and older enrolled in the GED programs at Sylvania and Rock Creek Campuses

Table 2

*Pseudonym and Demographic Data*

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER
Emma	29	Female
Nate	27	Male
Jackie	36	Female
Norman	36	Male
Maria	36	Female
Doug	45	Male

Table 3

*Percentage/Total of Students and Participants, Spring 2014*

CATEGORIES	SYLVANIA	ROCK CREEK
# of students in GED program	99	82
# of potential students to interview	21	32
% of students 25 and older	21%	39.5%

**Participants**

The study focused on 6 adult GED students from PCC as they shared their stories in a semi-structured interview format. A focus group also provided three students the opportunity to hear and respond to other students' stories. The students represented two different PCC campuses. All students, in this study, participated in the 2014 GED Test Series (which includes four subject area tests versus five subject area tests of the previous 2002 GED Test Series). Several themes emerged as the students shared their stories about the factors that assisted them in earning the GED credential. The students' stories highlighted the following themes: relationships and extrinsic

motivation/future goals. In the following sections, I tell the stories of the adult GED students and then synthesize the results.

### **Emma**

A 29-year-old woman entered the room and confidently introduced herself. A big smile appeared on her face when I asked her to share her story. She was not sure where to start because she had an extremely interesting life. I inquired why she enrolled in the GED program and she explained her educational experience and how it impacted her life.

Emma wanted to earn the GED but she expressed that “when I did turn 18, my mother didn’t want me to . . . I guess she didn’t want to sign for it, the release form.” I wanted to know why she believed Mom did not want to sign the form. Emma was unsure although she did say that her mom bought her a GED book earlier in her life. She explained, “when I was about 16, my mom did get the GED book . . . but when I got things right . . . my mom said, I must be cheating.” Emma eventually moved out of her parents’ home at 18 and got married. This situation caused her to postpone returning to school for 5 years. She ultimately ended her marriage because she felt trapped and controlled. After her divorce, another 5 years passed and she still had not returned to school to pursue the GED credential. I asked her to explain why she had avoided returning to school. She quietly expressed, “I guess I just didn’t think I could do it . . . my mom kinda stopped teaching my brothers and sisters and I at the age of 12.” In her large family, Emma and her sister were not her mom’s focus. Dad was

usually gone working and mom was the main parental figure who primarily focused on Emma's brothers. Emma stated, "my sister and I were just there."

I was interested in understanding what kept her from returning to earn the GED. Emma talked about how she went from a controlling home life to a controlling marriage and how the lack of a support group negatively affected her. I asked how this impacted her. Emma was quick to answer, "Without having a support group, I don't think you can really have faith in yourself . . . I never had a support group." As we kept talking, she discussed several life events that influenced her. I continued to pursue why she did not return to school after many years away from her family and marriage. She said, "probably my own anxiety, my own doubts, not really having faith in myself."

As she grew older, this would slowly change. She had always managed to get jobs because no one had checked on her education. Emma learned fast and did good work. However, she would not be able to advance because she never finished high school or earned a GED. Emma had a good friend who offered her support and kept pushing her to check into PCC's programs. I asked her what eventually caused her to enroll in this GED program. She laughed and said, "It took 2 ½ years of therapy and some really good friends to get me where I am right now." "My friend kept saying, so when are you going to do it?" She examined her current employment situation and realized she wanted to do something that was her own.

Emma was thriving in this GED program and I inquired about how this class was helping her reach her goals. This class "actually taught me a lot more than I

thought I didn't know." This statement struck me in a very powerful way because it was a different perspective than she explained earlier about how she felt unsupported and unable to make progress.

I wanted to know what kept her motivated to believe she could earn the GED. Emma did not miss a beat when she stated, "I think it's a lot of . . . I would say the teacher." She explained how she was motivated and energized on the first day when the instructor said, "You are your only obstacle." This encouraged her to realize that she could be successful and in control. This feeling of control was much different than earlier in her life as a child and a wife.

The instructor encouragement and support was something I wanted to learn more about. I asked Emma to describe how her instructor continued to motivate and encourage her.

He kind of put you in check. I guess that would really be the way to put it. He had what you called "word of the day". He would write down three or four words every day. At the end of the week you would have to go home and write sentences. It wasn't a requirement, but it was something the he wanted you to do and encouraged you to do, so he said. So come Monday, he . . . put you on the spot. "You gave me some." Haven't seen any work from you." It made you really think, all right, I gotta do it.

According to Emma, this type of environment was comfortable for students. She really liked how the instructor provided feedback and talked with students. "There were some days . . . like when we had a smaller class . . . he would ask an individual, what do you want to learn." This classroom structure kept Emma motivated because she was able to be part of the learning process. She wanted to make sure and let me know that this class "felt like you were sitting in a coffee shop with your friend discussing

something and debating things . . . it was nice . . . there was no judgment.” I asked how important a discussion group was for her. “It was really important because I never experienced that before.”

This support and encouragement was not restricted to just the one instructor. The additional encouragement came from tutors and other students as they each discussed individual struggles and successes. She described a relationship that she never thought would happen in this class. Emma met a couple of women who would provide conversation and support. She explained that, “We would discuss each other’s work . . . or when an individual would talk about, Oh, I’m not really good at math, the person was like, No, you are good. I’ve watched you.” This support through dialogue allowed Emma to stay motivated and ultimately complete the GED test.

Emma also shared how students would talk with each other about what they experienced when they took a test. She stated that talking with each other would help because, “you’d kind of give them something they need . . . I guess recommend which book would be the most helpful since you’ve gone through it all before them.” I asked her to summarize her experience and what assisted her in being successful in the program. She wanted to let people know,

It’s not as hard you think it is. The support you get from PCC and this program, and all the teachers, and all the students are a support group that you are not going to find anywhere else.

### **Nate**

A 27-year-old student was working diligently when I approached him to conduct the interview. He was happy to share his story although his time was limited



because he was going directly from school to work. Nate was employed in an adult foster home where he had worked for many years. He was currently working for his uncle and prior to that his parents had an adult foster home before his father passed away. He was considering opening his own home after he completed a business degree although he was advancing to manager in his uncle's foster home while he completed school and worked on some additional personal goals. His life had taken many different twist and turns and school had always been on his mind but not a priority.

Nate was raised in a small Oregon town and eventually moved to a larger city when he was 15 and attended high school. His high school years appeared to be a turning point in his education. I asked him to discuss some reasons for not finishing high school and he said, "Basically, the reason why I didn't get my high school diploma, just slacking off, skipped school a lot, did not really pay attention when I was in school." He believed individuals in the school system had not offered him enough encouragement or support. Nate eventually was kicked out of school his senior year for multiple disciplinary events including marijuana possession and drinking at a school dance.

Nate remained motivated to continue his education and eventually at the age of 19 he enrolled in a GED program to earn the credential. He experienced another dilemma causing him to drop out of the program. Nate expressed, "I was close to finishing my GED and then I quit, dropped out . . . my dad passed away." Nate discussed how he was doing well in classes because "I knew people in the program. I had some friends there. I liked the teachers . . . and they gave me instruction." His

father passing away created another situation where he was unable to complete his GED and pursue a degree. He stated, “I always wanted to go back.” He again enrolled in a GED program at about the age of 21. This educational experience was similar to his earlier school years when he felt that “they [teachers] didn’t really push me . . . I wasn’t taught very well.” He dropped out once more. Nate knew he wanted to go to college and needed a reason to continue.

At the age of 27, Nate decided it was time to continue his education. I asked him what prompted him to return. He simply stated, “I’ve always said that I’m going to do it. I just haven’t done it. I have a 6-year-old son.” This life situation was enough motivation for Nate to enroll in PCC’s GED program because he is attempting to gain custody of his son. His case manager said she would reopen his case if he completed his goal.

Nate’s goal was to earn his GED. He spoke with excitement about gaining custody of his son. Nate said, “That gave me a reason to do it.” This motivated Nate to stay focused on his goals. Although determined, he still grappled with staying encouraged and needed to have strong instruction and a belief that the teacher was helpful.

“I like . . . the instructor, a lot. I like the way he teaches class. I like the class.” This was a switch from his days in high school when he felt that “they really didn’t push me . . . I didn’t learn.” This instructor relationship seemed very important to Nate because the classwork was demanding and having someone providing support kept him focused. I asked him to describe what the support looked like. He thought about it

for a moment and then began to say, “He’s straightforward. He’s very willing to help. He doesn’t make you feel bad if you don’t know something. He’s not boring.” These statements were extremely meaningful to Nate because when he described his earlier school experiences it was an opposite situation.

He stated earlier about how the teachers had “failed him” and that he “moved up every grade without really learning anything.” This is also in contrast to his second time at the other community college GED program where he just learned from a book without much interaction with an instructor. Nate found his place in this supportive learning environment. Although he had a goal to complete his GED to gain custody of his son, he was supported and remained in the program because of this instructor relationship. Nate said, “He just doesn’t seem arrogant.” “He pushes you.” This is different than when he was in high school. This was a factor that assisted Nate in earning his GED. I asked him to tell me what “he pushes you” meant. He was quick to say, “He teaches you.” He was able to further describe that teaching means helping you understand the material “just showing you step by step . . . it motivates you to keep working.” The instructor would tell Nate, “Just keep coming . . . this stuff is not super hard, so if you work, you will get it.”

This supportive environment created a scenario which inspired Nate to consider pursuing further education. “Before I started the class, I wasn’t sure if I would want to take college classes. But now I’m going to school and see I can do it.” This program “has shown me that I can do it, that I can do schoolwork.”

Nate entered the program motivated to gain custody of his son. The instructor continually motivated Nate by teaching him the skills necessary to earn the credential. The combination of internal motivation and the interaction with the instructor supported Nate in achieving his goal.

**Jackie**

An energetic 36-year-old woman approached me and quickly introduced herself. I explained the process and she promptly warned me that she had not slept much and many of her responses may not be as clear and concise as she would like. I was curious about why she would start with this disclaimer and I asked her to explain her comment. She said that she worked long hours and then attended class.

I first asked Jackie why she enrolled in PCC's GED program after so many years away from school. This question opened the door to her story. Jackie told me that she should have graduated high school at 18 although she quickly expressed, "I am kind of a procrastinator; definitely a procrastinator." She always wanted to finish school but never did. I probed as to why she thought enrolling in a GED program never happened. She admitted that she had attended several community meetings at libraries that talked about the GED. Jackie said it never happened because, "I had a whole bunch of other drama in my life . . . I was unhappy at my job and not feeling good about myself because I didn't have a diploma." This drama was a reason for her procrastination.

I wanted to learn more about how the drama impacted her. She told me the story of her life with her fiancé. She admitted that her fiancé was extremely intelligent

and was finishing grad school and this caused some pressure in the relationship. Jackie was not attending any school and became unhappy. This pressure was mounting and pushed her to rethink returning to school. Jackie finally said, “OK, I have to do something.” She expressed, “I’ve always wanted to go to college . . . it occurred to me that if I was going to do that I had to get a diploma.”

I asked her to talk more about how she was able to complete her GED now after all these years. My question was simply, “What kept you here?” She promptly stated, “Maybe because, I’m an adult . . . I knew if I was going to go to college, I needed to get into the swing of being in a classroom environment.” She discussed how she was committed to her goals and the instructor. I explored further by asking her to explain this commitment to the instructor. She stated, “I don’t want to ever let anyone down.” She knew that if she signed up and committed it would increase the odds of her finishing. The structure of the class was important to her but also the instructor seemed to make a difference.

Jackie expressed that, “He [the instructor] means well obviously. It’s obvious he’s excited and he cares about everybody.” My interest was piqued and I wanted to know how he demonstrated care. She explained that, “He has a lot of things going on and he’s just excited in general, which is a good thing.” Jackie also discussed that when she started class she needed to adjust her class schedule so that she could get to class on time. Jackie was not sure it was possible. The instructor worked with her and made a personalized schedule to assist her in being able to attend class. This meant a lot to Jackie and kept her motivated to attend.

The smaller class size and the shorter time frame were factors that allowed her to remain focused as she progressed through class. Jackie also talked about being nervous on the first test because it was a new and harder version. She discussed being terrified to take the science test and how the instructor took time to talk with her about the content and encourage her and let her know that she was ready. This personalized touch was very meaningful to Jackie.

Jackie also wanted to explain other reasons she was able to stay focused and motivated. She explained that the classroom environment created by the instructor promoted students helping each other to stay motivated. Jackie mentioned that two other students were helpful in keeping her focused to complete the GED. I asked her to explain. The thought of graduation kept them focused. She remembered saying, “OK you guys! We’re going to graduation!” She talked with her classmates and said, “Hey, we have to have our test done by graduation.” They would hold each other accountable by constantly reviewing plans. “What test are you on? What do you have scheduled? What campus are you taking it at?” These types of questions really helped each person make a plan and stay motivated because they were talking with each other and sharing ideas about how to improve either writing or reading skills. I asked where she was in the testing cycle and she proudly stated with a big smile that she had completed all the tests and attended graduation.

She said, “Going to graduation is an awesome feeling. It felt like an actual graduation. I thought it was really cool.” I could see the pride in her smile as she told me how the head of the GED program spoke with passion about how this is a real

degree. I wanted her to give some final advice and thoughts as we concluded the interview. Jackie said, “It’s worth it for everybody. I realized how much I like helping people. It is just being appreciative of what I do have.”

### **Norman**

Norman entered the interview room with a large smile on his face. As I shared the interview process with him, he was not sure his story would be of any use to my research. This was quickly proven to be inaccurate.

Norman is a 36-year-old student who spent most of life working in construction and enjoying hunting. He dropped out of school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade because he did not feel welcomed by teachers and administration. His educational career included attending a private school from first grade to his freshman year in high school. At this time, he transferred to a large public high school. His class size immediately jumped from 10-15 students to more than 30 students. This was extremely overwhelming and presented a scenario where Norman could get lost in the system. He explained his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year by saying, “I get sent sophomore year to [local high school], which was absolutely overwhelming. I couldn’t even find my locker. I didn’t know anybody, which kinda just made me not want to be there.”

Norman dropped out and never returned to school and entered the fire inspection and construction field with his family. He continued this work until he was injured and could no longer work. “I worked with fire sprinklers and in construction. I’ve done construction my whole life, since I was age 17 probably . . . I hurt my wrist and now I cannot hammer a nail in anymore.” He needed to decide what to do and

spoke with workman's compensation. I asked him to tell me why he enrolled in the GED program versus entering another field.

Norman has always had a dream of being a wildlife biologist. Because he has been in the fire inspection and construction field so long he decided that he should stay in that field and maybe become a fire sprinkler inspector. This occupation requires him to have a GED so that he can enter further job training.

Although Norman does not view himself as a strong student, he knows that he must obtain further education to advance in the field. Workforce development agreed to pay for his GED class. He is not interested in further education unless he needs to enhance his skills. Norman's other motivation to complete school and advance his career is his desire to pay his bills and go hunting.

I was interested in learning more about how he would stay motivated to complete the GED class. I asked him to discuss what factors would assist him in earning the credential. Norman said, "At first, I have to say I am different. I know what responsibility is . . . I'm here for a specific reason." I pressed him to talk about how he was different. "I know what I need to do to pay the bills and live . . . when you are younger you don't listen." He also wanted to talk about how this class experience is different from his previous schooling. Norman never felt connected to school and he said, "I actually had teachers tell me 'You won't succeed.'" "It is totally different here at PCC." I wanted to know how it was different. He explained, "My teacher is definitely here to help everyone in class . . . he is not just a teacher . . . he wants you to fully succeed." This made me wonder how this looked in this classroom. Norman said,



“The instructor holds individuals accountable.” He gave an example by saying, “If you are late, he lets you know.” Norman said this is a good thing because, “that’s the number one thing you are going to get fired for, is not showing up on time.”

I was interested in the other factors that assisted in his success. Norman was open about the fact that “all the tests that he [the instructor] gives extra are preparing us for that [the GED tests], which I thought were huge, which helped me on the tests I did take.” Math was a particular struggle for Norman and he said that he was happy because, “Every time I had a question, he [the instructor] stopped and helped me.” This assistance seemed to be something that gave him the feeling of support that helped him pass the tests.

I continued to press Norman to highlight some of the other factors leading to his success. I asked him what parts of the program helped him earn the credential. Norman stated, “What he [the instructor] shows us and teaches us every day.” Norman did return to an idea that was important to him. He wanted everyone to know, “Having someone on you . . . I mean even though . . . I shouldn’t say he’s on me, because I’m a grown-up . . . but making sure you are on task of what he wants you to do each day.” This accountability was a theme that reoccurred with Norman. The structure of the program really helped him in earning the credential. “I mean just being here . . . I think having a regimented time, almost like a job, it keeps me focused in a way.”

The structure of taking pre-tests also provides the motivation needed by many students. Norman stated that, “If I want to take a test right now, I can take a test. There’s no one saying to you, No you can’t.” He was happy with this freedom because

he felt in charge of his learning. This was a big motivator to stay engaged. The idea that the instructor is able to provide this structure and also give students time to learn topics is important to Norman.

He discussed that the teaching style of the teacher is valuable. The instructor provides daily reviews of the concepts that students struggle with. For example, “even it’s not a math day, just every day taking 10 minutes a day and reviewing something that we did last, which is huge, because to be honest with you . . . it triggers it back.” Norman expressed that the instructor keeps him focused and motivated which is helpful in keeping him focused on his goals. “I’m sick of struggling my whole life . . . I don’t want that.” Norman now sees how important this credential will be to his future.

**Maria**

A smiling, polite woman quietly entered the room and waited for me to speak. She was soft spoken and had an accent that appeared to cause her to speak slowly and deliberately. Maria is a 36-year-old woman from South Korea. Her journey to the United States was interesting and provided powerful insight into the world of adult learners.

As a young girl in S. Korea, she explained that, “I did not finish, then after I migrated to the USA . . . I just worked in Los Angeles, and I didn’t attend any college or any education center.” She was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade when she dropped out of school. Although she had brothers, she was expected to leave school and assist the family because her brothers were required to continue their education. “I had been in LA for

more than three years . . . my English was really poor.” She returned to her country for medical reasons before returning to the United States.

Maria did not attend any classes or enroll in school and never really learned English very well while she was in LA. She explained that she never liked school because the teacher yelled at her and she did not feel welcomed or encouraged by the educational system in South Korea. She never felt really smart and lacked confidence in her ability because the teachers expected her to learn a topic the first time she had a lesson. Maria eventually moved to Oregon where she had a cousin attending PCC. Her cousin encouraged her to enroll in the GED program to enhance her English speaking skills and earn the GED. She was encouraged to do this because she realized that if she wanted to attend college and increase her employment opportunities and take care of her parents, she would need to learn English and earn the high school diploma or GED.

Maria was enrolled in PCC’s GED program and determined to complete her GED. I was interested in learning how this experience would be different from her early years in South Korea. “Actually, just a month ago I think about these things. I just want to study about dentistry.” She now had a goal and was supported by the staff. Maria said, “the instructor taught students a lot of math problems. That is really helpful.” Math was an area Maria struggled with along with English skills. I asked Maria to discuss how the instructor assisted the students in earning the credential. “One thing, the instructor, can teach each student what they need.” I wanted to know how the instructor knew what students needed. She explained, “It was the second

week and I asked him . . . I don't understand some of the words you say because I'm not very good at English, and listening or speaking." The instructor responded by giving her a process to solve math problems and then provided numerous opportunities to practice the math problem solving process.

I further explored the factors that assisted Maria in earning the credential. She explained that,

It's totally different, I think. Almost like 20 years I didn't take any education or something like education. After high school I didn't take anything. In Korea, so many teachers teach to their students, "You just memorize this thing. You have to do this one . . . very forceful, just like that. The Korean teachers scold. If some students didn't do very well, he scolded them.

She discussed the difference here in the United States. "Here, most teachers, instructors encourage them. You did really good; you can do that." This was something that kept Maria focused and motivated. The instructors created a welcoming and supportive environment by encouraging and offering as much instruction as needed to learn a topic.

Maria was not just explaining the support from the instructor but from everyone associated with the program. Many times throughout the program, "I took a science ready test . . . I failed . . . I was really disappointed . . . but the next day my instructor gave me the books and said, 'You can do it'." She explained:

Because of the instructors, Always they told me, OK you can do it. You are really smart. I'm not but they told me, you are very intelligent and you are very smart. Really? Am I? OK. I try . . . I am going to do I . . . for three months, I tried my best about the math and then I passed. OK! I'm not a dummy. So the instructors are really important for the students.

I asked her to give any advice she would have for students entering the program or for the program leaders. She stated,

I regret not studying earlier, because everybody knows about this—the older we get, our brains not smart as then [when younger]. But I love this GED program. I am really thankful. But the students must not give up. Just keep going, how many days, or months, or years it takes. That is a really important thing.

### **Doug**

Doug entered the conference room and seemed unsure and hesitant because his accent was pronounced and he was not sure I could understand him. He shared he was an ESL (English as a Second Language) student. As I spoke with Doug, it became very apparent he was an extremely intelligent and well-read individual.

He is a 45-year-old student who lived an extremely adventurous life as the son of an Eastern European diplomat. Traveling and living in nine different countries, he has experienced many different cultures. His travels allowed him to access numerous educational systems and attend multiple schools. This experience gave him the chance to develop excellent reading skills and learn nine different languages, including Spanish and Russian.

I asked Doug to explain why he enrolled in PCC's GED program. He stated, "I enrolled in because I'm trying to go back to school and the GED is one of the requirements." He did explain and clarify that, "I actually did finish year 12, as they call it in Australia." Doug explained that this was equivalent to graduating from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the United States. He further explained that he has been working as a technical designer for many years. Doug wanted to further discuss his path to the GED

program. He spoke about how his field of work has proven to be extremely lucrative and provided him with a solid income and employment base as a contract worker. After many years, Doug decided he was tired of contract work and piecing together jobs and wanted to advance in the technical design field.

He investigated various schools around the country and determined that a school in Orlando, Florida was the best place for him to enhance and develop his skills to obtain permanent employment in the industry. This is where he ran up against a barrier.

Doug quickly realized that he needed either a high school diploma or a GED to enroll in this institution. He attempted to obtain his records from the school in Australia and was unable to fully locate the needed information. He could have continued searching although he realized that even if he did obtain the credentials there was no guarantee that the United States' schools would accept the coursework. This is when he investigated the GED programs at PCC and enrolled in the GED program.

He seemed to have had a great educational background so I was curious about how many tests he had completed. He shared, "I have completed social studies, reading and language arts, and science." He was only in the program for about 3 months so it was very impressive to hear that he had completed three of the four tests. I asked him to discuss his sense of urgency. Doug stated, "I didn't want to spend 6 or 12 months on a GED program; I wanted to get it in 3 months, first term." This

motivation stemmed from his timeline to be accepted into the school in Florida. Being able to attend this school was a big motivator for Doug to achieve his goal.

I was curious about how he was able to stay motivated and achieve his goal of earning the GED credential. I asked, “What helped you to be successful in earning the credential?” Doug was quick to say that his instructor was important.

He was encouraged by his instructor’s high expectations. As I pressed him to tell me more about how he was encouraged he said, “One thing that she was critical in students understanding is that you have to be a really good writer.” He found this to be encouraging because he knew what was expected of him when he took the test. This allowed him to be prepared.

As he continued discussing what helped him successfully pass tests, Doug again expressed how his instructor was both encouraging and supportive. I pressed him to learn more about how his instructor supported him. He expressed that she gave him feedback on multiple essays and was always available to answer questions. The instructors were very personal. Doug had many different educational experiences so I was curious about how this class was different than his other schools.

PCC’s GED program provided a different experience than his earlier years because in other countries he stated, “The main difference is the teaching technique.” I asked him what this meant. He described an experience when he was sent to a classroom even though his English was not very good. “The teacher wasn’t very helpful with people whose English was not their first language.” The classroom instructor would explain something once and if you had a question the instructor

would say, “Well this is how it’s done . . . even if it didn’t make sense I had to memorize it.” He was very pleased when his PCC instructor would “explain it in more simple language.” He wanted to be sure to let everyone know that his instructors were very patient. This created an environment where he felt very comfortable and relaxed.

“My instructors here [at PCC] are very different. These instructors want you to understand and their technique is to be sure the students know why and how something works.” Doug explained that math was one of his weaknesses. His instructors were always available. He explained that his instructor “shows that there are many ways to get the same answer, and he doesn’t force you to memorize certain things.” This allowed him to better understand and pass the math test.

I asked Doug to offer some advice and final thoughts that would be helpful to future students. He explained other factors that assisted him in earning the GED credential. Before he could answer that question, he wanted to share that, “I loved both of these teachers and I think they are phenomenal. They have nerves of steel.” One thing that students should learn is to attend every single class and do some homework. In my case,

I was kind of exhausted, but I still had to attend it and I did it because it was a commitment as to what I am trying to achieve; that I need a GED, I have to pass it and then move on.

A final comment that Doug made was that, “both teachers were really good.”

### **Focus Group**

Each of the six students interviewed for this research study were also provided the opportunity to participate in a focus group. The focus group consisted of three



individuals from the larger group of students interviewed. ABE and GED classes offer students many chances to engage in dialogue that provides support for advancing in the class and ultimately earning the GED credential. “Since the data obtained from a focus group is socially constructed within the interaction of the group, a constructivist perspective underlies this data collection procedure” (Merriam, 2009, p. 94). This perspective highlights that students construct meaning from experiences and potentially critically reflect and transform based on this reflection. Critical reflection based on dialogue with other students is a main component of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61). The students were able to engage in meaningful dialogue that provided students the chance to learn from each other and further reflect on their own actions.

The students actively engaged in dialogue when asked to share why they enrolled in PCC’s GED program. One student stated, “I’m going through a custody battle to get my son . . . that’s basically it, the motivation; my son.” This prompted another student to speak about motivation by saying, “I agree with . . . about motivation”. Although, this student meant that the teachers kept him motivated because the teacher is key. “If you have good teachers, then, basically, the motivation will remain the same.” Motivation meant something different to another student who expressed, “My classmates, younger or older it doesn’t matter, they gave me motivation . . . they kept me coming and learning fast.” This theme continually occurred as a student reminded everyone that “a lot of times other students are helping each other.” Although each student shared a different reason for staying engaged in

the program, all were motivated by some external factor as well as the support from fellow classmates.

After this initial discussion, it was very apparent that dialogue with fellow students was a meaningful practice as the group spent the remainder of the time discussing the GED test and different strategies each of them utilized to pass a certain test. This portion of the focus was extremely powerful as the students supported each other in developing a deeper understanding of the GED test structure and content. As the students engaged in dialogue, it was evident that the dialogue component of Mezirow's (2003) transformative learning theory was very relevant.

The focus group provided further support that adult GED students are potentially transformed by engaging in dialogue and reflection. The students discussed the main themes of relationships and extrinsic motivation as well as having individual goals of either learning more English, getting into a postsecondary school, or gaining custody of their child. The focus group was an important element for this research study because it supported the need for students to engage in dialogue to learn from and be supported by fellow classmates.

### **Summary**

This chapter highlights the qualitative data of six adult GED students. These students encountered multiple situations throughout their lives that created opportunities and barriers. Ultimately, the individuals decided to pursue the GED for personal reasons. Although each student had different reasons for enrolling in PCC's

GED program two themes emerged. These themes were relationships and extrinsic motivation/future goals. The main questions asked were:

1. Why did you enroll in PCC's GED program?
2. What parts of the program helped you earn the GED credential?

### **Relationships**

The educational system encourages relationships as a way to motivate and engage students in developing the skills necessary for success. Assisting adult students in successfully achieving their goals occurs when instructors make connections and “it (success) happens in small steps, one person at a time” (Rose, 2013, p. 49). Specific relationships emerged from the interviews as key to the students' ultimate success. These were relationships with instructors, family, and classmates.

### **Instructors**

The most common factor deeply explored by the students was the fact that the instructors were extremely important in their success. One student stated, the “instructors encourage them . . . You did really good. You can do that.” Another student supported this when he said that the instructor is “not just a teacher. He wants you to succeed.” I explored this with a different student and a common theme occurred when the student wanted to be sure and say that the instructor “doesn't make you feel bad if you don't know something.” Quotes from students continued to support how instructor relationships contribute to the success of GED students in earning the credential. A student stated, “He's [the instructor] straightforward. He's very willing to help. He teaches you” Another student stated, “We would go on and have like one-

on-one discussions with him [instructor], but it felt like you were sitting in a coffee shop with your friends . . . There's no judgment."

These personal relationships assisted the students in connecting with the instructors. Personal relationships were obvious when a student shared, "it felt like we were sitting . . . with our friends discussing something or debating things." "The support you get from PCC and this program, and all the teachers . . . is a support group that you are not going to find anywhere else." This comment summed up the importance of the instructor relationship.

### **Family/Support Individual**

Several students discussed family or friends as a support network. One student expressed, "I have a 6-year-old son . . . I'm going through a custody battle to get my son." This family member was motivated to stay focused because he wanted to gain custody of his son. This is similar to another individual interviewed that said a close friend stated, "You can do it, you've done harder things than this." The family/individual support network was evident in other interviews as well. The following quotes further reinforce the importance of a support network whether it is family or other classmates that assist students in earning the GED credential:

Without having a support group, I don't think you really have faith in yourself.

I don't really think I got much encouragement or motivation to do it until I met . . .

It's good to see other people be successful and know you can do that, too,

My son, to get custody of him and to better my life.

These are examples of how relationships with family and close friends supported students persisting in the GED program. Relationships with multiple individuals remain as a reason students continue to persist and ultimately earn the GED credential.

### **Classmates**

In addition to personal relationships with the instructors that contribute to their success, all students but one stated making personal connections in the class was a key factor in their persistence. The relationships that developed in class allowed students to dialogue about how they were feeling about the test or to discuss test-taking strategies. Either discussion promoted the idea that talking about experiences is extremely important for adult learners. “A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). I interviewed three separate students and was intrigued by the commonalities of their comments about relationships with classmates. The comments were:

We would discuss each other’s [work] . . . or when an individual would talk about, Oh, I ‘m not really good at math, the person was like, No, you are good, I’ve watched you.

No, no. You got this. You are fine.

I made a plan with [other students] . . . So I was like, what test are you on?

I just wanted to say my classmates, younger or older it doesn’t matter . . . he is doing really well. That kept me coming.

A lot of the times other students are helping each other.

These types of comments and encouragement by fellow classmates allowed students to stay focused on earning the GED credential. The students remained motivated by this type of support.

### **Extrinsic Motivation/Future Goals**

Adult GED students are affected by many different external factors. These external factors motivate students to stay focused because a reward (future goal) is possible. Extrinsic motivation “refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55). Learners are impacted by numerous factors although learning can be affected by the external rewards offered to students. “Students can be motivated to learn almost anything if promised a sufficiently attractive external award” (Lei, 2010, p. 156). The external reward is the potential of earning a GED credential in order to reach future goals.

In addition to developing key relationships, another theme that emerged from these interviews was that of extrinsic motivation. The students interviewed as part of this research indicated numerous reasons that externally motivated them to enroll in and stay enrolled in PCC’s GED program. The data show that external forces, such as desiring further education or being injured on the job, are external factors that prompted the individuals to enroll in the GED program. The process of interviewing individual students allowed me to independently hear their experiences and ultimately compare responses to other participants. The following comments highlight the extrinsic motivators identified by students:

I was unhappy at my job and not feeling good about myself because I wasn’t in college and didn’t have a diploma.

They [the system] is going to actually pay to have me retrained in a job . . . because they will only pay for 16 months of retraining, I gotta work.

You know, you are just barely making it every month or whatever. Like, something dramatic happens, like I crash the truck or something like that . . . I've kind of watched my mom and dad, too. You know, no retirement and all that. I don't really want that."

The external motivators were the situations that prompted the students to enroll and attend the GED program. In addition to being motivated to enroll and attend the GED program, students also identified future goals. These future goals emerged as a theme closely related to extrinsic motivation.

The students indicated several goals related to either returning to school or entering a new field of work. The comments below demonstrate the future goals of adult students interviewed:

I wanted to enter the colleges, I hadn't any kind of knowledge of English, or math, or science, nothing. That's why I decided to attend the GED class.

I guess it's been a total of about 10 years, I decided that maybe it was time to finish and do something with my life . . .

OK, I have to do something. I've always wanted to go to college. I guess it finally occurred to me . . . I had to get a diploma.

The combination of students being impacted by external motivators and having future goals emerged as factors that influenced adult GED students in persisting to earn the GED credential.

### **Summary**

Overall, the main themes of relationships and extrinsic motivation/future goals emerged from this qualitative research. The students in this study all experienced disorienting dilemmas, although different, that prompted them to research and ultimately enter PCC's GED program. The students enrolling did not ensure their

success. The students attributed their success in achieving the GED credential to supportive family members and friends. An additional factor was the supportive relationships developed with instructors and fellow students that allowed for critical reflection and dialogue. These factors were evident in the interviews I conducted with the six adult GED students enrolled in PCC's GED program. The information gathered in the individual interviews was also reinforced in a focus group conducted with three of the six adult GED students interviewed.



## CHAPTER 5

### BACKGROUND OF STUDY

As a former GED instructor for many years, I spent many hours listening to reasons why students were not successful in school. I also observed as many students who were not successful in their previous educational experiences earned the GED credential and moved on to pursue further education or career opportunities. This experience led me to question what factors of the adult GED students' experiences were allowing them to earn the GED.

The literature on GED students has often focused on documenting the percentage of GED test candidates and test passers. Though we know much about how many students enter, how many take the test, and how many pass (American Council on Education, 2011) we know much less about the lived experiences of those in the GED programs. In fact, Quigley et al. (2011) reported that the stories of GED students "have yet to be told" (p. 2).

I chose to research adult GED students to increase the literature on what success factors lead to these adults earning the GED credential. The purpose of this study is to document the narratives of adult GED students' experiences from entering a GED program through earning the credential. The following research question guided my study: What factors contribute to the success of adult GED test completers earning the credential?

My study consisted of six adult GED students from two campuses at PCC. The students responded to several primary questions and participated in a semi-structured interview based on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, and in particular on a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, and dialogue. The students explained why they enrolled in PCC's GED program and how they were successful in earning the GED credential.

Mezirow and Associates (1990) explained that adults may develop an understanding of themselves and their future by interpreting a life event. These scenarios, also named disorienting dilemmas, could be loss of a job, the addition of a child to the family, an injury, or the inability to advance in a career. My study examined how students interpreted these experiences and how they related these situations to further activities and reflected on future opportunities.

Critical reflection offers individuals the chance to better understand how they interact with the world and specific life situations. Mezirow (1997) highlighted that "self-reflection can lead to significant personal reflection" (p. 7). The students I interviewed utilized this self-reflection technique as they thought about the past and how they can change and control certain aspects of the future. This component of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory was significant as students learned about how they interacted with the world and what options existed.

The aspect of dialogue played a significant role in student success. Several students participated in a focus group that allowed for dialogue. Individuals learn "together by analyzing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common

understanding” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). My study highlights how students learned from each other and utilized other students’ stories in assisting them in developing a plan to earn the GED credential and ultimately to access future educational opportunities.

The previous chapters explored the background of the GED, reviewed the literature discussing GED students and adult learning theory, and presented the data collected from my research. The following sections of this chapter consist of a summary of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Merriam (2009) stated that, “stories are how we make sense of our experiences . . .” (p. 32). According to research by Quigley et al. (2011), numerous barriers exist that can impede the success of students. These barriers include: situational (home and life situations), institutional (systemic barriers), and dispositional barriers (individual perceptions) (Quigley et al., 2011, p. 3). My research focused on learning more about individual student experiences as to why they entered PCC’s GED program and ultimately what factors contributed to them earning the GED credential. I utilized two main interview questions in the semi-structured interview process.

#### **Why Did You Enroll in PCC’s GED Program?**

Carnevale et al. (2010) reported an increased need for workers to obtain further education. More than 50% of students identified employment reasons for taking the GED test (American Council of Education, 2011, p. 3). The six students in my research project identified the pursuit of either further education or advancement in

their present job as a reason for enrolling in PCC's GED program. The students who identified further education were doing so to eventually increase employment opportunities. The research by Merriam et al. (2007) reported that 85% of adult learners identified some form of career transition as a reason to pursue further education (p. 63). My research data support existing literature about why many adult GED students enroll in GED programs to enhance academic skills and access further postsecondary options.

Mezirow and Associates (1990) suggested that experiences offer individuals a chance to learn by developing a new interpretation of an event (p. 1). The students identified significant events such as job loss or the desire to advance in their current job which prompted them to enroll in PCC's GED program. These situations are identified as a disorienting dilemma. A disorienting dilemma is something that disrupts a current life situation. Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory identified several phases of learning for adult learners that include a disorienting life dilemma (p. 19). The students determined that something must be done to continue and develop the skills necessary to be successful in obtaining future employment. The data show that as instructors support students in developing academic skills, the students are encouraged to pursue further education and employment options.

### **What Parts of the Program Helped You Earn the GED Credential?**

Willans and Seary (2011) identified "a resilient individual is one who can draw on his or her own resources to enact an effective intervention to find solutions to problematic situations" (p. 127). Five out of the six participants identified a support

group of either family members or friends. This support group assisted students in continuing to develop resiliency skills and contributed to each student persisting to earn the GED credential. Newman (2005) stated that maintaining good relationships were an important factor in developing resiliency.

All participants identified that strong relationships supported them in persisting and earning the GED credential. Mezirow (1997) reported that “learning is a social process, and discourse becomes central to making meaning [of experiences]” (p. 10). All participants highlighted those positive relationships with instructors, family/support groups, or classmates as a significant factor that contributed to their success in persisting in the program and ultimately earning the GED credential.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

This research project has implications for several members of the educational community. The students interviewed represented participants in the GED programs at PCC and the findings will not only impact this group, but potentially other members of the community college, as well. The following sections explain the implications this research could have within the community college setting.

#### **Administration**

The community college environment creates opportunities for all members of the local community to access educational programs designed to offer the development of skills and knowledge in multiple disciplines. The community college administration is responsible for creating an environment that provides policies and programs to ensure students can achieve their educational goals. Department chairs

and deans currently oversee the administration of the numerous programs that engage students in academic development. Administrators continually utilize course evaluations and meetings with faculty to learn more about what elements have been successful with students.

The feedback about instructors, programs, and curriculum provided by the students I interviewed can impact how advising services are offered to GED students that promote enrollment in further educational programs at PCC. Additionally, the information students shared about the importance of instructor relationships can guide the administration in developing appropriate professional development to assist the instructors in learning various strategies to support adult GED students.

### **Instructional Staff**

Instructors have contact with students on a regular basis. These relationships provide a unique opportunity to influence how students navigate the educational system. This study highlights the importance of these relationships as students described how the feedback and encouragement received from instructors assisted participants in earning the GED credential.

For instructional staff, this study provides valuable information about how the curriculum can be adjusted and accented to allow for additional time to have students dialogue about their experiences and future goals. The instructors can develop lessons that encourage students to discuss life events and have fellow students summarize what they heard and what they learned from the stories shared. This experience increases the students' opportunity to better understand others' experiences potentially

resulting in students reflecting on their own lives and possibly contributing to making a decision about whether to pursue additional education or employment opportunities. These experiences can be utilized to provide students with an opportunity to develop both critical thinking and analysis skills that are necessary to pass the different GED tests by examining stories and analyzing information about postsecondary opportunities. As students create strong supportive relationships with peers, they may be able to reflect on their experiences and learn from others' stories. These relationships with peers are supported by transformative learning theory because reflection and dialogue are key elements leading to an individual learning more about how they relate to the world.

### **Limitations of Study**

This study was conducted in Oregon's largest postsecondary institution. Although it is the largest institution, the sample size was relatively small. The data are not intended to be generalized to other institutions or to be fully representative of all adult GED students. The research conducted was intended to gather the narratives of adult GED students' experiences from entering a GED through successfully earning the credential.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This qualitative study examined the narratives of adult GED students about what factors led to earning the GED credential. The research project highlighted two main themes: relationships and extrinsic motivation/future goals. Although this research project highlighted two significant themes, additional areas of research are

needed that would continue to support the success of adult GED students in earning the GED credential. The following recommendations for further research may contribute important additional information to the body of GED literature.

1. Replicate with younger groups in options programs 16-20.
2. Follow students to determine persistence in further education and/or advancement in the workplace.
3. Further investigate the factors that influenced adult GED students to persist in maintaining attendance in the GED program.
4. Further investigate how gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic subgroups identify the factors that influenced them in successfully earning the GED credential.
5. Replicate with online GED courses to increase the body of literature on how distance learning affects the earning of the GED credential.



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