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Factors Influencing the Persistence of GED Students

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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PERSISTENCE OF GED STUDENTS

by David Wilson

A Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

July 2016

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the loved ones who help me in so many ways, including my dog Franklin.

Acknowledgements

  I would like to say a sincere thanks to all the supportive people in my life-particularly my capstone committee for helping me put this all together. My advisor put a lot of work into keeping me on track with this project, so I would like to thank her. And my administrators, colleagues and students for making all of this possible and making this whole endeavor interesting. For my students I would especially like to say thank you for helping me see what is really important and making me humble and thankful for the things I occasionally take for granted. I am very grateful for all the opportunities that I have had and continue to have.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter provides a description of the research question, the setting and participants, as well as my own personal background and journey. It also references the way that this research came about and why it is of interest to me personally. It describes some of the circumstances and challenges of adult education that might be different from more traditional settings and students.

Adult Education

Even though I recently finished student teaching in a kindergarten classroom, this school year I find myself teaching in an adult education program at the district headquarters in a low-income neighborhood of a major city. I do not have any background in *adult* education, but I am quickly learning that education and teaching are still the same in many ways, no matter the age of the students. There are unique challenges for adult students, however. Many of them have very busy lives including jobs, children and other responsibilities. Some students, many, in fact, do not continue with the Adult Education program or they have to "stop out" and return when things are less chaotic. This observation led me to my research question: *What factors influence the persistence of GED students?*

I am interested in the factors that influence whether our students complete our program or not. I will focus on whether they receive their GED, but more generally whether they stick with the program or not. I want to know from our students what barriers are getting in their way and what positive factors are supporting them.

Change in Plans. I was not planning to teach at all this year, as I wanted to have time to dedicate to completing this capstone project. However, I received an offer to work in the Adult Education program as ".8," meaning slightly less than full time. This was a commitment that I felt I could make, and I accepted the job. Now that I am here, I have found that it has been an adjustment teaching adults. However, I have also been pleasantly surprised by the small moments of connection and small victories, as well as a slightly more relaxed atmosphere.

Adult education is much different from elementary school. We as teachers are not responsible for our students in the same kind of way. We can still care about them, but they are adults and they decide what is best for them. We provide educational support and guidance. No need for constant discipline, snack time, nap time, or anything of the sort. It allows for a different kind of interaction, a different kind of learning, where the students and I can bounce ideas off each other as equals.

Formerly our program was called Adult Basic Education but we have recently switched to calling it just Adult Education. The name was changed to reflect a higher standard in our program in recent years. There are many things about this job, setting and population that I am still learning about, and this entire year has been a learning and developing process for me. I have had some experiences that make me reevaluate my approach in interacting with my students. Our students are adults and it is paramount for me as the teacher to demonstrate respect and equality as far as how I relate to them.

I want to motivate my students, but there are times that I have noticed it is better to ease up and not push a particular student too hard. Some students bristle at being

pressed or even engaged with at all. Trust needs to be built up, and if a rapport can be developed, that is great and it will help the students and myself as their teacher.

My Setting

The Adult Education program is stationed in a large office building, which is essentially the headquarters of the district in this city. There is also a second campus located in another part of the city. It is mostly an administrative building, housing human resources and other similar departments. Many employees work here; new and current employees who do not will work in this building will often have to come here to fill out paperwork and participate in interviews, trainings, and other events. On the fifth floor we hold our Adult Education classes.

Background of the Researcher

In some ways, it is a stretch for me to relate to my students. After all, I have rarely thought about what it would be like to have not graduated from high school. My entire life I have taken my high school diploma for granted. Though my family was not wealthy by any stretch, I did attend a competitive and prestigious school from kindergarten through high school. A lot of it was just good luck, as my parents were teachers at the school and we received greatly discounted tuition. The school is part of a prestigious university in the Midwest. Though my current location is different, and has become my home geographically and emotionally, these were my formative moments and experiences as a student.

This was the type of school where students are expected to go on to college, and not just any college. The standard expectation was an Ivy league school or at least some kind of highly rated college or university. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that

many of my peers aspired to become doctors and lawyers, and in fact many of them are doctors and lawyers today. As for myself, I "only" became a teacher. However, I provide this backdrop to illustrate how much of an adjustment it is and has been for me to put myself in my students' shoes.

Imagining what it is like to have no high school diploma and to be working towards a GED just seems foreign to me. The environment in which I grew up presented so much pressure to graduate high school with a high GPA and go to college. Seeing students strive to get a GED puts things in perspective a little bit; I am reminded to be grateful for the opportunities that I have had. And it is a major step for our students- I have heard real stories about jobs that students were not able to secure because they did not have their GED.

Student Challenges and Opportunities

I find the issues facing my students important and worth investigating. My undergraduate degree is in psychology and I find myself leaning on some of the major topics of psychology to try to understand the students who come through our program. After all, O'Neill and Thomson (2013) stated, "Academic persistence for the adult learner is a complex phenomenon" (p. 162). In particular I find myself pondering the importance of motivation or a lack thereof, and what other factors are influencing our students. Shaw, Tham, Hogle and Koch (2015) found that motivation was key for GED students (p. 28). I also keep coming back to the idea of goals and the importance of having a specific objective in mind. Many authors pointed to having goals as a positive factor for academic success (Comings, 2007; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Shaw et al., 2015). These factors will be examined more thoroughly in Chapter 2.

Getting a GED will legitimately open doors and opportunities for our students. With that diploma they can not only get a better job and make more money, they can potentially go to college, get a job and make more money than they currently earn. On top of that and maybe more importantly, they can get a *good* job in the sense of something that they can really enjoy, something that they can choose because it appeals to them.

This new teaching position has caused me to look at life and the world a little bit differently. It is not lost on me that there are things I have, whether they be material, or just certain opportunities and privileges, that my students most likely do not have. I suppose I have always been a thinker, and I do see some of the inequities that exist.

Our program has a total of 1,186 students. 61 percent of students are female and 39 percent are male. 69 percent of students are between 25 and 44 years of age, 11 percent are between 19 and 24, and 16 percent are between 45 and 59. 3 percent of students are 60 or older and a couple of students are between 16 and 18. 58 percent of students are African-American and 34 percent are Latino, along with 5 percent Asian students and a handful of White and Native American students.

Most of our students are African-American and low-income. I have been really seeing the dynamic of the "haves and the have-nots." It is unavoidable. I go into work, interact with my students, and then go home to my own world of opportunity and having everything I need. I have my bachelor's degree and teaching license, and I am working on my master's degree. Meanwhile, my students are trying to get a GED. I see a glaring difference in our lives that seems to boil down to opportunity. I have had second and

third chances, as others have, but some chances just seem better or more plentiful than others.

In this context, it is impossible to avoid some thoughts or discussion of racially-influenced societal inequalities. I have to believe that opportunities are more scarce and the chances of living in poverty are higher for our students based mainly on the color of their skin. At the least I would imagine that the load people carry with respect to stress and the wear and tear of life would likely be higher for people of color. In fact, authors such as Geronimus, Hicken, Keene & Bound (2006) have found higher measures of "allostatic load" for African-Americans as compared with whites. This refers to health deterioration as a result of excess stress related to ethnicity. Although this project is not directly about improving race relations or addressing inequalities, I do hope that in learning more about our students we are doing them a service as well as others who follow.

This year I did not teach ELL classes, but from what I have seen many of our Hispanic and Muslim students are in the ELL part of our program. I teach only GED classes, and the majority of these students are African-American. It seems that most also live in the surrounding low-income metropolitan area where our school building is located.

We have far more students who do not graduate than students who do. This year I taught a low-level Math class and a higher level writing class. I also led the orientation process for GED students, so I saw many people starting out in the program. I also saw people who did not complete the week-long orientation process. Even among those who did, many students do not last more than a week or two. We want our students to succeed.

There are many factors that impact our students and perhaps only a few that we can do anything to influence in a positive way.

Public Service of Teaching

I think that teaching is in large part about helping people, and that is one of my motivations in teaching our students. In some ways, teaching students in a GED program can be satisfying because the payoff is visible. Students potentially can gain this diploma and change their lives for the better, sometimes it will not even take very much time. Then they can see an immediate impact, whether it be eligibility for more and better jobs, applying for college, or some combination of the two.

I remember during student teaching my cooperating teacher reminded me that we were preparing these kindergarteners for life, for being adults. And the first step toward that for them is making it to first grade with the learnings and tools that they need. Before this I really did not have a clear idea of the overall goal of teaching elementary students.

With my GED students, the goal seems close because it really is just four sections of a test standing in their way. Some students are ready or very close to being ready to pass the test. This does not mean that it is easy. Frankly, it is not. However, I can say that I appreciate the simplicity of having a mission and trying to help our students reach their goal. They take a few classes, score high enough on a practice test, and hopefully pass the real GED test. There are four modules to the test, so students might pass one module and then take some time to prepare for the next. It really is somewhat straightforward, but it can still be challenging for our students. It is a combination of factors that makes it difficult for our students to complete our program. Part of my aim is to find out more about what these factors are.

A Different Dynamic

Some students in our program face difficult circumstances. Because our students are adults, they really have greater choice. It is up to them if they are motivated to come to class and follow through with their GED program. If they stop attending, they are always eligible to return at the next enrollment period though they may have a wait of a month or more. The program is free. On the other hand, as the saying goes, "time is money" and students are sacrificing some of their time which they could use by working and earning a living. I imagine this can be a juggling act for our students who do have jobs and attend classes in their free time.

As adults, our students do have all the responsibilities that fall on any person who has to take care of themselves, and often our students have children as well. It is easy to see in this context how the GED program would not be a top priority. Although it can help open doors, it is not as pressing as an immediate need such as paying the rent and the bills, or feeding and taking care of one's children.

Even though I am new in the world of adult education, I still feel a connection to our students. As almost any teacher would probably say, I see them not just as students but as people. Getting to know students better helps me see that they are just people with goals, dreams, problems and responsibilities.

Purpose of the study

Since most learning takes place in the classroom, persistence is important to build up that time spent in class. It means more than attendance, it means that students are continuing to work on building a better life. I recently had a student pass the GED test, which means she is no longer in my writing class. This was a concrete example of

someone moving forward in her life. It reminded me what this process of teaching is all about, and it drove home the point that student persistence is really for the benefit of the student. They have plenty to gain, it is just a matter of getting there and benefitting from putting in the effort.

Part of this project for me is just finding out more about our students' backgrounds, experiences, and point of view. I think this is where the interest in people comes in, and an inclination toward connecting with people and trying to understand behaviors. It would be rather easy for me to understand someone who is just like me, but it is those who have some different experience or background than I do who I can learn from the most.

I only know what it is like to be Caucasian, and I only know what it is like to be middle-class or perhaps lower-middle class. I question whether I have ever really known poverty. Some of our students experience real poverty and almost all are people of color, mostly African-American. This is an environment where I am learning and seeing things from a different perspective. Though it can be hard, challenging, even uncomfortable at times, this feeling of growing personally and professionally is encouraging.

Questions about persistence. What is it that allows some students to pass through the program and earn their GED? These students often have children, financial struggles, various responsibilities, yet somehow they still make it through. What I am interested in is *why*. I want to look at the students who do earn their GED and see how or why they can make it work for them. I also want to know what hinders students on their academic path. Why are many people not reaching completion? For the ones that do

make it through, what is it about these individuals that makes them successful? What are the barriers and what are the supports?

The goals of this study are to provide some new insights and/or contribute to the current body of knowledge on why GED students are successful or unsuccessful in their academic program. An additional purpose of the study will simply be finding ways to meet the needs of our students. The results will ideally help myself and my colleagues to have a clearer view of what factors are affecting our students and what is helping or hurting their progress. Professionally I would like to know what factors influence our students positively because this will inform my teaching practice and allow me to grow in my craft. Personally, I want to see our students succeed. I know that cultural factors hinder our students in some ways, and I want to see them persevere.

Conclusion

Adult education was never on my radar so it never entered my mind as a career possibility. However, now that I am in my current position I have seen things from an entirely different perspective. Helping students to get their GED really means something to me and the realities that some people face have been uncovered for me. For these reasons, I have an interest in finding some possible insights into why GED students succeed, and why the number of students who do persevere seems so low. The findings of this study will potentially help our current and future adult education students.

Chapter 2 Preview

In the next chapter I review the literature on this topic and discuss the different research, viewpoints and arguments. The main themes are persistence, supports for persistence of GED students, and barriers to persistence. These are the main topics

addressed by the literature. Other topics that fall under these categories include

motivation, goals, relationships (both supportive and problematic), and lack of time/life

demands.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to shed light on the question of *what factors influence the persistence of GED students?* The literature review discusses different barriers and supports that may make it easier or harder for students to persist and succeed. The research that has previously been conducted in these areas will inform the direction of my own research based on their findings and recommendations.

The major themes addressed by the literature in this chapter are academic persistence and the barriers and supports that can influence persistence (both positively and negatively). The topic of persistence is explored in numerous ways, including the definition of the term as well as why it is important. The barriers and supports are explored in terms of how they directly connect to academic persistence. Barriers are explored for their potential negative influence on students. These factors are examined closely to see how they might inhibit students' academic success and persistence. Barriers potentially make it more difficult for students to continue in the GED program and graduate. Supports are explored in a similar way, except that they are influential in positive ways as opposed to negative ways. Supports are those factors that help GED students continue with their program and reach their goals.

These themes are all interconnected and directly influence one another. There is also some crossover in certain areas, for example, the same thing that is a barrier for one person can be a support for someone else. This applies to certain internal factors such as motivation and self-esteem, and can also involve external factors such as family support

or a lack of support. There are many stresses and pressures for our students, but there are also supports and assets. The importance of cultural and social factors can not be overlooked. In fact, a number of authors recommended that teachers become more aware or educated about students' lives and experiences, and their cultural and social identities. This literature review will shed some light on the things that our GED students face as possible hindrances, as well as the things that can provide a boost for students in achieving their goals. Our administrators and instructors want them to attain the GED, but first we need to know how to keep them coming back. Therefore, the discussion begins with an understanding of persistence, both what it is and why it matters.

Persistence

Persistence can be defined in different ways and it has a number of synonyms and related terms such as retention and resilience. Many authors, including Comings (2007), Gopalakrishnan (2008), O'Neill and Thomson (2013) and Pickard (2013) provided various thoughts and definitions of retention and persistence. For example, some adult students might stop attending class but continue studying on their own and then return to class when they are able. Comings (2007) suggested that this can be considered a measure of persistence even if students are not physically in class for a certain time period. Gopalakrishnan (2008) suggested taking a longer-term or "longitudinal" view of persistence spanning a number of years (p. 148). Persistence is critically important for students because the amount of time that a student is in the classroom and engaged in learning has a fundamental impact on academic success.

Definition of persistence. Pickard (2013) clarified differences between *attrition*, *retention*, and *persistence*. She noted that attrition refers to programs losing students,

retention measures how well a program retains its students, and persistence measures a student's capacity to continue on in their academic program and/or achieve their academic goals (p. 115). Persistence is the key for students to continue on their path and eventually achieve success.

As O'Neill and Thomson (2013) stated, "Academic persistence for the adult learner is a complex phenomenon" (p. 162). Even thinking about and defining persistence can be a challenge. According to Pickard (2013), "How researchers conceptualize student participation in adult literacy programs has changed over time" (p. 117). She mentioned that at first students were looked at as either "participants" or "non-participants," and motivation was assessed based on participation (p. 117). Pickard (2013) explained that eventually student participation was broken down into how much time they spent in a program. Pickard (2013) explained that "Those who stayed in a program until they completed their goals 'persisted;' those who left a program before meeting their goals were classified as dropouts" (p. 117).

Comings (2007) stated that persistence has two key components, "intensity (the hours of instruction per month) and duration (the months of engagement in instruction)" (p. 24). In other words, persistence is measuring how much time a student spends in the classroom. If they are staying engaged over a long period of time, they still might not be spending enough hours per month in class, and this can reduce the amount of learning gains that they would otherwise attain.

Comings (2007) continued, "Adult education programs often refer to persistence as *retention* and measure it by recording participation in formal classes and tutoring sessions" (p. 24). Comings (2007) went on to propose the following definition of

persistence: "Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services, and returning to program services as soon as the demands of their lives allow" (p. 24). This definition is more student-focused and allows for some of the complexities and challenges that adult learners often face.

Gopalakrishnan (2008) suggested a slightly different definition, one that was more "longitudinal" (p. 148). He acknowledged that some authors would prefer to use the term "stopout" rather than "dropout" because some students return soon after leaving an adult education program. However, he suggested "Though it may be preferable to call learners 'stop outs' and not 'dropouts,' the data require a new definition of retention within programs that it based on a longitudinal perspective" (p. 148). Gopalakrishnan (2008) suggested that the amount of time used in measures of persistence is insufficient.

Gopalakrishnan (2008) stated,

...this new definition of retention should expect the tracking of continued attendance into the next fiscal year and hold programs accountable for such longitudinal participation. Without this emphasis on longitudinal retention and tracking, local providers may rely on the incorrect assumption that all non-graduate exiters are simply stopping out and will eventually return to adult education. (p. 148)

Gopalakrishnan went on to suggest that without this longitudinal perspective, programs might be obtaining a false or misleading measure of persistence. He used the term *retention* in place of persistence, but is essentially using the terms interchangeably. Whereas Comings mentioned persistence being measured over one year, Gopalakrishnan

advocated for a "longitudinal" measure of persistence because it provides a clearer and more accurate picture. This is a significant distinction, but there remain many similarities in these definitions of persistence.

Each of these authors are attempting to define the same phenomenon, so there are many similarities between these definitions. However, there are also some differences, such as the span of time over which a student's participation is measured. The important thing about persistence seems to be that students stay involved and engaged in academic pursuits. A working definition for this study will be: a student staying engaged in an academic program through attendance and participation over an extended period of time (beyond one year), and if they "stop out," continuing with independent studying and/or returning to the program shortly after stopping out (within 3 months).

The importance of persistence. The importance of persistence has been highlighted by various authors. Keffalinou (2009) noted the problem of a lack of persistence, saying "Our ABE/GED program has historically had low retention and persistence. Students often left before the end of the year or before accomplishing their goals, many times without letting us know" (p. 106). Porter et al. (2005) stated "Research indicates that adults need 100 to 150 hours of literacy instruction to raise their skills by one grade level. Yet adult literacy students participate in instruction for an average of only 70 hours per year" (p. 1). While Comings, Sum, Uvin, and Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (as cited in Pickard, 2013) showed that "about 2/3 of students who attended 100 hours of instruction achieved a one grade level improvement, suggesting that more hours of instruction equaled greater achievement" (p. 115).

In his review of the related literature, Comings (2007) suggested that persistence is important for academic improvement and success, saying, "Studies point to 100 hours of instruction as the point at which a majority of adult education students are likely to show measurable progress, and, therefore, it serves as a benchmark that identifies an effective program" (p. 25). Clearly students benefit from putting in a certain amount of time in attending classes and studying. This leads to academic growth and is critical to success. Ideally, students will continue to persist until they pass all four sections of the GED test. However, simply being involved in an adult education program can offer benefits.

As Terry (2006) observed,

Learner Cassandra said that her 'whole outlook on life' had changed, and fellow student Jennifer said that the program had put her life 'back on track,' instead of being 'totally left behind' her high school graduate friends. Other learners said that they would have been 'just wasting away'(Noel), 'just sitting at home all depressed'(Edith), or 'just working, trying to make it, which is hard'(Rodney), if not for their literacy programs. (p. 6)

This research study is based on the understanding that academic persistence is necessary for students to be successful in the GED program. A rare student might stop in and pass the GED test shortly after enrolling in the program. However, most students will benefit from long-term persistence. In order to maintain persistence, there are a number of positive factors that can aid students in their academic pursuits.

Supports

Supports, as categorized for this research project, will refer to anything that may potentially help a student persist and succeed in the GED program. The positive factors identified here are taken from the works of Comings (2007), Fritz and Alsabek (2010), Gardner (2011), Goto and Martin (2009), Jacobson (2009), O'Neill and Thomson (2013), Reynolds and Johnson (2014), and Shaw, Tham, Hogle and Koch (2015). These factors include family, motivation, strong sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, strong community support, positive connection with teachers and having specific goals.

There are many other factors that can act as supports for GED learners. Progress and goals are very important as well. Not only setting clear goals, but having an opportunity to see progress that has been made towards achieving those goals is important for students. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) pointed out the importance of building and maintaining a sense of self-efficacy (p. 168). In this section, motivation will be covered, including how motivation is directly connected to having goals.

Motivation. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) discussed the importance of motivation and resilience as it relates to academic persistence. They stated, "As motivation wanes, volition or will takes over to support motivation and bolster persistence in pursuit of a goal" (p. 164). Motivation helps students but they need that extra effort sometimes to help them follow through. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) also stated, "Resilience is another term that defines the personal quality of employing persistence in overcoming obstacles to achieve one's goals" (p. 164). Persistence, motivation and resilience are all interconnected, along with a sense of personal will. These are all internal factors that can contribute to success for adult learners.

Shaw, Tham, Hogle and Koch (2015) also found that motivation was key for GED students (p. 28). The students who they interviewed were mostly studying online, but they found similar factors that contributed to success. The researchers noted that many factors were involved in students' success or struggles, but the personal factors were critical. Shaw et al. (2015) interviewed one student who stated "'One thing I believe you need to do is believe in yourself and stick to it. You have to do it for yourself. If you don't want to do it for yourself you're not going to get it" (p. 28). Their interviews highlighted the importance of desire, self-efficacy and motivation.

Goto and Martin (2009) noted the positive influence of intrinsic motivation (p. 13). They conducted interviews with students and found that some students were motivated by the prospect of having a "'better life'" (p. 13). This can include a number of factors, mainly financial gains, a better job, and providing a better quality of life for family. Like other authors, Goto and Martin (2009) highlighted the significance of self-efficacy (p. 15). In some cases, students build self-efficacy and confidence from being in an adult education program. As one student reported to Goto and Martin (2009), "'I am enjoying the education-and self-discovery, I love to find that I am a lot smarter than I thought'" (p. 15).

Goto and Martin (2009), O'Neill and Thomson (2013), and Shaw, Tham, Hogle and Koch (2015) all pointed to motivation as an important element in achieving academic success. Adult learners have various motivations, many revolving around having an improved standing in life. Confidence and motivation were closely related and have also been linked to having and achieving goals. These are significant factors that can influence persistence of GED students.

Goals. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) noted several other factors that can aid adult learners, including having career and personal goals (p. 168). Reynolds and Johnson (2014) also noted the importance of having goals and the fact that this could help students overcome barriers like fear. They said of students, "Strong goal orientation and a desire to achieve seemed to be more powerful than (and helped them overcome) their fear of failure" (p. 41).

Comings (2007) also mentioned the importance of goals. Examples of goals were "helping one's children, getting a better job, bettering one's self, moving ahead in life, attending college or some other academic institution, proving someone's assessments of the student's abilities wrong, or obtaining citizenship" (p. 34). Shaw et al. (2015) supported Comings' findings by echoing the importance of having goals and seeing progress toward those goals (p. 31).

Various authors have pointed to goals as a positive factor for academic success (Comings, 2007; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Shaw et al., 2015). Goals were similar to motivation in that they revolved around finding a path to a better life. Motivation and goals were closely related and confidence and self-efficacy were also relevant to the pursuit and achievement of goals. All of these are supports that can boost persistence and success of GED students.

Community and relationships. Jacobson (2009) highlighted the importance of community building and changing the traditional roles of teacher and student (p. 164). This study was actually conducted in Japanese adult education programs, but there were many noteworthy suggestions which apply to education in the United States. Instead of looking at a system of a teacher and students, these educators viewed themselves and

their students as "co-learners" (p. 164). These educators also placed a decreased emphasis on assessment, instead using a more "holistic" view of students as human beings (p. 164). One notable difference in this setting was that teachers were unpaid volunteers (Jacobson, 2007, p. 165). Student success was considered in terms of the growth of a human being rather than a score on a test, thus allowing students to feel more of a sense of accomplishment and less pressure to achieve a certain grade.

Comings (2007) highlighted the importance of relationships. "*Relationships* are the support noted by participants from their families, friends or colleagues; God or their church community; support groups; community workers; mentors or bosses; and their children" (p. 34). Shaw et al. (2015) found that encouragement from teachers was important for student persistence and they also noted that teachers needed to help students build self-efficacy (p. 31). This relationship with the instructor can be a positive force for students. Also, students can have a better sense of community if there is a rapport between instructor and students, and between students as a group.

Reynolds and Johnson (2014) mentioned family as an important support for GED students. They pointed out that family members can serve as motivation because students want to set an example for their children or make parents proud of them (p. 42). These family relationships can be a support system for students to help them continue, especially in difficult times. Another support mentioned by Reynolds and Johnson (2014) was community and a "sense of belonging" (p. 43). Sometimes it was just a friendship with one person that made the difference, whether that was with a classmate, teacher, staff or administrator. Reynolds and Johnson (2014) quoted a student who said, "'I needed someone outside of my family to motivate and encourage me'" (p. 43).

Whether it is community, relationships, or a combination of the two, these kinds of support can carry students further through their education, especially in trying times. Students need positive and helpful people around them, whether it be at home or at school. These supports can positively influence GED students to help them persist and succeed.

Self-efficacy and individual characteristics. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) pointed out the importance of self-efficacy, or a belief in one's ability to complete a goal or task. However, they mentioned that this can present its own unique challenges for adult students. They suggested, "Particularly for adults, the process of building a sense of academic self-efficacy may take much longer since adults' self-concept has been built on more life experiences and has become more firmly established" (p. 168). This self-concept is part of the many internal factors that can affect adult learners' ability to persist.

O'Neill and Thomson (2013) reiterated that internal factors are important for students and will need to be reinforced by educators. They mentioned a "global sense of self-efficacy which is important in many aspects of adult life. Reinforcement of these attributes is necessary to having a positive effect on self-concept and ultimately builds a stronger sense of self-determination" (p. 169).

Another important factor mentioned by O'Neill and Thomson (2013) is *interest* (pp. 168-169). They suggested that a high level of interest is important and it also needs to be maintained or even increased. They pointed out that adult students need to be able to visualize themselves in future roles of being a college student, or working in a particular environment. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) stated, "Adults need to be able to see themselves in these roles in order to anticipate how best to evaluate their readiness to

make the change, and prepare accordingly" (169). This is also a part of having long-term

goals and using that as motivation to persist.

O'Neill and Thomson (2013) noted that students are learning *flexibility* in dealing

with life situations and this will help them with their future challenges and opportunities.

Reynolds and Johnson (2014) noted specific individual characteristics that served as

supports, such as "resourcefulness" and "flexibility" (41). These qualities helped with the

various challenges and unexpected life events that adult students faced.

Many internal attitudes and characteristics were found to influence academic

success and persistence. Whether it was self-efficacy, self-determination or self-concept,

any of these internal beliefs and perceptions could have an effect on adult learners'

abilities to reach their goals. A high level of interest and flexibility were also positive

supports for adult learners. All of these things can be supports for GED learners trying to

succeed and persist.

Choice. Shaw et al. (2015) uncovered other factors that were essential for student

persistence. For instance, they found that offering an online GED program brought in

students who would not have pursued their degree if they had to attend an on campus

program (p. 30). This is a new way that some students might be able to persist and find

success.

One of the supports that has been suggested to be effective with adult learners is

choice. Gardner (2011) mentioned the positive effects of giving adult education students

a greater amount of choice in their learning (p. 97). She created *activity menus*, where

students could choose the work they would do that day. These activity menus were based

on Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, which help cast a wider net as far as

engaging a larger number of students who may have different learning styles. She also mentioned a number of ways that this process helps and encourages adult students.

Gardner (2011) suggested:

Activity menus allow the teacher to model civic participation by creating a more student-centered classroom; they allow students to take responsibility for their own learning; and their use fosters instructional strategies- such as active learning, community building, and self-efficacy- that have been found to improve student persistence. (p. 98)

Fritz and Alsabek (2010) noted the importance of student choice. They surveyed students about what was working as far as activities that the students felt benefited them the most. The students were also encouraged to make suggestions about the next week's activities. In this article the authors also pointed out the importance of attendance. The teachers posted a list of students who had perfect attendance.

The common theme among these various authors is that students benefit with more choices offered to them. Whether it be program options, having more say in their assignments or offering feedback to instructors, these are opportunities for students to demonstrate a level of autonomy. This also shows respect that adult students are on an equal level with their instructors. These are factors that can positively influence persistence of GED students. Unfortunately, there are also many factors that can hinder adults pursuing their GED.

Barriers

Barriers are essentially the opposite of supports. Some factors such as family relationships might be a support for one person and a barrier for someone else. Another

example could be self-esteem or confidence, which can be a barrier or a support

depending on whether it is at a high level or a lower level. Goto and Martin (2009)

pointed out that barriers can be internal factors, such as motivation and self-efficacy.

Meanwhile Cuban (2003) and Schafft and Prins (2009) pointed out that there can be

many external barriers such as housing, work, and family responsibilities. The following

section will include a discussion of the importance of barriers as well as a more detailed

explanation of different kinds of barriers.

      Understanding barriers. Cross (1981) mentioned "Those who have had

unpleasant experiences in school and who have grown to adulthood thinking that they

were 'too dumb' to succeed in academic learning…" (p. 135). Cross focused on how to

increase participation, but this previous statement highlights his awareness of one of the

barriers for adult learners, namely, bad experiences in school and/or low academic self-

confidence and self-esteem.

      Cross (1981) noted the importance of understanding barriers:

      It is just as important to know why adults do not participate as why they do.

      Indeed, since it is usually the people who 'need' education most-the poorly

      educated-who fail to participate, understanding the barriers to participation has

      been a subject of special interest to researchers and policymakers. Unfortunately,

      it is usually harder to find out why people do not do something than why they do.

      (p. 97)

      Cross (1981) mentioned "situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers" (p.

98). Situational barriers refer to circumstances in a person's life, such as personal

responsibilities with work or home life. Transportation is an example of a situational

barrier. Institutional barriers refer to situations at the site or school itself that could cause conflict, such as fees, "inconvenient schedules or locations," and other such factors. And dispositional barriers refer to internal feelings, "attitudes and self-perceptions" that might get in the way of academic success (p. 98).

There are many different types and examples of barriers for GED students. It is important just to recognize that barriers do exist and that adult learners may have to deal with a multitude of problems which can make achieving academic goals more difficult. These factors can negatively influence the persistence of GED students.

Time and life demands. Responsibilities and a lack of time were a common theme described by multiple authors. Comings (2007) mentioned "life demands" as a significant barrier. Examples of life demands were "child care needs; work demands; transportation difficulties; the student's own, or his or her family's, health issues; age; lack of time; fatigue; bad weather; rules set by welfare and other social programs; unfavorable conditions at home; moving; and lack of income" (p. 34).

There are many responsibilities that come with being an adult. As adults, students can become stressed or burdened by responsibilities of life. Time is a common issue because students have lives and priorities that take up their energy and occupy their time. These are barriers that can affect the persistence of GED students.

Relationships, traditional gender roles. Comings (2007) suggested that relationships can become barriers for adult learners to persist in their education. Examples of relationships that can represent barriers include "Family members, friends, colleagues, and community or welfare workers who did not support persistence, as well as fears about letting other people down by failing in a program" (Comings, 2007, p. 34).

Cuban (2003), in her case study of two women pursuing adult literacy education, mentioned that women could find themselves in caregiving roles which made it more difficult to make time for their own goals and education. She quoted one woman who said, "'You have no choice. I mean in life, I have to help. I cannot say no. So it's hard. So I try not to make 'em [her plans] around them [the family], but everytime I say OK, something else comes up'" (p. 20). This woman wanted an education for herself but found it difficult to make time for herself. Cuban (2013) also explained one woman's perspective on coming to adult education:

> Donna wanted somebody to care for her, and she turned to the literacy program to unearth a niche for herself around her family's needs. She said, 'I would love it, to sit, come every day, doing only for myself.' Donna's dreams of giving something to herself, like many mid-life women who enroll in literacy programs were dashed because her family role superceded her ability to attend. (p. 21)

Cuban (2003) focused on the conflict between family and school that can occur, especially for women. She also noted the importance of adult education programs changing to support the needs of women learners who are sometimes burdened by the role of the caregiver. She also pointed out the benefits of understanding students and their lives in developing ways to help and support them (p. 38).

While relationships can provide a boost, they can also be potentially draining or problematic. Women might experience specific issues of being burdened with the caregiving role which can potentially prevent them from having their own goals. Other students might experience pressure or a lack of support in their relationships. These things can definitely influence and inhibit persistence for GED students.

Cultural barriers. One potential barrier to consider is students who feel that they might not be able to relate to their instructor. As Wlodkowski (1999) stated, "For example, when I teach an extension course, I need to realize that being a male, middle-class, European American academic gives me a certain perspective that may be quite different from that of the African American, working-class women who are some of the students in my course" (p. 99). Students need to feel supported by their instructors and feel some sort of positive connection. However, students might not have an instructor who comes from the same cultural background as they do. Drayton (2014) pointed out the importance of *cultural competence,* saying "Adult educators can help learners achieve their goals by employing strategies that would reduce alienation and isolation for the learner" (p. 24).

Drayton (2014) continued,

Cultural competence calls for an intentional critique of social structures,

organizational practices and policies, and learner-educator relationships to expose taken-for-granted assumptions that foster inequity, exclusion and oppression. Some of the questions teachers can ask include: How much do I know about the lived experiences of the groups represented in the classroom? What subliminal messages am I sending about different groups through the omission and selection of texts? What knowledge (e.g., widely accepted ideas about a particular group and personal experiences) am I drawing upon to interpret behaviors, determine what is good, and inform my interaction with others? (p. 24)

Cultural factors are very important because they are an ingrained part of who the students are as people and where they come from as well as what they have experienced.

This can be a potential stumbling block for instructors who might not have the *cultural competence* needed to engage their students and create a welcoming, inclusive environment. This is a factor to consider in examining the factors that can influence persistence of GED students.

Institutional barriers. Gopalakrishnan (2008) mentioned that limitations of the GED program can be barriers in their own right. He compared the GED with two other adult education alternatives and found some limitations that made it tougher for GED students to succeed. The programs he compared are offered in Connecticut, and are not necessarily available in all states. However, it did highlight some areas of the GED program that could be improved. For example, Gopalakrishnan (2008) noted that in the GED program everything is centered on the test, but in other programs there are alternative pathways to completion such as "portfolio-based assessments or independent study projects" (p. 148). Gopalakrishnan also mentioned that other programs offer "incremental achievements" that count towards a diploma, whereas with the GED the only thing that is relevant is the test (p. 148).

Schafft and Prins (2009) found that residential mobility was a barrier to persistence, especially for adult education students in rural areas (p. 6). Schafft and Prins (2009) also pointed out that poverty could be a barrier that led to a number of other problems, "'When situational factors such as inflexible work schedules or health problems are discussed, they are often treated as randomly occurring personal problems rather than social problems that disproportionately affect poor families'" (p. 4).

Poverty may be overlooked at times, but it manifests in the lives of some students in various ways. Students who are highly mobile may experience stress or a general sense

of disruption in their lives. These things, along with aspects of the GED program itself can present as barriers to success. These are the kinds of factors that influence persistence and relate directly back to the research question stated in chapter one.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy. Goto and Martin (2009) interviewed students and found that there may be a fear of moving on to something better in life. One student they interviewed stated, "'They're afraid to step out of that comfort zone and go to the next step, which is getting a job, or going to school" (p. 14). The authors also mentioned the importance of self-efficacy, "this was a monumental hurdle for many of the students" (p. 15). One student who Goto and Martin (2009) interviewed shed light on this, "'I was told I wasn't very smart growing up, so I thought, 'What's the point?' You know, 'why should I get an education?'" (p. 15).

Lipnevich and Beder (2007) commented that "...learners with low academic self-esteem are prone to becoming discouraged by challenging tasks, and are more susceptible to failing than learners who exude high academic self-esteem" (p. 75). Phipps, Prieto & Ndinguri (2013) noted that students with low self-efficacy do not put forth their best effort because they feel that even if they do their best, they "still would not be competent to achieve the desired standard of performance" (p. 17). Shunk and Zimmerman (1994) have suggested that self-efficacy is directly related to motivation. They explained that without self-efficacy, a student will not have the motivation needed to succeed (as cited in Phipps, et al., 2013, p. 18). This lack of self-efficacy represents a barrier because it is impeding motivation and effort.

So, while many would point to low self-esteem and low self-efficacy as a barrier for adult learners, Lipnevich and Beder (2007) actually provide a counterpoint to this

idea. Their study concluded that adult literacy learners had similar self-esteem to a group of doctoral students (p. 79). They pointed out that more research is necessary to confirm their results, but their findings remain noteworthy. This study challenges the notion that adult learners have low self-esteem, or that self-esteem would be a barrier to their academic persistence and success.

Comings (2007) added poor "self-determination" to the list of internal factors that could become barriers. Examples of poor self-determination as reported by students were "'thinking negative thoughts,' 'my own laziness,' and statements indicating a lack of confidence in students' ability to succeed" (p. 34). These negative attitudes and mindsets could hinder student success.

Self-perception remained a significant potential barrier. Some students saw themselves as simply being too old. According to Beder (1990), many older students were concerned that their classmates would all be younger than they were, and they saw their age as a barrier to continuing their education (as cited in Phipps, Prieto & Ndinguri, 2013, p. 15).

These concepts and beliefs about the self can have a significant effect on the student's potential and ability to learn. There are many nuances to the different self-perceptions and attitudes, but negative beliefs about the self are problematic. These issues pose barriers for the adult learner who hopes to persist and succeed academically. These barriers connect directly to the research question of *what factors influence persistence of GED students?* Barriers will certainly have an influence on students and can potentially make their path to success more difficult.

Conclusion

Adult students have many responsibilities and stresses to deal with on their path to academic success. There are things that can get in the way of their goals and plans, particularly a lack of available time. This is one of many factors that can be barriers for adult learners. However, there are also positive things that can help adult students succeed. These supports can include people, personal attitudes, and many other factors that help them reach their goals. In this chapter the literature on these topics was reviewed. In chapter three, I will be collecting data from my students about what factors in their lives have hindered them and what things have been a support that helped them. I will detail the process of how I collected data, analyzed the data, and how students were involved in the process.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of my research was to shed light on my research question: *What factors influence persistence of GED students?* In our Adult Education program we know that only a small percentage of students stick around and even fewer graduate (receive their GED). I wanted to investigate: what are the barriers that inhibit students from being persistent and successful, and, perhaps more importantly, what positive supports can helps students persist and graduate? In the literature review many authors pointed to factors that could help or inhibit students on their path to success in a GED program. I wanted to find out if these factors that were mentioned applied to some of our students and if there were other, less frequently mentioned factors that could inhibit or empower our students to persist and succeed in the GED program. In order to learn more about how students experienced their path to a GED, I employed qualitative methods to gather information about the human aspects of this phenomenon.

Research paradigm and rationale

The research paradigm for this study was to use qualitative methods. I made this choice because it allowed me to get a better sense of what my students were thinking, feeling and experiencing. As Creswell (2013) stated, "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). The meaning that students create or experience will be the central focus of this study. Qualitative data, such as results from interviews, was necessary to

understand more about where students were coming from and what they were going through. The chosen research methods were designed to get the students' perspective on this process of attending classes and pursuing the GED. This research also had elements of a case study because of the detailed interviews of students.

Perhaps the most important thing that I focused on in this research was the meaning that participants experienced. As Creswell (2013) explained "In the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature" (p. 175). I wanted to look at the participants as people and not just as students. In other words, I favored a more holistic view of students' lives and experiences. Cuban (2003) also mentioned the importance of looking at "students' lives and persistence holistically" (p. 35). This is the image that I wanted to portray, of our students as human beings facing a complex mix of factors that could potentially support or inhibit them.

Setting and participants

Our school is located in a major midwestern city. We are situated in a mostly low income neighborhood with a high population of African-Americans. Our school is housed in an office building that serves as an administrative headquarters for the district. Our adult education program is located on the top floor and we are the only actual classroom instruction taking place at this location. The offices on other floors are mostly administrative and human resources.

The participants in this study were mostly students from another teacher's class, as well as three of my former students who were interviewed. There were 18 students

from the other teacher's class (for the survey). The class had 18 students, including 12

female and 6 male students. The ages of these 18 students ranged from 27 to 48. The

three students who I interviewed were all female and all of different ethnicities, including

African American, Asian and Latina. Their ages were 27, 38 and 36. As stated in Chapter

1, our program has a total of 1,186 students. 61 percent of students are female and 39

percent are male. 69 percent of students are between 25 and 44 years of age, 11 percent

are between 19 and 24, and 16 percent are between 45 and 59. 3 percent of students are

60 or older and a couple of students are between 16 and 18. 58 percent of students are

African-American and 34 percent are Latino, along with 5 percent Asian students and a

handful of White and Native American students.

I used formal interviews (via email and face-to-face) and a survey. The survey

helped to identify issues that could be explored further in an interview. I used an exit slip

(see Appendix D) to gauge students' interest in being surveyed and interviewed. Exit

slips were only given to students who had completed my class. This was intended to

relieve any pressure that students might feel to participate. Also, students were explicitly

told that participation would not have any effect on their progress in our program, either

negative or positive.

Interviews

I conducted interviews (see Appendix A) with 3 individual students. These

students were selected based on the criteria that they attended class regularly and I felt

that we had developed some kind of positive rapport. In these interviews I used scripted

questions but I altered the course of the interview if there was an issue of interest that

seemed to need further discussion. These interviews were conducted in person or by phone. The rationale for conducting interviews was to provide deeper insights into students' experiences and perspectives. It was valuable to hear about the issues of barriers and supports in the students' own words. These interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder along with any notes that I recorded in a journal.

Survey

I created a survey to gather some baseline data about themes from the literature review that students felt were connected to their own lives and experiences (see Appendix B). This was just a brief way to establish some themes that students identified with, and it was a way to inform the types of questions that would be asked in formal interviews. Eighteen students completed the survey. Students could select which themes applied to them and provide an explanation if they desired.

Analysis of Results

I will analyze themes and patterns in the data compared to what was described in the literature review (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Question, Methods and Analyses

Research Question	Data Collection Instrument(s)	Sampling and Data Collection Methodologies	Time Demand on Research Subjects	Proposed Analyses
What factors influence the persistence of GED students?	n/a	Survey and formal interview	Survey: 5-10 minutes, formal interview: 15-20 minutes	I will use a thematic analysis to see which themes identified by students line up with the literature review and which factors might be new or unexplored.

Human Subjects Review

I was required to provide a detailed description of my study for Hamline University's Human Subjects Review process. I filled out the non-exempt application (long application) with the following information:

- Explained how my students were involved in the study and how I protected them from risk.
- Explained how I got informed consent and include a copy of the letter with my application.
- Explained how confidentiality would be protected.
- Noted possible benefits of the study for any people who could be affected.

I used a letter of consent which I created based on a sample letter provided through Hamline University. Student confidentiality was protected by coding names on written documents and keeping documents securely locked away in a classroom when I was not present. I also completed the necessary review process in our school district.

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter detailed the research methods used and the rationale for using these methods. The style of research was chosen based on the type of information that needed to be collected and the goals of the study. Students were involved in the process throughout because it was about their own "participant meaning." My goal was to learn more about the students' lives and experiences, which is why I chose qualitative methods and checked with the participants to make sure I was getting the right information. Chapter four looks at the results of the research that was conducted. I analyze the results and discuss how the process unfolded, noting what the possible significance of the data might be.

Chapter 4 Preview

Chapter four looks at the results of both the survey and the interview. The data is presented and the students' voices are the centerpiece of the chapter. There is a brief mention of the themes that were highlighted by the data as well as how they tie in with the research question. Further analysis and conclusions on my part are presented in Chapter five.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Overview

This study has been framed by the research question: *What factors influence persistence of GED students?* Students in our Adult Education program have many positive and negative factors affecting their lives. In determining the most influential factors, two categories emerged; supports and barriers. Supports included anything that helped and barriers referred to obstacles or pressures that might have hindered students on their academic journey. Students were surveyed and interviewed to find out more about the various factors in their lives that were most influential.

Survey

Eighteen students in a colleague's class were surveyed about the supports and barriers that were most important in terms of the effect that they had (whether positive or negative) on students' ability to persist in the GED program (see Appendix B). Students were asked to rate the importance of a variety of factors on a scale of 1 to 5; 5 meaning that the factor was very important in how much of an effect it had on the student's ability to persist. The factors were split into two sections, *supports* and *barriers.* The survey data was meant to serve as supplemental data while the interviews were meant to tell a more complete story of the students' lives.

For supports, there were 4 factors listed: classroom support, personal motivation, personal goals and belief in yourself/confidence (see Table 2). For barriers, there were 7 factors listed: lack of support from family and friends, difficult relationships with family

and friends, lack of time, job responsibilities, family responsibilities, lack of motivation

and lack of goals (see Table 3). Tables 2 and 3 are displayed below.

Table 4.1

Supports rated on a 5 point scale of relevance.

Classroom support	4.1
Personal motivation	4.4
Personal goals	4.4
Belief in self	4.3

Table 4.1 shows that students rated all positive factors relatively highly. This is

encouraging but perhaps not surprising for adults who are choosing to attend school.

Motivation and goals received the highest ratings.

Table 4.2

Barriers rated on a 5 point scale of relevance.

Difficult relationships with family/friends	2.4
Lack of time	3.6
Job responsibilities	3.4
Family responsibilities	3.4
Lack of support from family/friends	2.8
Lack of motivation	2.8
Lack of goals	2.6

Table 3 has lower average ratings than Table 2. This seems to show that students

do not blame negative factors for preventing them from reaching their academic goals.

Time, job responsibilities and family responsibilities received the highest ratings for the level of impact on students' lives. These are the realities of students who have jobs and families and are also trying to attend school.

Students rated positive factors to be of higher importance on average than negative factors. In other words, the things that seemed to matter more or were more impactful to them were the supports, and the barriers were not as significant. In reviewing the personal attitudes and beliefs that were surveyed, it is noteworthy that the highest rated factors were personal motivation, personal goals and having a belief in self (self-efficacy). This is not unusual considering that students are adults attending school of their own volition. So it makes sense to see that students have a strong sense of goals, motivation and belief that they can persist and succeed. These are positive signs for their success that they are motivated and self-confident.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by phone or in person with a scripted set of questions. The participants were students who had been in my class previously but had moved on to the next level or had completed the GED test and were therefore no longer in my class. Depending on how participants answered the questions, follow up questions may have been asked or students may have been asked to elaborate on their answers. Though questions were scripted, there was still a free-flowing style to the interviews.

The questions followed along the lines of a handful of themes from the literature review. Students were asked some casual warm-up questions and were then asked questions about the two distinct categories, supports and barriers. Within these basic categories, questions were open-ended and intended to elicit information about students'

lives and academic experiences. Three female students were interviewed. They each offered insights that illuminated the triumphs and struggles that our students face. The students interviewed were Shannon, Angela and Tiffany (all names have been changed to protect the identities of participants.)

Shannon

Shannon is 38 years old, African-American, is married and has children. She had plenty of success in the GED program and recently graduated. It was eye-opening to learn about the things that she was facing on her path and how matter of fact she was about what she was going through. She said that family, classroom support and one teacher in particular really helped her grow and be successful in finishing the program.

She spoke of her success and the importance of support, as well as the importance of having a positive mindset. She said,

> It's important to have a supportive team, whether it's your teachers or your family. I passed my test yesterday, so I'm done, I have my GED. It feels really good to accomplish that with going through all the health issues and homelessness-I've been through a lot and it hasn't even been a year. If I can do it I'm sure anyone else can. If they put their mind to it-once you put your mind to it, once you set your brain that 'I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna get it done,' then you'll get it done.

She mentioned her family as something that influenced her and reminded her to keep going. She said "I just decided that I gotta do something good for myself, because me telling my kids, you know, 'You gotta graduate high school, everybody in my house is gonna graduate,' and you're not graduated, from high school, you know, it's all bad.

It's not a good look for you to try to tell your kids, 'you gotta do this,' and you haven't

done it for your own self."

She said personally what kept her going was determination and self-confidence.

She said, "Just wanting to get it finished because I know I could do it, the whole time I

was doing it, I just know, without a shadow of a doubt it could get done, you know. And I

knew it was gonna make me feel better as a person."

Shannon spoke of one of her teachers in particular, whom she credited with

helping her persevere when she was struggling with serious health issues. She said,

> She's super awesome. She was so super-motivating. I had to get my gallbladder
>
> removed, and my surgery wasn't for a week. I would come in the classroom, just
>
> in so much pain in there...and she helped out and would give me a little bit of
>
> comfort for the pain, and also was like 'you can do this, you got it. Take your
>
> time, don't go into overkill and don't hurt yourself trying to get this done...you
>
> got it though.' She helped talk me through a lot of stuff. She's awesome, she's
>
> really, really awesome. She's great at what she does.

Shannon faced multiple major obstacles on her path to academic success. She was

very matter of fact about the challenges that she and her family encountered. She

mentioned her serious health issues and also stated, "Homelessness was another obstacle.

Homelessness was certainly an obstacle. Not having a stable, you know, living

arrangement, is always an obstacle."

When I asked Shannon about other classmates and the struggles she saw in them,

she said, "I saw some classmates who, it was more important to work, than to get their

GED. Because you know they got a family to take care of. I've seen a lot of that go on.

And seeing the younger kids coming in and just not caring *enough* to wanna do something, I've seen that as well."

Shannon's experience was remarkable and inspiring. Clearly she faced a lot of challenges: homelessness and health concerns being the most pressing concerns. The fact that she persevered speaks volumes. It shows the quality of her support system-family as well as instructors- but it seems to speak loudest about her inner qualities: her positive attitude and her overall disposition to continue moving forward no matter what.

Angela

Angela is 27 years old, Latina, separated and has children. Her experiences were somewhat unique in that she had success in her work before she finished high school. She spoke of working for a lawyer and making "really good" money, which made her question the merits of staying in school. She said, "Ever since I was 15, I always worked, I've just always been kind of an independent person. I had a part time job at a radio station, and then I got a job with an attorney and I ended up being the office manager there, and then the head legal assistant. So, I made really good money. And I was like, this is what I'm gonna do, why am I gonna go to school if I'm getting 20-something-bucks-an-hour?"

She spoke of her marriage being a barrier to her pursuing her GED before now, and how things have changed for her in terms of motivation, including the example she wants to set for her children. She said, "I couldn't do it before, because I was married. And my husband didn't want me to work or do anything but be at home [laughs]. And I tried actually, when we had been together about a year, to do a program but I just never really stuck to it. Nothing really motivated me back then."

She noted that things are different-she is currently separated and no longer working at the same law office- and she is motivated by being a parent. She said, "So, this time, now I have three kids, and my 7-year-old said to me one day, he came home from school and he's like 'Mom, do I have to go to college? Because, you're not going to college,' and that kind of like gave me this...thing like I have to set an example for all three of them, you know. And I told him, 'I'm gonna go back to school. You have to go to college.'"

When asked to tell more about what motivated her and kept her going, she said,

My kids, first off. Wanting to be, like a role model for my sister. And my mother, if it wasn't for her and my Dad's support, I don't think I could do...coming to school and not having to worry about anything else. I don't have to work a full-time job because I'm living with them and they're not like demanding anything from me. So they're helping me with that but I wanna make them happy because we have like a bad situation at home with my brother. So, like I want them to see that...I want them to be proud, I want them to see that I'm trying to do something.

She also spoke of her goals to have a better job and a better future. She said, "I'm separated now, so I don't wanna just like slave away at a job to be able to provide for my kids. I wanna get an education and be able to find something that works for me and gives me the income that I need as well."

She spoke further about her marriage, and of how her success in the GED program changed her thinking and the way she feels. She said,

I used to be a very independent person, and then...I got married and I...lost myself, I guess you could say. I like became somebody else's wife, and not, like, an

individual. So after going through this process, like just yesterday I walked out of the class and I saw my [GED Test] scores on my email and I was like, 'Oh my God...it's just a GED, but I'm doing it.' Like my RLA score was like college ready, and I'm just like I can do this, why did I lose myself? I'm a smart person, I'm a motivated person, like I can do this. So, it kind of brought back my self-confidence, too. I'm excited. I want to go to college. And I'll be the first one in our family to go to college. So that just kind of makes me happy. I'm hoping I can set an example for my sister, she's in high school and she's not doing good.

She spoke of some family problems that were barriers to her persistence. Her home life was a source of stress- living with her parents as well as her brother who she noted was having some personal difficulties. She said,

I missed a lot of days, if you don't notice, because of things that are going on at home with my brother. I think that that kind of puts a strain on it. I can tell you a little bit about it...I don't know...he is like, on drugs, and um, he lives at home as well but he doesn't work at all...he doesn't help out with anything. And all he does is constantly cause problems. The last episode he had, my parents are in denial, but the last episode he had, he came upstairs and broke into my sister's room. He broke the door, and then my Dad kind of ran over and they started fighting, and like...that's kind of a stressful situation because I'm worried about the safety of my kids. So when stuff like that happens, that stops me from coming here because I wanna be at home, to make sure that my kids are ok and he's going nowhere near them.

She later described how she has seen classmates struggle with barriers of their own. She explained,

> For other people in class I've noticed that as well. I've kind of grown a little bit close to one of the classmates who's also Hispanic. And I've noticed that she kind of has the same issues that I did. Like the husband is kind of like, 'why are you doing this for yourself? You're my wife and like, you…' You know I think that...culture and beliefs have a little bit to do with it for women. I lived in Mexico for like the past three years. Women can't do anything but be at home...your house has to be clean, you have to have meals prepared three times a day, clothes has to be ironed, um, like you aren't anybody, like you are just the person that's at home, like your kids have to be taken care of, like it's like you can't do anything for yourself. Like my Mom doesn't work all she does is, she's at home making sure that my Dad has his food and his clothes is washed and ironed, and like...I mean she's happy. I think things are changing a little bit. Now there's third generation, second generation...but if you're from there or your parents are from there I think you kinda stick to that. Men are controlling in our culture, just so you know. So that stops women from pursuing education and I see that in somebody...here. One day she'll be very happy and excited about what she's doing, and the next, 'I don't wanna come to school anymore, it's putting a strain on our relationship, and I'm tired…'"

Angela's interview was by far the most in depth. As she put it, "I talk a lot." I assured her that was a good thing in this setting, as she provided a great deal of insight into what students' experience in their lives. She had a good support system but also

identified problems within her family structure. Again (similar to Shannon) she showed that the inner drive and attitude seemed to outweigh the negative factors that came into play.

Tiffany

Tiffany is 36 years old, Asian, married and has children. She explained that she had a hard time with high school and she began working instead of attending school. When asked what had prevented her from continuing with her education at an earlier time she said: "I think what prevented me from pursuing my GED was being afraid of failure, you know maybe not passing the GED test. So that's kinda you know what held me back for a while...but I'm like well here I am, and I passed one of the tests so that's really...that's really awesome. It means a lot to me."

She mentioned the motivation that she gets from her family. She said, "I feel like it's going good. My sister is also enrolled in a GED program, and she has also passed all her tests, she just needs her Math. So, it's kinda like challenging each other to see who can graduate first. Of course she's gonna graduate, but she still has her Math so I'm still trying to hurry up and catch up to her, and I want to kind of like surprise her and be like 'Hey, you know what? I only got Math left,' or you know?"

Tiffany spoke about her motivation and the support of teachers in the program. She said, "It is actually more than I expected because the teachers here are determined to teach, and it motivates me to want to learn and of course get my GED. Whenever I lose motivation I just think about why I started, and to just keep on moving forward. I'm like, this is the time where it's kind of like 'do or die,' like I have to accomplish this, and I'm very determined to do it, too."

She mentioned some of her past experiences and the reason she came back to get her GED. She said, "I've done a lot of work in the past, and I did get my high school diploma, but it was like online, and not a lot of places take it. Not a lot of community colleges take it, so I had to come back and get my GED."

She then went on to describe her goals and the importance of enjoying what one does. She said, "Most importantly I want to retire in what I do, and I love working with animals so that's why I'm here. That's one of my goals to retire in what I love instead of doing other jobs, and I didn't really like them, so that's why I'm here."

When asked about barriers to her persistence and to her success, Tiffany was not making any excuses. She said, "I would say just the stuff like my kids being sick, or if a family member needs me to be there for some reason...But yeah those are just the other stuff but like, as of right now I feel like there's nothing stopping me but myself."

When pressed about barriers other students might experience, Tiffany went into detail about some of the things she had seen with her classmates. She explained,

> There was this lady a while back when I first started here, and um, she, she was new, and she had like a really awesome personality and um, she seemed like she was so determined to get her GED because she explained like some of her like...if she would get her GED she would go and um, help out like her community and everything like that. And it sounded really good and I was really hoping that she would actually get her GED... but then like one day she came to school and I overheard her saying something like she was gonna quit, and I just kinda felt bad like, oh that's too bad, because like, you know, she had a wonderful, awesome go and I really wanted to see her complete it. So sometimes I think about her. I feel

that...at that time she had a lot going in her life, and she looked like she really couldn't concentrate. Half of the time she was here she was thinking about something else, so I think that's what prevented her from getting her GED.

Tiffany noted how the program and the success she has had makes her feel excited. She exuded a sense of empowerment from her progress. When asked how her success has affected her she said, "What I learned about myself is that I can do it and anything is possible."

Tiffany's interview was brief and to the point, representative of her personality. She showed a lot of empathy and compassion for her fellow classmates, and yet she always had a resoluteness about what she was doing and maintained her direction. She spoke about her goals and the motivation and support that she gets from her family. Mostly though, it seemed that like Shannon and Angela she was driven from within to create a better life for herself.

All three interviews were very informative and revealed a lot about what our students experience. Students spoke about their goals for having a better future. They spoke of the importance of having a "supportive team," and being a role model. They showed the importance of keeping a determined, positive attitude. And they also mentioned the confidence that they felt after having some success in the GED program. Some of the themes that emerged connect to the literature review: goals, motivation, family support, and self-efficacy. All three students seemed determined to succeed and somehow driven from within. They mentioned positive people or things motivating them from the outside, but what really seemed to keep them on track was something internal.

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter summarized the results of the data tools: the survey and interviews. The survey provided baseline data while the interviews were really the heart of the study as they provided detailed insight into students' experiences and lives. Chapter five discusses these data tools in more detail with regard to their significance and how they inform the research question. The final chapter returns to some of the literature review themes, discusses key learnings, reflections, limitations and implications for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The original purpose of this study was to determine *What factors influence persistence of GED students?* Within this question the categories of positive and negative factors were examined, referred to specifically as *barriers* and *supports.* This research came about from my exposure to teaching in a GED program and observing the unique dynamic that occurs with our students. Not only are they adults but they have lives with many twists and turns and what they face on a daily basis is more than most people might imagine. This study revealed more information about *their stories* which will hopefully provided some useful insights for program administrators and teachers working with GED students in the future.

Key Learnings

The key learnings from this whole process arose out of the students' insightful remarks from the interviews. There were a lot of topics covered but there were a few that seemed to keep coming up. These are the ones that help us to see what really matters to students and what has the greatest impact. Three findings that kept surfacing were the importance of family and support, attitude and mindset, and working toward a better future.

Supportive team. Students mentioned the importance of support. This was mostly centered around family, but teachers and staff were also mentioned. All three students spoke about family either in terms of being motivated by them or wanting to be a

role model and provide a good example. Teachers were also recognized as providing valuable support. This was a key finding that each student mentioned in one way or another. Shannon said, "It's important to have a supportive team, whether it's your teachers or your family." And as Shannon said of one of her teachers, "She helped talk me through a lot of stuff. She's awesome, she's really, really awesome. She's great at what she does." Angela also emphasized the importance of her "team," saying, "And my mother, if it wasn't for her and my Dad's support, I don't think I could do...coming to school and not having to worry about anything else. I don't have to work a full-time job because I'm living with them and they're not like demanding anything from me. So they're helping me with that but I wanna make them happy…"

The "supportive team" that Shannon mentioned is clearly an influential factor in the persistence of GED students. Each student mentioned some kind of support or motivation that they received from other people. That "team" could consist of family or teachers or both, but the bottom line is that the support was there.

Attitude and mindset. Each of the students who were interviewed showed a very determined mindset and strong motivation. They either mentioned their confidence in themselves or they spoke of how determined they were to succeed. Students mentioned that they already felt confident or their confidence grew as a result of success in the GED program. They noted a sense of possibility and growing self-efficacy. Angela described this vividly, saying "Like just yesterday I walked out of the class and I saw my [GED Test] scores on my email and I was like, 'Oh my God...it's just a GED, but I'm doing it.' Like my RLA score was like college ready, and I'm just like I can do this, why did I lose

myself? I'm a smart person, I'm a motivated person, like I can do this. So, it kind of brought back my self-confidence, too. I'm excited."

And as Shannon said, "If I can do it I'm sure anyone else can. If they put their mind to it-once you put your mind to it, once you set your brain that 'I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna get it done,' then you'll get it done." So it is clear that as it relates to the persistence of GED students, mindset and having a positive attitude is a significant factor. It was also shown that success in the GED program can increase self-efficacy and confidence. Shannon also said "Just wanting to get it finished because I know I could do it, the whole time I was doing it, I just know, without a shadow of a doubt it could get done, you know. And I knew it was gonna make me feel better as a person." A determined mindset and a positive attitude clearly is a factor that influenced the persistence of these GED students.

Working toward a better future. They also mentioned that they were doing this so that they could have a better job and a better future. They spoke of wanting to have a job that they liked and also being able to provide for their families in a more effective way. This seemed to be a good motivating factor to have this long-term objective on the horizon. Related to the section above, as students made progress they noted how their confidence grew, and this helped them to see a brighter future as they kept moving forward. As Tiffany said, "Most importantly I want to retire in what I do, and I love working with animals so that's why I'm here. That's one of my goals to retire in what I love instead of doing other jobs, and I didn't really like them, so that's why I'm here."

Angela echoed this sentiment, saying "I'm separated now, so I don't wanna just like slave away at a job to be able to provide for my kids. I wanna get an education and

be able to find something that works for me and gives me the income that I need as well."

As it relates to the research question, having long-term goals and striving for a better life

seems to positively influence persistence of GED students.

Connections to Literature Review

The results of both the survey and the interviews suggested that themes identified

in the literature review played a part in our GED students' lives as well. These themes

were broken into two categories, supports and barriers. Factors in these categories ranged

from motivation and goals to complicated family entanglements and a lack of time or

simply having too many other things going on. It is clear from the data that students

encounter a variety of factors that can both support their learning and also be barriers to

their persistence. It was very informative to hear more details about their struggles and

successes; the things that helped them and the things that hindered them. The surveyed

showed that supports were rated as more important or relevant than barriers

Tiffany's interview highlighted some of the supports from the literature review. In

particular she mentioned that she wanted to be able to have a job that she liked, which

was working with animals. She had a very clear picture of what she wanted to do. This

connects directly to what O'Neill and Thomson (2013) stated about having an interest in

the entire process, "Adults need to be able to see themselves in these roles in order to

anticipate how best to evaluate their readiness to make the change, and prepare

accordingly" (p. 169). Tiffany's long-term goals helped her to maintain interest in what

she was doing and it gave her something to strive toward in the future.

As far as barriers, as simplistic as it sounds it does appear that sometimes (or most

of the time) our students just have a lot of other things going on. Depending on the

student, the circumstances and what these things are that are occurring, this can be enough to present a major obstacle for success in our program. However, there are more specific things that can hinder their progress. From Shannon's interview, it was clear that she had a strong sense of self-efficacy, that she could succeed at what she was striving to accomplish. Shunk and Zimmerman (1994) explained that without self-efficacy, a student will not have the motivation needed to succeed (as cited in Phipps et al., 2013, p. 18). This suggests that perhaps not all students believe that they can succeed the way that Shannon did.

Angela's interview connected with the work of Cuban (2003) because it raised issues about traditional roles for women. Angela spoke of being married and the expected role of the caregiver that prevented her from pursuing her own goals. This was similar to Cuban's study of women who were burdened by the traditional caregiver role.

The literature helped to provide a framework for the survey and interview questions that I posed to the students. And the themes from the literature review did prove to apply to students lives. For example, themes like family support, classroom support, motivation, goals, family responsibilities, time constraints and job responsibilities all showed up in conversations with the students and in survey results. However, the interviews where students were able to speak freely from their own perspective was where the most valuable and authentic information came out. The literature review helped to guide the process but ultimately the students' voices were the most valuable source of data.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study are that students were interviewed after they had attained some amount of success in the GED program, passing the Reading/Language Arts test or completing their whole GED. Survey questions provided more categories in the barriers section, so that provided a little bit more data on barriers. Though students were asked about barriers to their success and that of their classmates, the individuals who were interviewed were all successful in the program. In other words, students who stopped out and have not returned to school are the ones who truly know what barriers are getting in the way. So, this project at its heart is really about supports. The interviews are the real core of this study and they are more centered around things that helped students succeed. Barriers are not examined at a deep level and that is probably the largest limitation of this study.

Future Research

As noted in the limitations section, future research could be beneficial in the area of barriers and finding out why students stop attending or what makes it difficult for them to continue. It could be beneficial to interview students who had to stop coming to our program to see what factors caused them to not persist. Although this study examined barriers, it needs to be studied on a much deeper level than this study. In reality this study looked at supports much more than barriers.

Implications

Implications of this study include the possibility that knowing more about our students and their circumstances might help us serve them better. The study revealed that there may be a lot going on with students that we are not aware of as teachers and

administrators. How to connect with our students and to understand what they are going through are questions that could help us better serve our students.

Plans for Communicating/Using the Results of the Study

This project will be shared with the District Research Department as well as various administrators and interested staff members. The final paper will be emailed to the appropriate parties or a link to the digital commons page will be shared. The final paper will be stored in Hamline's Digital Commons database with other MAT program capstones. The results will also be shared with colleagues who are interested in reading about the findings. And of course I will use the results to reflect on my practice as a teacher; how can we account for the complexity of our students' lives and learn how best to serve them? That is not an easy question, but still worth considering.

Reflection

In some ways this study poses as many questions as it answers, but I am pleased that it offered an opportunity to give our students a voice. That is what I am proud of; that the voice of the students comes through. A lot of work went into making this project come together, and though it will never be perfect I am satisfied with the result. It creates or at least highlights more avenues for future research to provide a fuller and clearer picture of our students' lives and experiences. What our students need and what they experience is the essence of what this project was meant to be about; that is what is most important in my opinion.

I learned a lot from listening to students' perspectives. One thing that sticks out is how much it can mean to someone to have another person motivate and encourage them

to keep going. Maybe as teachers we underestimate the impact that we have, but perhaps it only takes one person to believe in a student for that student to feel inspired and supported. This is a reminder to me to encourage students and not underestimate how much that can mean to someone.

Overall this process was informative, humbling and inspiring. To hear the stories of students: the struggles and obstacles that Shannon overcame, the great rapport students had with instructors and the self-confidence that students gained from their persistence and success. I came into this process perhaps feeling somewhat apart from my students and not able to stand in their shoes. After hearing their stories and walking with them through this school year, we are really not so different. I can feel the importance of what it means for them to succeed and I can see more clearly what they go through and struggle with. Overall it is much easier for me to relate to my students and just see what they are experiencing. All of this is very humbling and inspirational and makes me feel admiration for students in our program. Tiffany said it best: "What I learned about myself is that I can do it and anything is possible."

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APPENDIX A

Exit Slip

Would you like to participate in a survey after you have completed this course? Participation is completely optional and will not affect your progress in the GED program in any way. It is for a research project that I am doing to find out more about our students and the things that help them succeed in the GED program, as well as the challenges that they face.

__ Yes

__ No

Your name _____
contact information
email _____

APPENDIX B

GED Student Survey

GED Student Survey of Positive Factors

Questions about what helps students stay involved in the GED program

Age___

Gender: Male___   Female____

When did you join the Adult Education Program? _____

What was your highest level of education prior to joining this program?

college_____

high school _____

middle school _____

elementary school ____

Things that have helped you in the GED program

For the following factors, please choose a number from 5 to 1, with 5 meaning that this factor has been very important in helping you succeed in the GED program, and 1 meaning the factor does not matter.

___ classroom support (instructors, classmates)

___ personal motivation

___ personal goals

___ belief in yourself/confidence

Any answers that you would like to explain further?

_____

Are there any important factors for you that were not listed here? Please explain

_____

GED Student Survey of Negative Factors

Questions about what makes it more difficult for you to continue in the GED program

Things that make it difficult to continue with the GED program

For the following factors, please choose a number from 5 to 1, 5 meaning that this factor made things very difficult for you, and 1 meaning that this factor had no effect on me at all.

___ lack of support from family/friends

___ difficult relationships with family/friends

___ lack of time

___ job responsibilities

___ family responsibilities

___ lack of motivation

___ lack of goals

Any answers that you would like to explain further?

_____

Any factors that I did not mention that made things difficult for you? Please explain.

_____

Are you willing to participate in a follow up interview? Your name and any personal

information about you will not be used, you have the choice to refuse to be interviewed,

and this will not affect your progress in the Adult Education Program in any way, either

positively or negatively.

Yes I would be willing to be interviewed. _____

No I would not like to participate in an interview. _____

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

*Restate total confidentiality of process and the fact that any answers given will not affect progress in the Adult Education Program (either positively or negatively).

- ● When did you join our program?

- ● How do you feel about how things are going?

- ● How are things going overall for you?

- What have you learned about yourself or what has stood out to you about your experiences in the GED program? Is it what you expected? Why or why not?

- When did you decide to enroll in a GED program? Why was it the right time?

- What had possibly prevented you in the past from pursuing a GED?

- What led to you not graduating high school? Are any of the same barriers getting in your way now? Why or why not?

- What are some things that you might call positive factors in your life that are helping you succeed? What is it that keeps you going in the GED program?

  - ○ Possible prompts if needed: Having a sense of motivation? Having clear goals? Having a belief in your own abilities? Having supportive relationships? A strong sense of community within classes? Family-teacher-classmate support?

- Are there some factors that help you to keep going and be successful that I have not mentioned?

- What are some of the things that you see as obstacles or barriers to your success? What are some things that make it harder for you to continue on in school?

- ○ Possible prompts if needed: lack of time, life demands (job, kids, etc.), not

  connecting with instructor, quality of instruction not up to par?

- Are there some factors that make it more difficult for you that I have not

  mentioned?

- Have you seen classmates who you knew were struggling to stay in the program

  for some reason? Or classmates who had to leave the program for some reason?

  What were some of the things that you saw keeping classmates from staying in

  the program?