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# How do the Life Stories of Non-Traditional Students Impact Their Educational Journeys

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HOW DO THE LIFE STORIES OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IMPACT  
THEIR EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS

by

Janna L. Graham

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Literacy Education

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To Julie, for always believing in the power of a story.  
To Ross, for his endless encouragement during this journey.  
To Karen, Ilene, and Camela, for challenging my perspective.

*Key to a bright future,  
education is my life,  
education builds humanity.  
Education is my pride,  
I won't give up just yet.*

*I was told to give up,  
too old for education,  
I feel pain whenever I hear those words.  
I won't give up just yet.*

*Life is a challenge.  
My pride was challenged.  
My education was challenged.  
But I won the race  
and education is my future.  
I won't give up just yet.*

*~Asha*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
The Educational Journey.....	1
Journalism 101.....	2
53 Faces.....	5
Humphrey People.....	6
Summary.....	8
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	10
Overview.....	10
The Value of Storytelling.....	11
Storytelling in an Educational Setting.....	13
The Characteristics of Disconnected Learners.....	16
The Plight of Disenfranchised Young Adults.....	16
The Reconciliation of Perception and Reality.....	19
The Connection of Personal Story to Motivation.....	20
Conclusion.....	23
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	25
Project Goals.....	25
Setting and Students.....	27
The Phases of Job Corps.....	31
Case Studies.....	32
The Accessible Educational Biography.....	33
Four Steps to an Educational Life Story.....	35

Limitations.....	37
Summary.....	38
Chapter Four: Results.....	40
Introduction to the Interview Process.....	40
Asha.....	42
Asha’s Educational Profile.....	42
Asha’s Story.....	42
After the Interview.....	51
Isabel.....	53
Isabel’s Educational Profile.....	53
Isabel’s Story.....	53
After the Interview.....	65
Jordan.....	67
Jordan’s Educational Profile.....	67
Jordan’s Story.....	68
After the Interview.....	82
Final Thoughts.....	84
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	86
Project Overview.....	86
Connections to Research.....	87
Limitations of Findings.....	89
Future Research and Studies.....	90
Why Connectivity is Critical.....	91

Appendix A: Letter of Consent.....	93
Appendix B: Getting Started: Thinking About Your Experiences.....	96
Appendix C: The Education Life Story Project: Interview Questions.....	98
Appendix D: Your Educational Journey.....	100
Reference List.....	103



## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### The Educational Journey

We all have a story. A series of moments, experiences, and events that comprise the essence of who we are. During my first student teaching practicum, I sat beside a shy student as she worked on her autobiography. With no idea of where to begin, she disinterestedly played with her hair while she stared at the terrifyingly blank piece of notebook paper in front of her. Cautiously, I picked up her pencil. “Tell me about yourself.” Surprised by my interest, the student smiled and started talking with me. As she spoke, the details of her life began to fill the page as I documented her story.

Although it would be years until I connected student narrative to powerful pedagogy, I quickly learned that the best way to authentically establish relationships with students was to take an interest in their lives. One of my colleagues knows the hometown of every student in his program. As we walk across campus together, he greets students, not by name, but by place. “What’s up, Chicago? I heard you’re killing it in class, Milwaukee! Kenya, don’t forget you promised to take me back to your village to go bow hunting – I’m holding you to that!” With each acknowledgement, students’ faces reveal their pleasure, the joy of recognition.

The desire to be known is a distinctly human quality. Our unique stories allow us to create narratives that give our lives context. As I’ve reflected on the students that I’ve known throughout my educational career, I began to consider the immense influence of each student’s story. Would having an understanding of a student’s past empower me in

establishing educational programming and training that could potentially impact their future?

The power of personal narrative leads me to ask the following question: *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their educational journeys?* How can we synthesize students' history with their current classroom needs? Is it possible for a deep understanding of a student's educational background to be translated into refinement of classroom methodology? My experiences say, yes, student stories matter. Creating a mechanism through which students understand and share their educational backgrounds has an effect on their current and future school experiences.

This chapter will begin with my own story: an introduction to the people, places and, most importantly, the students who have defined and inspired my journey.

### Journalism 101

My junior year of high school was momentous. I had bad bangs, an unrequited crush on the lead trumpet player in the marching band, and a newly minted position as a staff writer for *Panther Paws*, our school newspaper. My first writing assignment was "Student Spotlight," a section of the paper that featured a randomly chosen student. The selection process was less than scientific. On one of our newspaper computers, the editor and a few copy writers pulled up an active list of students, hit the scroll key, and watched as hundreds of names rolled by in bright orange text. "It's completely chance, unless we don't like the person," one of the copy writers told me.

The screen stopped moving as a highlighted name was displayed. The editor, a senior, shook her head. "No way. We're choosing again. She's a sophomore and one of those Under the Stairs Kids. Nobody will even know who she is." As the editor reached

to hit the scroll key for a second round, I felt suffocated by the injustice of what was being suggested. The Under the Stairs Kids spent their breaks and lunches congregating under the broad staircase that led into the cafeteria. Dressed in all black and covered with piercings, they were a community unto themselves. Although I didn't know Lora, the girl whose name the computer – or the Fates – had selected, I knew what had to be done.

I spoke up, “I want to do the interview.” I firmly believed that despite the fact that she spent her lunch period under a staircase, the story still belonged to her.

I interviewed Lora in the hallway outside of her Spanish class. She wore baggy jeans, with heavy chains hanging from her hips. Her short, wild hair was an indescribable shade of green; her facial piercings dominated her small features. As we sat cross-legged on the floor, Lora couldn't contain her excitement. “I can't believe you guys picked me for this! My family is going to go crazy!” I hadn't expected such a bubbly personality. Weren't all of the Under the Stairs Kids depressed druggies? For the first time, I began to truly grasp the words often ascribed to author Eve Zibart, “Prejudice rarely survives experience.”

During our half hour interview, I learned that Lora loved animals and was addicted to dyeing her hair. She had an eclectic taste in movies and friends. When the article ran, Lora's exuberant smile lit up the black and white newsprint. Outside of hallway hellos and cheerful waves, our paths didn't cross again before I graduated. My freshman year of college, I received a phone call from my sister, a high school junior. “Wanna know something sad?” Her voice broke. “A senior girl died in a car crash last weekend.”

Lora and her friends had been going too fast down a dirt road when they lost control of their car. Lora died instantly, her story unfairly cut short, living on only in memory. The tragedy hit me at my core. I was haunted by the image of Lora's name scrolling by randomly, a story waiting to be explored. That semester I applied for a position at *Cedars*, my university newspaper. At my first writer's meeting, when the editor asked who was interested in taking "Cedar Faces," a column highlighting the stories of staff members, I didn't hesitate before raising my hand.

For the next four years, the "Cedar Faces" column belonged to me. My goal was to interview unrecognized campus staff. I featured the smartly snarky IT guy, a maintenance manager with a penchant for large scale art (although he'd painstakingly welded a miniature model of a piece he'd designed for the middle of the campus lake, he never got the approval he needed to build it), and a soft-spoken cleaning lady working to support her husband and three kids.

Each interview, each story, challenged my perceptions and expectations. During my senior year, I emailed an assistant librarian and requested an interview. She replied within minutes. "If you want to know something about literature or what it's like to live in a small town, I might have something to tell you. However, if you're looking for someone who has exciting stories or takes interesting vacations, you should probably talk to someone else." My interview with the "boring librarian" became one of my favorites. She knew every nook and cranny of the library and shared fascinating accounts of our college town's history. After the interview, she sent me a recommended book list and said that she'd enjoyed our visit.

My introduction to interviewing taught me important life lessons: everyone has an important story to tell, most people are more interesting than they think they are, asking the right questions is everything, and articulating our stories gives us a sense of permanence in an ever-changing world. In a school setting, the act of talking about our educational journeys provides a forum for connecting with each other. It gets us involved.

### 53 Faces

After graduating from college, I packed two suitcases and headed to China. I spent my first year in Tianjin, an industrial city of ten million people. I wrote copy for an English language game show and taught business English to corporate executives. A year later, I moved to Minhang, a suburb of Shanghai, where I took a position as Academic Director. My responsibilities included training and managing the foreign instructional staff and teaching the Special English class, a group of 53 high school sophomores whose parents were pushing them to become fluent in English.

The first three months of class were terrible. My students would simply not stop speaking Chinese. I felt like a failure. How was I supposed to connect to my students if I didn't know them? Then, in late fall, two things happened that changed everything. At the end of October, I organized a Halloween storytelling challenge for our night class. As the students told old, spooky stories in English, the candles on my desk illuminated their faces. It was the first time I was able to clearly see students' individual personalities. It was also the first time that the classroom was truly quiet. We were listening to each other.

The second element was more subtle. Harkening back to my interviewing days, I decided to get to know my students on a personal level. I created a poster for "Sunday Hang Outs with Ms. Graham." Students signed up in groups of four to simply hang out

with me on the weekend. We played games, talked about culture, and I learned that students had been talking during class because the lessons I'd planned weren't challenging enough. After three months of "Sunday Hang Outs," I was a different teacher and the Special English class was finally realizing its potential.

A year and a half later, as I was preparing to leave China and move back to the States, the Special English Class presented me with a book. Each page of the book represented an individual student. They'd handwritten messages and memories, drawn little pictures, and dispensed advice. A crowded room full of dark eyes had blossomed into a motivated classroom teeming with personalities. Each student had radically improved their oral and written English skills; the higher level of classroom engagement had changed the way that they learned. Their individual stories and strengths taught me more about education than any college course ever could. To this day, I still consider my Special English class book, my 53 pages of possibility, one of my most valuable possessions.

### Humphrey People

After returning to Minnesota, I found myself applying for a position at the Hubert H. Humphrey Job Corps Center, a place where underprivileged students aged sixteen to twenty-four receive a combination of academic and career training while living on campus. Since I wanted to work with at-risk, non-traditional students, Job Corps seemed to be a perfect fit. Even after more than seven years of working with the program, I still marvel at my students' grit and determination. As a former student of mine once said: they've been down, but they refuse to stay down.

A year after I started working at Humphrey, Job Corps released an announcement for the National Oratory Competition – a challenge offered to the 122 Job Corps centers across the country. The top three finalists would be flown to Washington D.C. to compete at the nation’s capital. The competition required students to create a video that featured them telling their personal stories to a live audience. Ryan, our student government president came to my office the day he heard about the competition. “I need to tell my story.”

Ryan grew up in a rough neighborhood. His mother was mentally ill and he had little support when it came to continuing his education. He dropped out of school and started using and selling drugs. Ryan’s life changed when he applied to the Job Corps program. He earned his GED, became a campus leader, and, for the first time, saw a glimpse of what he could become. Ryan spent weeks working on his speech; draft after draft filled my recycling bin. When the judges revealed that Ryan had advanced to the final round, we were ecstatic.

Ryan’s flight to D.C. was the first time he’d ever been on a plane. He gripped the sides of his seat and recited his speech over and over. The day of the competition, Ryan and I visited Mount Vernon. As we sat on the expansive lawn behind the historic house, Ryan decided to practice one last time. As he confidently told his story, I listened to his passionate words and watched the flowing waters of the Potomac drift by. I felt my chest tighten and my eyes fill with tears as I thought about what one person’s story can do. Later that night, Ryan shared his journey with nearly a thousand people – members of Congress, educators, and students.

Deeply moved by the experience, I began working to guide other students through the process of telling their stories. At each of our two yearly graduations, I help two or three students to document their journeys. Over the past five years, these student speakers have become a cherished part of our graduation ceremonies. Mai, a Burmese immigrant, spoke about growing up in a refugee camp where she didn't have access to education. The sun was her lamp, a stick was her pencil. Staci, the courageous single mother, who wrote that her life was a testament to the fact that it is never too late to start over. Deshawn was desperate and homeless before coming to Job Corps; he'd hit rock bottom. He now stands tall, wears a tie, and is applying for jobs in the railroad industry. In his graduation speech, Deshawn said, "I'm no saint and this is no miracle." He refused to forget what he overcame or be dissuaded by obstacles.

Each year as the students stand at the graduation podium, I watch as their words drift into the audience, absorbed by new students, community partners, and struggling family members. I'm moved by the faces of hundreds of students watching the ceremony, thinking about the day when their turn will come to wear a cap and gown. Each face is an opportunity, a reason to create classrooms and programs that inspire greatness and growth. Stories allow us to relate. They are powerful. They inspire us to take action, to change legislation, and to improve a young person's quality of education.

### Summary

As an educator, I know what miracles look like. They can be found in the stories of kids who sit under stairs. They exist in the tiny moments where a single mom chooses to rewrite a lifelong pattern of quitting. My experiences have taught me that the right questions give us the ability to create connections. As I think about my students' stories,



I wonder how history can change the future. Based on my students' pasts, what programs and teaching practices will best help them to be successful now? *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their educational journeys?*

In the following chapter, I will introduce research that has been done in the area of educational life history and take a closer look at examples of how student narrative can be used in a scholastic setting. Chapter Three will explore the methodology I will employ during my case studies. Chapter Four will detail the life stories of three very different students. Last, Chapter Five will summarize my findings, examine research observations, and discuss the ongoing potential of this journey.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Overview

The topic of personal narrative is gaining traction in the educational community. The concepts of biographical interviewing and storytelling can be particularly meaningful when working with young adult learners who do not fit into a particular educational mold or stereotype. Thoughtful lesson plans and expensive technology are ineffective if students are not connected to a learning community or engaged in their own personal educational journey. This chapter will explore research that informs the capstone question: *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their educational journeys?* In order to better understand the topic, three areas of research will be examined. First, the value of storytelling/narrative research in the educational setting; second, the characteristics of disconnected learners; and third, the connection of personal story to motivation.

The ubiquitous phrase “tell me about yourself” is an instant invitation to connect with another person. As I began to research this topic, I wondered if seemingly simple social niceties could actually provide insight into my students’ educational needs. What if my dialogue with students went beyond casual greetings? My program, Job Corps, is open-entry/open-exit; this means that new students aged sixteen to twenty-four years old start classes every week. Not too long ago, a rough-looking new student arrived at our welcome luncheon. In Old English lettering, the city name “St. Paul” was boldly tattooed across his throat. His sense of self and the value he assigned to his hometown were laid

bare. The majority of students, however, are not quite so easy to read; unearthing their personal narratives requires time, trust, and intentional work.

The concept of storytelling must be discussed in two parts: why it is valuable and it is manifested in an educational setting.

### The Value of Storytelling

In his educational manifesto, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Freire (1970) postulates that our individual histories are the starting point for all education. He writes that humans are constantly in process, that we are continually *becoming*. This powerful concept is particularly meaningful for at-risk or disenfranchised students who enter the classroom carrying the weight of past failure. Often times this baggage can stymie academic, social, and vocational growth (Mullet, Akerson, and Turman, 2013).

Returning to school after a hiatus can be incredibly difficult for young adult students. Incorporating activities that promote the narrative process can assist students in assigning value to their life experiences (Clark and Rossiter, 2006). The autobiographical method, first utilized in the 1970s by Pinar, gives validity to the multi-layered concept of personal knowledge (Sharma, 2012). When students are able to view their pasts as learning tools rather than stumbling blocks, an entirely new frame of reference becomes available.

The importance of one’s personal narrative, or autobiography, is seldom readily apparent to disconnected learners. Collier and Thomas (2001) emphasize the importance of recognizing the value of students’ individual history: “Whatever their circumstances, they are all proud peoples who may at some time have been denied their identity, their right to chart their own life journey with dignity and respect” (p. 68).

Educators have the opportunity to facilitate the connection between past experiences and course curriculum in order to assuage past feelings of inadequacy. For example, although most adult learners are able to talk about their work history, many have trouble relating their training and expertise to classroom topics – the identification of learned skills is seldom obvious (Muller, 2012). “Moreover, being expected to evaluate, interpret, and synthesize their knowledge can make them feel inadequate because these processes and ways of thinking belong to an academic world of which they do not consider themselves members yet” (Muller, 2012, p. 182).

Strategic coaching and narrative building can provide learners with an opportunity to connect prior learning with their current academic goals. Education has the unique capacity to serve as a tool for interrupting oppression and negative cycles (Guy, 1999). The creation of a new educational narrative can inspire growth and commitment to long-term goals.

This educational dialogue, then, becomes paramount when examining strategies that can benefit disenfranchised learners. Freire (1970) takes this idea even further: “If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity” (p. 88). Personalizing a student’s literacy journey can incite metamorphosis and the reclaiming of identity (Houp, 2009). The psychologist Howard suggests that humans assign purpose to our existence by understanding life as a continuing story (Morrison, 1991).

Mair (1988) elaborates on the way that stories give us context for culture and place:

We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are lived by the stories of our race and place. It is this enveloping and constituting function of stories that is especially important to sense more fully. We are, each of us, locations where the stories of our place and time become partially tellable. (p. 127)

The act of exploring one's personal narrative allows deeply-seated beliefs to surface. What past experiences have led a student to their current beliefs about what they are capable of in the classroom? Knowing our students means understanding how they view themselves.

#### Storytelling in an Educational Setting

Personal interactions between educators and students are often marginalized in educational programming (Houp, 2009) as a strong emphasis is placed on standardized test scores, the Common Core, and college readiness. However, simply teaching basic skills is not enough. By connecting with non-traditional learners in an authentic way, we can assist them in creating a new framework, an altered self-perception, a stronger belief in their own abilities. Stories have the unique ability to promote individual growth by envisioning life on the other side of boundaries (Morrison, 1991).

Storytelling provides students with the opportunity to see their life as a journey, rather than a sequence of events that has "happened" to them. A sense of control can be obtained as students assess the decisions that they've made on their own. The shedding of old beliefs and painful memories can allow students to learn unencumbered by the past (Mullet et al., 2013).

To begin, learners write a personal life story from their current perspective and then use guiding questions to examine and challenge aspects of the story that could be interpreted differently. The second viewpoint does not change what happened, but only how we look at it. Thus, the new story we tell ourselves reshapes how we view future events in our lives. (Mullet et al., 2013, p. 76)

There is strength and courage to be found in the retelling a story. Past events that at one time seemed debilitating can be re-examined from a place of contemplation and forward thinking. Validating students' personal stories empowers students to become active members of the learning community rather than simply passive recipients (Burk, 1997).

This methodology can also be employed while working with English learners. Storytelling can give students the opportunity to bring their own voice to their new language and to develop knowledge of language structure and use (Nicholas, Rossiter, and Abbott, 2011). Additionally, the incorporation of personal narrative brings richness to the task of vocabulary acquisition. Learning becomes meaningful and authentic as a collaborative classroom community is created (Nicholas et al., 2011).

Establishing a strong community requires intentional planning. Nicholas et al. (2011), propose a structured approach to classroom narrative:

- Respect the learner's right to non-participation
- Develop a sense of community
- Value the importance of personal stories and experiences
- Instructors must also be willing to share stories
- Begin the process with low-risk activities

- Identify elements of the stories that align with curriculum objectives
- Be prepared to address controversial and difficult issues as they arise

Ground rules are important, but they are just the beginning. It is also essential to have a clear plan for incorporating personal stories and exploration into a student's educational experience. Abrahamson (2011), a college professor, begins each semester with a personalized writing project. He informs students that he looks forward to reading their responses and getting to know each one of them individually through their writing and personal introductions. "The primary purpose for this writing exercise is to begin the student's storytelling process whereby I can learn about them through their own stories – their names and faces, along with the personal information that they have shared" (Abrahamson, 2011, p. 3). The act of assuring students that they are important and that their work is valuable has the potential to empower and excite even the most reluctant learner.

Mullet et al. (2013) present three strands to coaching students through the process of reframing their personal narrative: (a) realize that the *stuck story* isn't the only story, (b) address the *magic question*, and (c) practice looking at each situation through a series of different perspectives. The stuck story, where the narrative is deeply rooted in negative past feelings and associations, can be redirected with the magic question, "Imagine that you woke up today and the issue was gone – how would you act? What would you think about?" (Mullet et al., 2013, p.75). This powerful technique allows students to think about their own potential, about their own capacity for success.

Embedding guided narrative into students' educational experiences allows students to acknowledge their past, while recognizing that their story is taking another

path. By changing the way we tell our stories, we alter the way we perceive ourselves. This increased dialogue requires that educators have faith in their students' ability to make and remake, to create and re-create, to become the fullest versions of themselves (Freire, 1970).

### The Characteristics of Disconnected Learners

Each student's story is directly tied to their background, the places they are from and the experiences they have had. Disenfranchised and disconnected learners have frequently been denied, through social or familial circumstances, their right to a solid education. They have seldom been privy to rosy classroom experiences. Feelings of isolation in the classroom can lead to disconnectedness. Youth who have never felt attached to a school or work setting are at a greater risk for undesirable outcomes as they begin to move toward adulthood (Brigeland, Milano, Civic, American's Promise, and Peter D. Hart Research, 2012).

Exploring the various backgrounds of at-risk students can help us to better understand their stories. The concept of disconnected learners will be examined in two parts: the plight of disenfranchised youth and the reconciliation of perception and reality.

### The Plight of Disenfranchised Young Adults

The dilemmas faced by disenfranchised young adults extend beyond the classroom and into the job market. A recent report outlines the urgency associated with reaching out to disconnected youth:

There are millions of youth ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and out of work. They cost the nation billions of dollars every year and over their lifetimes in lost productivity and increased social services. They also represent an opportunity for



the nation to tap the talents of millions of potential leaders and productive workers at a time when American's skills gap is significant. (Brigeland et al., 2012, p. 3)

Poor, working-class young people may have negative workplace experiences and are at increased risk for harassment that can have long-term effects on their willingness or interest in pursuing viable employment (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2008).

Individuals who are assigned to low-status social groups are often blamed for the problems they encounter. Issues such as poverty, crime, illiteracy, and drug addiction are often seen as the fault of minority group members; this type of negative cultural assassination can destroy an individual's sense of personal identity (Guy, 1999).

“For minority students, a potential threat to their sense of adequacy is the possibility that their racial or ethnic group is devalued in the academic environment” (Sherman, Hanson, Binning, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Taborsky-Barba and Cohen, 2013, p. 593). Educators must be aware that cultural differences can lead to marginalization in the classroom; providing students with opportunities to engage in self-affirmation exercises can remove barriers to learning (Steele, 1988). In order to make young adult education culturally relevant, instructors must question their assumptions and methods.

The nature of the fit between learner's cultural backgrounds and their educational experiences is of central concern because of culture's importance in establishing criteria for success or failure. Thus, a principal focus of the educational experience, from the perspective of cultural relevance, is the reconstruction of learners' group-based identity from one that is negative to one that is positive. (Guy, 1999, p. 13)

Addressing cultural stereotyping in the classroom can provide a forum in which students can truly shift their self-perceptions and personal narratives.

Clark and Rossiter (2006) note that our self-perception is reinforced in the telling of stories. When we are asked to tell stories about times we were successful, that image is strengthened in our minds. Alternatively, relaying stories about oppression, fear, anger, and victimization has the potential to further cement a view of self that is rife with frustration and disappointment.

I once asked a student to tell me about the last time he remembered feeling confident in a classroom. He replied, “Things were really good in third grade, I got all Bs. I just don’t know what happened in fourth grade; things just went sideways.”

Abrahamson (2011) expounds on the importance of real life connections: “People gain a better understanding of one another using concrete examples rather than abstractions and generalizations that have little relationship to one’s experiences . . .” (p. 3). Knowing something about my student’s educational background helped me to understand a small piece of his complicated history as a learner.

Linguistically and culturally diverse students have an ever-increasing presence in U.S. classrooms (Collier and Thomas, 2001). Students come from a wide variety of backgrounds. For immigrant and refugee students, academic success has often been thwarted by prolonged discord in their home countries. Trauma also plays a significant role in a student’s educational and emotional development. Many of these students have experienced informal education, interrupted learning, overcrowded classrooms, limited accessibility in rural areas, or years of missed school because of political instability (Collier and Thomas, 2001). The horrors of rape, murder, and war can make it difficult, if

not impossible, for a student to fully engage in the learning process (Reynolds, 2004).

Despite these severe barriers, linking a student's life stories to their educational journey can promote increased levels of significance to their coursework.

### The Reconciliation of Perception and Reality

In addition to learning new concepts, young adult learners must reconcile the change in the way they are viewed by themselves and others (Mooney, 2011). Feeling powerless to change their situations, disenfranchised students have often spent years in educational withdrawal or disengagement (Guerda, Helms, Jernigan, Sass, Skrzypek, and DeSilva, 2008).

Helms' research demonstrates that withdrawal for this type of student generally manifests itself in one of three ways: (a) students participate only in same-race activities and avoid achieving too much to avoid the perception of showing-off, (b) students focus only on academic achievement and are otherwise disengaged from school, or (c) they manifest symptoms of psychological withdrawal (2003).

Reconnecting with non-traditional youth requires a strong, integrated support structure that promotes student ownership and responsibility (Brigeland et al., 2012). Guy (1999) describes the value of creating strategies that minimize the potential for exclusion and marginalization: “. . . educators sometimes find themselves responsible for the learning of students with whom they share little in common. Whenever teacher and learner cultural backgrounds differ, teachers should find a way to learn about who their learners are” (p. 15). This process can be achieved by guiding students through the process of valuing themselves as learners and understanding that education is a process.

Shull (1998) links classroom participation with educational equity: “. . . I want them to believe that their place is not outside but with the literary and cultural events in the community” (p. 12). This sense of belonging sets the stage for the process of becoming (Freire, 1970).

“Helping children and young adults to see their own experiences and stories as valued and important can build students’ confidence and competence . . . competencies that are necessary for the higher level literacy skills needed in today’s complex society” (Stuczynski, Linik, Novick, Spraker, Tucci, Ellis, & Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 2005, p. 10). Acknowledging the unique needs and stories of diverse learners can provide educators with the information they need to structure classrooms and programs that challenge, motivate, and inspire their students.

### The Connection of Personal Story to Motivation

In order to learn about their students, educators must first be intentional about creating space for storytelling and personal narrative. The way that we think others view us can have a direct impact on our personal narratives. However, the opposite can also be true – creating stronger self-versions can instigate the loss of motivation or fear of failure.

Likewise everyday hardship in the classroom can take on a threatening significance in the light of a stereotype about one’s race, gender, or ethnicity. Negative feedback from a teacher, rejection by peers, and other challenges common in adolescence may seem more like confirmation of identity devaluation rather than simply negative or aversive personal experiences. (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 593)

As students find themselves beginning to excel, the thrill of achievement is often tempered with the fear of success. However, labels, categories, and history can be challenged through the use of autobiography. “To think beyond our known scope of what makes knowledge possible and subvert the tendency to silence or erase what does not fall within our understanding of things is what emergent forms of critical and innovative curriculum inquiry offers” (Sharma, 2012, p. 150).

Houp (2009) also discusses the idea of “out of the box” exploration by comparing personal literacy to institutional literacy: “. . . institutional literacy transforms human beings into case numbers; personal literacy, expressive writing in particular, helps one retransform, reclaim identity” (p. 702). Personalizing a student’s coursework extends its meaning in a significant way.

Additionally, an enhanced level of connectivity can occur when students perceive that they have a bond with their instructors. Abrahamson (2011) postulates that when students feel connected to the classroom community, their motivation to interact with and apply course material can become a reality. When students realize that their stories matter and that they are part of a larger, inter-connected community, their sense of self-worth can blossom.

Connection is the mother of motivation. One of the best ways to connect with learners is to establish a shared narrative in a safe space. Personal connections give students a voice (Stuczynski et al., 2005). After seeing her students struggle with classroom writing assignments, Shull (1998) developed a course called “The Story of My Life.” The class challenged students to explore personal stories through autobiographical writing and prompted Shull to reflect on her own feelings:

Sometimes I am hard-pressed to explain this interconnectedness to students who insist they are living ordinary and uneventful lives, students who maintain they cannot relate to literature because it is difficult to understand and seems so distant. To those who do not yet see literature as the story of human beings just like themselves trying to figure out what they are supposed to do in this life. But I do have a clue. If those who have been outsiders can be helped to listen closely and carefully, they will eventually hear some even if only one thing that speaks to them. Then the idea of connections becomes a possibility connecting to the voice coming from the page, connecting to the voices around the classroom, and connecting to the voices throughout their lives. Becoming part of the story themselves. (p. 12)

Abrahamson (2011) explains that the idea of narratology is the human desire for chronicle and causal connections – the very act of storytelling, both telling and listening, helps us to understand ourselves (Scholes, 1981).

No longer just a simple classroom strategy, storytelling is a valuable pedagogical resource. Burk (1997) discusses one of the major benefits of storytelling: students are given the freedom to develop trust in themselves and others. By becoming intricately invested in their own learning, students are able to experience enhanced levels of motivation. “By sharing one’s personal narratives, one may realize the relevance, validity and efficacy of her/his lived experiences” (Burk, 1997, p. 7). Providing opportunities for students to connect their learning to their own personal narrative creates an immediate sense of ownership in the course material.

By identifying the things that are valuable, the things that we care about, we give them meaning. Clark and Rossiter (2006) address this concept as it relates to the adult

learner:

Narrative process brings meaning to experience. The facts of our existence – events, actions, happenings large and small – constitute the raw material of life. The facts are merely a data set without some process to understand what they mean. Meaning has to do with values and beliefs – what do we want to happen, what do we hope to be the next event in our lives? Meaning has to do with context – what is the importance of certain facts or happenings in relation to others, and when considered as a part of a larger whole? Meaning has to do with interpretation – how do we bring our own store of knowledge to bear on our understanding and put our own spin on the actualities of life? (p. 20)

The exploration of meaning allows students to go beyond the age-old question, “Why does it matter?” Instead, the narrative process urges students to thoughtfully explore the query “Why does this matter to *me*?” Muller (2012) observes that “self-reflective learners are not only better able to articulate their knowledge in the learning narrative but are also more able to demonstrate or imagine applications of their learning” (p. 184). As application gives way to implementation, students have the freedom to see the value of their work and connect it to a real goal. This powerful intrinsic motivation has the potential to stay with a student long after the completion of a course. In fact, it might even change their life.

### Conclusion

Touring the research surrounding the rich topic of personal narrative provides a basis for exploring my capstone question: *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their educational journeys?* The voices of the researchers, psychologists,

educators, and counselors join in unison to say: our stories matter. A character on the popular show *Mad Men* once said, “If you don’t like what people are saying, change the conversation.” Infusing storytelling into the pedagogical process gives our students the chance to change the conversation surrounding their educational careers. Stories of failure and quitting fade to the background as a new narrative emerges, telling a tale of success and perseverance. Acknowledging and valuing a student’s past experiences paves the way for increased engagement with the classroom community. Personal narrative is a vital part of understanding our students – who they are, where they come from, and who they want to be. In Chapter Three, I will present the methodology that will be used as I seek to help my students tell their own stories.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### Project Goals

Every day I work with struggling students. Some battle chronic absenteeism – they have never known a world in which they arrived on time to school and stayed in class. Others fight to manage untreated mental health conditions or emotional/behavioral disorders that have left a trail of classroom outbursts and half-finished credits. Still others have simply never had familial support – instead they’ve spent their days caring for siblings, cousins, neighbors, and sometimes even their own parents. Each one of these students has a plethora of reasons for why “school is hard.” Knowing a student’s story, the *why* behind the struggle, can help educators to tailor programs, incentives, and strategies for assisting at-risk students to succeed. My capstone project asks the question: *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their educational journeys?*

I have worked at the Hubert H. Humphrey Job Corps Center for nearly eight years. Six of those have been spent in the role of Manager of Academic Training. Job Corps is a Department of Labor program designed to provide academic and vocational training for at-risk youth. Since our program is open-entry/open-exit, we have students arriving every week. Every Wednesday, I speak at a Welcome Lunch for new students. I always say, “Sometimes you will have hard days. Sometimes you will feel like quitting. On these days, I want you to envision yourself on graduation day. You’ll be wearing a gown and a cap with a golden tassel – you’ll be feeling proud. As you walk across the bridge on stage, you’ll be surrounded by your family, your friends, your classmates, and

your teachers. You will be a completer: someone who finished something. Graduation is my favorite day of the year because it means that I will get to shake your hand and congratulate you on your accomplishments.”

Something in the language of this visual resonates with students week after week. The power of a new story allows them to envision themselves in a different light. It gives them the ability to look ahead to a concrete goal and see an attainable future. Seeing the new students each week reminds me that our individual stories are an important part of who we are and how we define ourselves. Most importantly, our personal stories, as Freire (1970) reminds us, allow us to reflect on the process of change, the act of becoming better versions of ourselves.

While my work with students often involves resolving disputes, conducting pep talks, counseling, managing behavioral issues, and coordinating schedule changes, it's rare that I have the time to learn each student's backstory. For many years, I prided myself on my ability to recall the names and test scores of all of the students in the Job Corps program. My misguided attempt to connect students in this way meant that instead of understanding students as individuals, I simply tracked them.

I began to realize that the majority of my time was spent doing educational triage. Rather than establishing a relationship with students early on, I only got to know them well when they were melting down, ready to quit, or too angry to function. It was only when I recognized that each student's past pain, classroom slights, and fears of failure were a part of their story that I began to truly understand how to assist a student with redefining their struggles (Mullet, Akerson, and Turman, 2013). In particular, working

with students to tell their stories on graduation day has become one of the most meaningful parts of my job.

Abrahamson (2011) suggests that student motivation is inherently linked to classroom connectivity. In light of this, one of my project sub-goals is to create a template for an abridged educational autobiography for all students entering academic classrooms. Implementing a document like this into classroom practice would give all instructors a forum for quickly learning information about their students that extends beyond race and test scores.

The overarching goal of my Capstone Project is to expand the storytelling experience. Rather than simply talking about a student's Job Corps journey, I want to expand the conversation to encompass the whole of a student's educational experiences. Using a combination of personal interviews, observation, and educational artifacts, I want to document the educational journeys of three students who are not yet able to write about themselves. Through the act of developing a process for writing a student's educational biography, my project seeks to answer several questions. What does it look like when one person's story is examined from an entirely new perspective? How can the process of narrative building be used to bring meaning to experience (Clark and Rossiter, 2006)? How will understanding students' pasts help educators to positively impact a student's future?

### Setting and Students

The Humphrey Job Corps Center is located in a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. Job Corps was established by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 as part of a larger effort to fight the war on poverty. Although there are 122 Job Corps centers

located across the United States, the Humphrey Center is the only location in Minnesota. In 2015, Job Corps celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year of serving students.

Job Corps is a need-based program. One hundred percent of students meet the federal poverty guidelines. The majority of Humphrey's 264 students live in campus dormitories. The residential element is an important programmatic component. It addresses core concerns that have often been barriers for students in the past and answers important questions: "What will I eat today?" "Where will I sleep tonight?" "Will I be safe?" The dorms are a blend of military-like rigor (students must make their beds, adhere to a curfew, and complete daily floor jobs) and the comforts of home (students relax in lounges and hang out in each other's rooms).

Although the National Office of Job Corps has taken significant steps to recruit female students, the program continues to attract a higher number of male students. Males currently comprise 60.17% of our student body; female students 39.83%. The Job Corps computer network (CIS) collects and maintains comprehensive student data reports for both active and separated students. Having a culturally, socially, and academically diverse student population means that accurate student information is a vital part of maintaining a strong program.

Job Corps serves students ages 16-24. This significant age spread means that there are often large disparities in student goals and conduct. For example, a sixteen-year-old student may have a much more difficult time envisioning her long-term career plans than a twenty-three year-old student. Being mindful of a student's age is an important variable when working with students to understand their pasts and envision their futures.

<b>Student Population by Enrollment Age (2015)</b>	
<i>Age</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
16	2.12%
17	5.51%
18	13.14%
19	16.53%
20	23.73%
21	13.14%
22	11.44%
23	6.36%
24	7.20%
25+	0.85%
Totals	100%

*Figure one. Enrollment age data*

The center's staff and students are incredibly diverse. Staff from around the world represent countries like Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Liberia, and the Ukraine.

Currently, English learners comprise over twenty percent of the student body, representing twelve countries and fourteen different languages. Although the center-wide numbers reflect great diversity, the CIS tracking mechanism does not break out students

by country or region of origin. Nevertheless, the available information still provides a viable snapshot of our current student population.

<b>Student Population by Race (2015)</b>	
<i>Race</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.69%
Asian	13.56%
Asian & Black/African American	0.42%
Black or African American	51.27%
Black/African American & American Indian/Alaska Native	0.42%
Hispanic or Latino	6.78%
Hispanic/Latino & American Indian/Alaska Native	0.42%
White	19.49%
White & American Indian/Alaska Native	0.85%
White & Black/African American	4.66%
White & Hispanic/Latino	0.42%
Totals	100%

*Figure two. Student race data*

### The Phases of Job Corps

When students arrive, they spend their first five weeks working through their initial programmatic phase, the Career Preparation Period (CPP). This phase is designed to acclimate students to center life and rules. For many students, the transition into Job Corps' highly structured system can be overwhelming at first. Students must clean their dorm rooms, attend roll calls, complete community service projects, and remember dozens of rules. This rigorous introduction helps students to see the part they play in their Job Corps story (Shull, 1998) and is a critical part of students' long-term success.

The next phase in a student's Job Corps journey is the Career Development Period (CDP). During CDP, students select an area of vocational study (e.g. Culinary Arts, Certified Nursing Assistant) and begin their academic training. Academic classes consist of reading and math recovery, EL classes, GED preparation, and online high school diploma. The combination of academic, vocational, and social skills training often proves to be difficult for students who lack familiarity with formal education or who have negative associations with prior school experiences. Stuart, Lido, & Morgan (2011) researched the way in which a student's cultural capital serves as a predictor of educational success, "Cultural capital refers to forms of knowledge, skill, education, attitudes and expectations, or any other advantages a person might have which make environments such as the educational system a familiar place in which they can succeed easily (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977)" (p.490). As students move through the various program phases, our continuous aim is to provide them with the cultural capital they need to be successful.

According to CIS, approximately fifty percent of all incoming students taking the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) test below the eighth grade level in both math and reading. These students are enrolled in math and reading recovery classes designed to identify each student's greatest areas of academic need. As students progress through their academic coursework, they are enrolled into GED programming or high school diploma classes. Students who have already obtained a high school diploma continue to work on strengthening core academic skills as they move through their trade. Academic classes are taught by a group of six passionate, dedicated instructors. Our seventh team member administers the TABE and manages student schedules. Our collective belief in each student's potential for growth is at the core of our team philosophy.

### Case Studies

Academic frustration is a reality for many Job Corps students. A significant number of students have experienced high mobility, changing schools frequently during their formative educational years. Students from countries torn apart by war and poverty often never had a chance to experience formal education. Finding themselves in a new country, too old for public school services, yet lacking the language skills and academic credentialing required to make a living wage, students frequently express themselves in my office with tears and anger. These non-traditional students require a means by which to redefine their experiences.

The biographical method provides a guide to challenging terminology and establishing new norms (Sharma, 2012). Houp (2009) urges educators to turn institutional literacy into personal literacy – reading and writing opportunities that resonate with students on a deeper level.



Since many of the students that I work with do not have the tools to write their own story, the case study methodology provides a framework in which I can assist students in fully examining their educational histories. According to Stuart, Lido, & Morgan (2011), “Life history methodology is based on a belief that subjects seek to make sense of their own lives and can provide, through linking life experience with particular events, deep insight into life choices and chances” (p. 492). Although the students involved with my Capstone Project may not be ready to write their own stories, their voices will be heard through interviews, observations, and a review of educational documents.

Triangulation, the process of comparing two or more pieces of data, will be a critical part of each case study (Griffiee, 2005). Rather than portraying a student’s educational history through a single lens, triangulation allows each student’s story to be explored in a variety of ways. This, in turn, can lead to an in-depth understanding of a student’s past experiences (Schapp, Van der Schaaf, Baartman, & Kirschner, 2011). As Mullet, Akerson, & Turman (2013) discuss, while a new viewpoint doesn’t change our story, it does have the power to alter our perception.

#### The Accessible Educational Biography

The editors (2007) talk about the value of student biography in the preface of Mi Voz, Mi Vida: Latino College Students Tell Their Life Stories:

A life consciously reflected on is changed by this process of deep introspection. It has been the editors’ consistent observation over seventeen years of this kind of work that the process of autobiographical writing can have a profound transformative effect on the spiritual, moral, and emotional domains of a person’s

life. We have found would-be contributors overwhelmingly open to the invitation to make sense of their childhood and adolescent experiences, which up to then may have been inchoate and unintegrated (p. xii).

Documented life stories are very rarely accessible to those who do not possess strong writing skills. The process of self-reflection found in autobiographical writing is often a privilege born of time and strong formative education. Narratology frequently belongs to the elite, the well-educated, or cultural pop stars with money for ghost writers. It is incumbent upon the educational community to create the time, space, and accessible formatting for documenting the life experiences of a struggling student. Stuart, Lido, & Morgan (2011) expound on this idea: “Although they are personal stories, life accounts also provide rich detail of the interface between the personal and social as individuals describe their encounter with society and their engagement with heritage and culture.” (p.492).

The process of transcribing a student’s educational history reinforces the importance of viewing life as an incomplete journey. The choice to get out of bed each morning is part of the journey. Deciding to attend math class day after day, even though the work seems impossible, will become a part of the story where a student decided not to quit. Self-reflecting on the learning narrative has powerful implications for long-term application (Muller, 2012).

While the student biographical interviews will contain personal elements and anecdotes, the most vital part is capturing forward movement. It is critical that students are given the chance to see their life story in motion, to understand that the choices they make today have the power to propel them forward. Small changes are actually big

changes. Chaos theory embraces the concept of the butterfly effect: the gentle movement of a butterfly's wings has the power to cause a hurricane.

The purpose of documenting a student's educational life story is two-fold:

1. To give students the opportunity to reflect on their educational journey, to see that they are in process – their story is still being written.
2. To provide educators with the ability to see students in a new way, giving them the tools to recalibrate their teaching style to best meet the needs of the pupils sitting in their classroom.

#### Four Steps to an Educational Life Story

Student participants will represent a range of ages and backgrounds. It is critical that students fully understand the project goals and are committed to exploring their educational history. After identifying the three students who will take part in the project, I plan to follow four steps as I work with students to tell their stories.

Step 1: Schedule an initial meeting with the student to introduce the concept of an educational life story. Students will be given several prompts to help them begin thinking about their story. They will be encouraged to write out their responses, however, it's okay if they don't feel comfortable doing so. The primary goal is to ignite the reflective process by giving students license to assign meaning to their past life experiences.

<b>Getting Started: Thinking About Your Experiences</b>	
What were you doing before you came to Job Corps? Give as many details as you'd like about your life and school experiences.	<i><b>Your thoughts:</b></i>
What are you doing at Job Corps? What have you accomplished so far?	<i><b>Your thoughts:</b></i>
What are your plans for the future? Where do you see yourself one year from now? Five years from now?	<i><b>Your thoughts:</b></i>

*Figure three. Pre-interview prompts*

Step 2: Conduct a life story interview with each student. For the purposes of storytelling integrity, there will be no time limits placed on the length of each interview. The interviews will be largely semi-structured. According to Griffie (2005), semi-structured interviews are conducted using predetermined questions but the interviewer is permitted to ask follow-up or clarifying questions. The interview questions are a compilation of guiding questions I have used with students over the years as I worked with them to write their stories for graduation.

<b>The Educational Life Story Project: Interview Questions</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are your first memories of learning?</li> <li>2. What was school like when you were very young?</li> <li>3. What role did your family play in your education?</li> <li>4. What challenges did you face when it came to being successful in school?</li> <li>5. Who were your mentors? Who really encouraged you and caused you to want to do your best?</li> <li>6. Was there a time when you felt really good about yourself as a learner?</li> <li>7. What led you to Job Corps?</li> <li>8. Where do you see yourself one year from now? Five years from now?</li> </ol>

*Figure four. Interview questions*

Step 3: Review each student's interview narrative and write their story from a third-person perspective. Students' educational life stories will include their testing scores, vocational progress, and reference documentation from other staff members. In order to increase each student's comfort level, all student participants will be referred to by pseudonyms.

Step 4: Conduct an authentic classroom observation. In order to get a better picture of each students' academic and vocational career, I will conduct one hour of classroom observations with each student. The goal will be to synthesize students' self-perceptions with observational insights as I write each student's educational history.

### Limitations

My project presents a number of realities that I must address. At the top of my list is student mobility. Even the most committed Job Corps student has the potential to suddenly leave the program. In the words of Stuart, Lido, & Morgan (2011), my students

inhabit “complex worlds” (p.493). Familial concerns, addictions, financial obligations, and disciplinary action are all common reasons for students to leave the program with little to no warning. The possibility of losing contact with a student after beginning work on their educational life story is a devastating thought but a possibility I must be prepared to encounter.

Another potential barrier is my own research process. Although I have worked to thoroughly explore the research that has been done on student biography and educational life history, my research will always be limited by what I have yet to discover. For now, I must trust the work of those researchers who have gone before me to guide my project postulations and decisions.

A final limitation is time. Due to the nature of the project, I will need to resist my natural inclination to extend student educational life histories beyond their intended scope. The Capstone Project is not designed to capture the whole of a student’s life story. Rather, it must be a directed effort to encapsulate a student’s educational history in a way that encourages and embraces the notion of change.

### Summary

As I seek to help students develop and understand the correlations between their life stories and educational journeys, my goal is to challenge them to reinvent their personal narratives and to facilitate the process of meaning making (Sharma, 2012). My methodology for writing the educational life stories of three diverse students will encompass personal interviews, classroom observations, and a review of academic information. The educational biographies presented in Chapter Four will provide an introspective look at the journeys of non-traditional students who are in the process of changing their lives.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Introduction to the Interview Process

Three students at the Hubert H. Humphrey Job Corps Center participated in the following case studies. After hearing about the project, each student wanted to help answer the question: *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their educational journeys?* This vital question asks both students and staff to take a closer look at how a student's personal history influences their scholastic success.

I approached the three students involved in the project (Asha, Isabel, and Jordan) because they had each been enrolled in the program for less than four months at the time of their interview. All of the educational interviews took place in my office during the training day. Before each interview, I reminded students that their educational biography would be written using a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

Asha's interview was completed in a little over an hour. Both Isabel and Jordan shared their stories for roughly two hours. Jordan's interview took place over two consecutive days; parts of his story are very emotional and we both decided that it was important to take a break halfway through the process.

Before each interview, I talked through the importance of students' individual educational histories (Collier and Thomas, 2001) and explained the purpose of the questions I would be asking. The questions were designed to allow students talk through the process of *becoming* (Freire, 1970) as they take steps toward positive changes. The

interview set the stage for students to reimagine their past as a journey – their own story in which each event played a part in who they are today.

Throughout the three interviews, I found myself considering a number of questions: What factors most influence an individual’s educational development? What factors most incite change? What happens to educational progress when we experience a traumatic event? Is it necessary to have peace in order to learn?

Each student profile consists of three parts: a brief educational profile, their story, and a post-interview follow-up that includes notes from campus observations. All observations took place after the interviews were completed.

During my conversations with each student, I began to see overlapping themes emerge. Although the students are from very different backgrounds, their journeys had some striking similarities. Throughout their formative educational years, all three of the students experienced some type of disrupted learning – they were forced to miss school for weeks or months at a time. All talked extensively about the impact that their families have had on their school success – in ways that were both positive and negative. Additionally, each was subjected to some type of trauma that made it difficult to attend school or to focus while they were in class. Perhaps most importantly, despite seemingly insurmountable hardships, all three expressed a deep desire to change their lives. To move forward with their educational careers and to finish what they started many years ago.

The intent of this chapter is to allow the voice of each student to shine through. In order to avoid disrupting the authentic narrative, individual stories will not contain subheadings. Rather, a chart summarizing common themes and characteristics between



the stories will be found after each profile. An analyzation of the themes will be discussed at the end of the chapter and revisited in Chapter Five.

### Asha

Asha is a twenty-one-year-old Somali refugee who came to Job Corps to earn her high school diploma and become a Certified Nursing Assistant.

### Asha's Educational Profile

Although Asha is soft-spoken, her confident demeanor is immediately evident. She wears a head scarf as an expression of her faith and frequently goes out of her way to help others. Asha's initial TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) scores placed her reading grade level at a 5.2 (fifth grade, two months) and her math grade level at a 4.7 (fourth grade, seven months). She has strong classroom attendance and no absences or tardies.

### Asha's Story

Asha's earliest memories of her education took place in her family home when she was a very little girl. Even before learning the alphabet, Asha remembers teaching herself how to write her father's name in Somali. At the time, her father was around a lot. He always had papers with him – documents that had his name at the top. Asha didn't know what the papers meant, but she was fascinated by the letters in her father's name and traced them over and over.

Asha was born in Somalia, but her family moved to Kenya when war broke out. Her mother, a nurse, knew that she had to protect her family. Asha recalls, "My mom moved us from city to city to find peace . . . but there was no peace." Shortly after the move, her father stopped working and eventually left the family. The resulting divorce

between Asha's parents meant that her mother was suddenly the sole provider for Asha and her six brothers and sisters. Although she was young, as the third oldest, Asha's familial responsibilities increased as well.

Out of necessity, Asha's mother left the children with their grandmother in Kenya and moved to South Africa where she started a small business selling tea. Over the next several years, she expanded her customer base enough to open her own restaurant. The money her mother earned was sent back to Kenya to pay for private school for Asha and her younger brother. Although they lived in Kenya, Asha and her family spoke their native Somali language at home.

Going to school, however, meant learning to speak English. Asha was six or seven years old when she first started attending school – a difference, she notes, from Western education. Starting school when one is slightly older is a normal part of African culture. She remembers school being fun, she loved learning and attending classes. Because she was at a private school, both teachers and students followed rigorous policies. Students knew that they would be suspended if they didn't follow school guidelines – something that was never an issue for Asha.

Since parents paid such high tuition fees, students were constantly held to high standards. Failure to complete a homework assignment meant getting struck across the hand with a small stick. Methods such as this never intimidated Asha; it was simply motivation to do her homework. She says, "When we were at school we had to speak English. They would whip you if you spoke your language. They would say, 'This is the future for you, you have to speak English!' They used to force us to speak English and learn to communicate with each other." Although some students would secretly speak

their native language, there was a collective understanding that English acquisition was critical.

As the oldest, Asha's sister, Deeqa was responsible for caring for her younger siblings; school wasn't an option for her. Asha's grandmother was old and needed Deeqa's help. Although Deeqa didn't learn how to write her own name until she was fifteen years old, she has always had a major influence on Asha. "She's the kind of person who loves to read. When I go home now, if I don't take a piece of paper or do something, she'll ask me why I don't have homework. She doesn't want to see me just sitting."

When Asha was thirteen years old, her grandmother passed away and her mother decided that it was time to bring her children to South Africa. Although she was disappointed to leave her school, she was thrilled to see her mother again – they had been separated for six years. Asha was excited to finally see her mother's restaurant. She felt proud when saw her mother's many employees and their customers walking down the restaurant's long hallway.

Once settled in South Africa, Asha started attending school again. Life was good: her mother had remarried and all of the children went to school, except Asha's oldest brother who spent his days helping her mother with the restaurant business. Then, in 2008, things at home took a dark turn. Asha's stepfather became difficult to live with. He became violent and struck her mother on several occasions. Asha knew she needed to get involved. "My sister and I decided to talk to him. We told him that we were going to call the police if he hit my mom again." With no resolution in sight, Asha's mother and stepfather separated.

Going to school at this time was difficult, not only because of a stressful home life. Asha remembers, “Xenophobia happened.” Asha describes xenophobia as: “People would start killing you or hitting you, physically or emotionally – saying words to you. But then at school, on the road, at my mom’s business . . . people felt like I was a foreigner, a person who had come from another country. They thought I had come to their country to take something away from them, so they would do whatever they could to make me feel fear, to make me feel like I wanted to leave the country.”

The exceptional teachers at her public school were Asha’s champions and protectors during the school day. On breaks, however, students would take advantage of the lack of supervision. She and her younger sister were the only Muslims in their classes, the only students wearing head scarves. Students would say cruel things to the girls and talk about them behind their backs. Asha found herself returning to the only people who understood: her teachers. Her teachers tried to talk to students as much as they could – with little success. Students would say things like, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from? What do you want here? What do you want from us? What do you want from our country? This is our country. We got independence in 1994, we don’t want people coming in here. You people are taking our business away.”

Asha believes that the main problems were economic. South Africans were afraid that people from other places were threatening their livelihoods. Xenophobic attitudes had a tremendously negative impact on Asha’s education. She stopped going to school altogether. “It wasn’t safe – not only in school, but outside. I used to walk to school and there was no bus, even though I was in high school, so I had to walk down the street.

There were men and women who would throw stones, they would burn you alive. People were scared. We stopped doing anything and just stayed home.”

It’s hard for Asha to talk about those hate-filled months. People threw rocks at her if she walked to the store. Asha says that it’s impossible to describe what was happening by simply using words. She talks about the YouTube videos that show the destruction that took place. She is reflective when she talks about this time of her life. “They will burn the whole place where you have a business. You have to run for your life. The whole place is burning down and they are stoning the whole thing. You just have to run away.” Her mom’s business was in the district where many of the demonstrations were taking place. Her car and restaurant were destroyed during one of the violent protests. Asha was particularly afraid for her older brother, a young, working African male. She says that South African men were looking for young men like that to kill. Her mother, always thoughtful and proactive, decided that all of her children must stay home – no work, no school, nowhere. She began making plans for her family to resettle in the United States.

Asha’s mother had saved enough money to sustain the family while South Africa was in turmoil. She alone would leave the house to visit the shops and bring food home for her children. The unrest lasted for about nine months. Nine months of staying at home, nine months of wondering what would happen. While the children stayed at home, they spent hours each day reading their textbooks. Every day, Asha’s older brother would hold a textbook and challenge the others to write down all of the difficult words he read aloud. The sibling with the most correct answers would receive a prize. There is fondness and nostalgia in Asha’s voice as she talks about this time of her life. The gentle

game developed during a time of trouble has lasted through the years. Asha and her brothers and sisters play it to this day, even though she is in Job Corps and they are in school.

Asha credits change in South Africa to Nelson Mandela. She believes people's hearts and minds began to shift when they heard him say, "We are all Africans." These calming words had an impact on the country and Asha's family tried to find a new normal. Asha's mother, her business burned to the ground, started a new venture. Asha and her younger siblings returned to school. Things were difficult though, they had lost a lot of time and had fallen behind. "We had a lot of catch-up to do," Asha recalls.

In spite of everything, Asha's mother had not lost sight of her dream to move her family to the United States. She continued visiting the United Nations regularly and gathered all of the documents required for travel. The whole family moved to the city of Pretoria in order to be closer to the UN headquarters. Each person had to complete a thorough individual interview process with the UN agencies in order to move to the United States. The entire resettlement process took four years.

Once Asha learned that she and her family members had been approved for resettlement, she was so excited that she stopped going to school. Even now, she is shocked by her decision. "That was the stupidest thing that I did. I stopped going to school because I was going to the United States!" Instead, she stayed at home for five months and relaxed while she waited for the resettlement agency to schedule their air tickets. Four years of planning and dreaming transitioned into feelings of excitement and fear. Asha had heard a lot about the United States and was overwhelmed by all of the opportunities.

The whole family moved to Atlanta, Georgia in March of 2014. They were amazed by the state's beauty and calm weather. They took pictures and exclaimed over the newness. The resettlement agency had set up a home for them. There was cooked food on the table when they arrived at their apartment. The beds were made – everything was ready. The caseworker assigned to Asha's family made sure that they felt comfortable. The family was given cash and daily living supplies, Asha notes, even some things they didn't "need," like a television. Additionally, the resettlement agency required that everyone in Asha's family attend school – even her mother.

Asha remembers being picked up in a car and being taken to public school to register the first day. Her younger brother and sister were accepted without difficulty. Asha, however, had a problem. Her purse carrying all of her transcripts had gotten lost at the airport in South Africa. Any evidence that she had attended school in Africa was gone. "Luckily, my mother had the papers for my brother and sister in her handbag, but I was carrying my own stuff." Because she didn't have transcripts, the schools required Asha to start in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. "I was heartbroken. I really tried to get into school, but every school that I went to told me the same story, that I would need to start in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, even though I was nineteen years old." Not only did this mean that she would be attending classes with students much younger than herself, it meant that she would not be on track to graduate by age twenty-one – the age-out limit for public school.

Determined to fight her depression, Asha took a factory job with a shipping company. She started on the assembly line, then became a sealer, where she worked to seal large cooling containers before they were shipped. When the time came for her to

move on, her manager begged her not to leave. He even offered to give her a room to stay in at the factory.

In November of 2014, Asha's family moved to Minnesota. Her mother had broken her leg in a fall and became aware of the harsh reality of living without friends and extended family nearby. The resettlement agency had moved on from the family once it was determined that they were settled. Asha's mother realized that they needed a better support network and more opportunities for adult education for her older children. Her friends had told her good things about Minnesota, so she decided to move the entire family north. There was never a question of leaving anyone behind. Asha says, "Always we are together."

Asha's mother and seven children moved to St. Paul to live with Asha's mother's friend, a single woman. Once they got settled into their own place, Asha and her older sister started routinely visiting the St. Paul Public Library. It was there that they found a pamphlet on a table for the Hubbs Center, a local adult education program. The next week, Asha, her mother, and her older sister went to sign-up for classes on Wednesday – registration day. All three began taking English classes. Asha immediately felt out of place. "I was sitting with old people. I saw that they're not writing the way that I'm writing – I'd been to school my whole life! I was really disappointed."

One day a friend of the family stopped by their house. He brought news about a program he was attending – Job Corps. It sounded like a better fit for Asha, more prospects for success and classes at her level. Deeqa, her older sister, encouraged her to explore the program. Asha glows when she talks about Deeqa.



“My sister has the most amazing story in my whole entire life. I have to tell everybody. She taught herself how to read through newspapers and magazines. My father had taught her a little bit of Somali, so she knew some words in Somali, but then she didn’t know English. All I can remember is her trying to read . . . but I never remember her going to school. She now knows how to read and write. She put herself out there. It’s because of all of her hard work that she is now in college.”

Asha credits her mother for her educational progress. “Even though she never went to school, she never wanted us to stay home. My mother always wanted us to know what was happening in the world. She tried her best. I thank my mom. Back in South Africa, when I was not going to school for five months, she was very disappointed. She knew that I would benefit somehow just from going. She is that person who will encourage you. I am here today in Job Corps because of her. I know that she wants me to be educated. To be someone out there in the world.”

Asha’s mother is currently working part time and attending classes at the Hubbs Center to improve her English. Asha becomes emotional as she talks about watching her mother struggle to learn how to read and write in a new language as she balances her role as a mother and provider. Her younger brother is graduating this year from Central High School in Saint Paul. The pride in Asha’s voice is evident as she talks about his achievement.

“When I came to Job Corps, I needed an opportunity to start. When I started my academic classes, I felt proud of myself. I knew that I was close to whatever I wanted to achieve.” She has started her Certified Nursing Assistant courses and is putting her all into completing her adult high school diploma. During a recent two-week break from

classes, Asha continued to attend school, putting in nearly seventy hours of extra work during the two weeks. She credits her teachers, saying that they give her words of encouragement and push her to do her best. Asha often envisions herself finishing Job Corps, working part-time, and attending college. Five years from now, Asha hopes to be a Registered Nurse, on her way to being a doctor.

Many years ago, Asha's mother was a nurse working at a hospital in Somalia. When the war broke out, that job no longer existed for her. "She is always talking about how she loved it, how she loved helping people. In my family, my mom is the only one who is talking about a career. She is talking about something that I can relate to." What kept Asha going when she felt like giving up? "I had hope and love. My mom, she gives such big love. It makes you forget about everything, you just want to focus on big things. It makes me forget that people told me that I should give up, or that I was too old. I was still her baby. She never thought I was too old to go to school."

When she thinks about her future, Asha says, "This is the way to my goal." The computer she works from each day in the high school diploma classroom has little yellow pieces of paper framing the monitor. On each piece of paper, in Asha's careful handwriting, is the name of one of her family members encircled by a heart.

#### After the Interview

Over the past month, Asha has become increasingly more active in the classroom and on campus. She has stepped forward as campus leader and has volunteered for two different center projects. She completed driver's education classes and is scheduled for a permit test.

Asha has worked relentlessly in her academic classes. She has improved her reading score on the TABE by 4.7 (four years, seven months) grade levels. Her math scores have improved by 1.6 (one year, six months) grade levels.

After one of the high school diploma instructors turned in her resignation, Asha came to my office with a proposal. She asked if she could recruit high school diploma students to take part in the process of interviewing and hiring a new staff member. I immediately agreed. Less than an hour later, Asha returned with a list of seven students (including their cell phone numbers) who were willing to come to campus over the summer break to conduct interviews with me.

Due to all of the extra hours that she has put into her credit recovery, Asha is nearly halfway complete with her high school diploma.

<b>Common Characteristics</b>			
<i>Disrupted Learning</i>	<i>Impact of Family</i>	<i>Traumatic Experiences</i>	<i>Desire to Change</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Forced to change schools when she moved to South Africa.</li> <li>-Not able to attend school in South Africa due to xenophobia.</li> <li>-Didn't attend school for five months before moving to the U.S.</li> <li>-Had difficulty enrolling U.S. schools due to lost transcripts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Her father left the family when she was very young.</li> <li>-Her mother's dedication to paying tuition meant that she was able to attend a private school.</li> <li>-She is greatly influenced by her mother and sister's commitment to learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Aware of her mother being physically abused.</li> <li>-Had rocks thrown at her while she walked to school.</li> <li>-Her mother's car and business were targeted and destroyed during violent protests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Decided that she was not "too old" to return to school.</li> <li>-Aggressively working toward her high school diploma.</li> <li>-Has long-term educational goals.</li> </ul>

## Isabel

Isabel is a twenty-one-year-old Hispanic student. She dropped out of school when she was sixteen. She came to Job Corps to earn her GED and become a Certified Nursing Assistant.

## Isabel's Educational Profile

Isabel presents herself as quiet and mature. She keeps to herself and rarely talks to staff or other students. Although she knows how to drive and has a truck, Isabel has never had a driver's license. She's been pulled over three times, but has never received a ticket. She is preparing for her license test while at Job Corps and will take her test in the next month. Attendance has been an ongoing struggle for Isabel. Since she was informed by campus security that she was not allowed to drive her truck onto campus without a license, she has had to take three busses to get to school each morning. She is late nearly every day and currently has twelve AWOL days, the maximum allowed by the Department of Labor. If she misses one more day of school, she will be automatically expelled from the program.

Isabel's initial TABE scores place her reading at a ninth grade level and her math at a 3.4 (third grade, four months) grade level.

## Isabel's Story

Isabel was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota to Hispanic parents. An incident at the Mall of America when Isabel was two and half years old prompted Isabel's mother to rethink their life in the United States. Isabel was at the mall with her mother and her sister, Bianca, who is six years older. She clearly recalls what other people told her about that day: "I was riding in a little coin car and my sister was watching me." When her

sister looked away for a minute, Isabel disappeared. Her mother ran to alert security and the mall was shut down. Isabel was eventually found on the other side of the mall next to a store that sold cowboy hats. She doesn't have any memories of the incident, but her mother was shaken by the rough hand marks on little Isabel's arm. The woman who tried to kidnap Isabel was never found. Isabel understands her mother's worry. "My mom got really scared, so she decided to move back to Mexico." Although Isabel's dad initially moved to Mexico with the family, he returned to Minnesota a year later.

Isabel learned how to count before she was five and could recite all of her numbers before she went to kindergarten. Thinking back on her early school experiences bring happiness. "I used to like reading," Isabel remembers. Growing up in Mexico meant that her mom and uncles were there to influence her early education. South of the Texas border, just four hours from El Paso, the combination of pre-K and kindergarten can last up to three years. Precocious Isabel was always ready for a challenge. "Instead of being on the swings, I liked to be on top them. The other kids didn't like to do that, they were scared. I was smart, but I was really hyper."

Isabel only attended kindergarten for half a year since she was already familiar with the material. "Colors, right hand, left hand, how to write your name," it all came naturally. Isabel was quickly promoted to first grade classes. At the time she didn't realize what was going on, she just remembers that the work was easy for her and that she got everything right. Even at a young age, being independent felt normal. "I was always by myself. I would have one friend and that was it. I like to be by myself."

Isabel loved school. "Every time they used to do something at school, they used to put me first." Because of her good grades, she was often tapped by her teachers for lead

singing roles or other classroom responsibilities. When she was five and six years old, her school sent Isabel and three other students to take part in a testing program that represented the region. Isabel remembers the grading system well. Students in Mexico did not receive As and Bs; rather, they were scored by numbers. Ten was the highest, nine was very good, six through eight meant that you were average. Below five meant you were really low. At the end of each year, Isabel's report card was always filled with nines and tens.

When Isabel turned eleven years old, she began thinking about her father back in Minnesota. She told her mom every day how much she missed her dad. Isabel's sister, Bianca, didn't want to move back to the United States. She was in high school at the time and the idea of leaving school and her friends behind was out of the question. An agreement was reached: Isabel's mother and Bianca would stay in Mexico and Isabel would move to Minnesota to stay with her father.

Life in Minnesota meant living with her dad and his older sister in Saint Paul. "Everything was weird and different. There were lots of different people of different races. I didn't know where they were all from. I'd thought that every Spanish person was from Mexico. Suddenly people are like, 'I'm from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Columbia.' All of it was new."

Since Spanish was Isabel's primary language, she was enrolled in English language classes; getting a handle on the basics took her about a year. Although the work was often difficult, she was committed to doing her best. "I'm a quick learner, I can do well if I put in the effort and time to get things done." Starting seventh grade at Cleveland Middle School was an adventure. Her biggest struggle was finding the right bus. There

were so many! She remembers walking up and down the line of buses, trying to find the one that would take her home.

“Middle school was good,” Isabel reflects. “I was still smart in middle school. I was getting good grades and I was often student of the month.” She still didn’t have many friends since she didn’t talk much. She met her best friend one day after school when they both missed the bus. They’ve been friends ever since and often refer to each other as “cousin.” Middle school meant studying, staying away from the drama, and keeping to herself. By this time, her mother and Bianca had moved to Minnesota as well, bringing the family together again.

Things changed, however, when she went to high school. “I thought that being with the cool people meant doing bad things. I stopped doing my homework. I was getting in trouble.” During her freshman year, Isabel started arriving to classes late and stopped listening to her teachers. Finding her identity in a new place wasn’t easy.

When Isabel was a sophomore, she learned about the Army. The recruiters told her that she would need to do well in school and earn her high school diploma. “I knew I could do it.” The Army was the motivation she needed to get back on track. She was determined to use her sophomore year as a time to make a change. “I wanted to do my work and be on time.” She pulled herself away from the group that had been such a poor influence on her the year before. Even though she was starting to get in a bit of trouble here and there, she was still getting her assignments done.

Back in Mexico, all of her mother’s brothers, seven or eight of them, are cops. Her cousins are cops, too. One of Isabel’s uncles was a particularly powerful influence when she was young. She remembers being a little girl and asking him about all of his

guns. He told her that they could be used for good things or bad things. Isabel had never lost the desire to be like her childhood role model; the Army seemed like the best way to follow in her uncle's footsteps.

Isabel was fifteen when she first told her mom about her plans to join the Army. "At that time, I knew that I was going to join the Army and go away as soon as I finished high school. My parents were fighting constantly and I didn't get along with my sister. I just wanted to get away from my house." Her mother reacted strongly to the news. "She told me no, you're not going. She thought I could be blown up into little pieces by a bomb." Isabel would not be so easily dissuaded. "I told her that a teacher is a teacher because they want to teach, a doctor is a doctor because they want to cure people. I don't want to be a teacher, I don't want to be a doctor. I knew that if I didn't live for something, that I would die with nothing. I wanted to go to the Army."

Isabel started attending Army events with her recruiter. Her father has two other children who are both in the Army; he had always supported her military dreams. The difficulty lay in convincing her mother. Isabel's recruiter even visited her family's home – although nothing could change her mother's mind. Things escalated when Isabel forged her mom's signature so she could attend Army events and military job fairs as a minor. When her mother found out about Isabel's actions, she was upset and disappointed. Frustrated by the lack of approval, Isabel mentally checked out of school – her motivation for excelling was gone. She began a pattern of leaving school during the day to hang out at friends' houses.

Isabel sometimes thinks about how her mom and dad didn't finish high school. Her dad never liked school. Her aunt told stories about how her father would "enter



school by the door and get out by the window.” Isabel’s mother was from a family of eighteen children. As the third oldest, she took responsibility for sending her younger siblings to school. As a parental figure, she was always busy taking care of her brothers and sisters. Despite her resistance to Isabel’s Army plans, her mother had always supported and encouraged her education, even though it was hard for Isabel to acknowledge it at the time.

When Isabel started going to Johnson High School at the beginning of her junior year, things simply stopped moving forward. She was suspended for not listening to her teachers. She would sometimes just walk out of her classes. She never argued or disrespected her teachers; her parents taught her better than that. She would just get up from her desk and leave the classroom. She’s thoughtful as she remembers those rocky days. “I knew that they were doing their jobs, I was the one not doing my job.”

Isabel began to feel like trouble was looking for her. Although she kept to herself, it was difficult not to get involved when she saw injustice. One day at school, she saw a student picking on another student. Although some of her other classmates were standing around watching, no one was doing anything. Isabel approached the bully and told her to stop what she was doing; her actions resulted in a fight that led to another suspension. “I’m really calm, I’m really quiet, but I don’t like to see that kind of thing,” she says.

When she was sixteen, she met a guy who lived in an apartment building near hers. They both went to Johnson; he was the first guy she had ever dated. “I was supposedly in love,” she remembers. The combination of friction with her mom and close proximity to her boyfriend led to problems. “My mom didn’t like him, but I decided not to listen to her.”

Although her boyfriend was one of the students who was always in trouble, Isabel didn't care at the time. Even though he had gang affiliations and knew how to fight, Isabel remembers him being a nice person – they always had something to talk about. As their relationship grew more intense, Isabel began to find herself in frightening situations. One day after school, her boyfriend's gang met up to fight with a rival group. Someone in her boyfriend's gang made a phone call and a truck pulled up. Three people that Isabel didn't know got out of the truck. She thought that they would start fighting even more . . . but they didn't. Instead, one of the guys pulled out a knife and stabbed someone right in front of Isabel. "I pushed him away to make him stop." The police and ambulance arrived and things broke up quickly.

The trouble, however, was just beginning for Isabel. One of the members of her boyfriend's gang accused her of supporting the other gang. The threats started. "He said he was going to send a group of females to look for me." Isabel wasn't fearful for herself, but she was afraid for her family. She stopped taking Bianca's young son to play in the park. She was afraid whenever she was with her sister. "I thought that maybe my sister, my mom, or my nephew would get hurt." Throughout the ordeal, Isabel's boyfriend stood up for her. He seemed to understand that her personality would not allow her to stand by and watch another human be unfairly attacked. She felt herself falling more deeply in love.

In the middle of her junior year, when Isabel was about to turn seventeen, she became very ill. Her mother took her to the doctor's office to find out what was wrong. When the doctor told her she was pregnant, "I felt like I had dropped a cup, I felt it break. I didn't want a kid. My plan was to join the Army, to dedicate my whole life to it. I didn't

want a family or kids. My mom was even more mad at me! Since I was underage, the doctor gave me the choice not to have it. I sat there, thinking and thinking and thinking. I remembered all of the times I had stood up for other people and I knew that I needed to keep it.”

Isabel’s mom told her she was no longer allowed to live at home. Isabel recalls this time as the “start of hell.” Because of her boyfriend’s gang involvement, his family no longer felt safe staying in the neighborhood. Isabel dropped out of school, packed her things and moved to Hastings, Minnesota with her boyfriend, his parents, his brother and two sisters. Despite the move, her boyfriend had trouble leaving his old lifestyle behind.

Isabel’s days were filled with stress. She constantly argued with her boyfriend and his parents; there was no one there to support her. With the weather too cold to be outdoors, “I was in my room all day long for six months.” With tensions running high, she was confined to a single room in the three-bedroom apartment. “I watched TV and moved furniture at least four times a day.” She spent hours moving the bed, the dresser, and the television into every possible configuration.

When the weather was nicer, she walked to the park and explored the streets of Hastings. “I walked so much that I was really healthy when my baby was born – I didn’t feel any pain.” Her baby boy was born naturally in less than four hours and Isabel felt the sudden weight of becoming a mother. “I was seventeen and everything changed.”

Her boyfriend started working and Isabel began to feel hopeful for the future. A month after her baby was born, Isabel’s boyfriend and his brother got into a fight with two guys at Lake Phalen where they were celebrating a birthday party. Since he was eighteen, no longer a minor, he was sent to jail for three months. To this day, she is still

exhausted by the memory of that event. “So there I am, back to Hastings by myself, back to the room. Except for this time, I have a baby.”

When her boyfriend was released from jail, he immediately went back to his gang life. Isabel knew she wanted a different path for her son. She reconnected with her family and moved back to St. Paul. Her parents, realizing that their relationship just wasn't working, decided to split up. Isabel felt stressed out, she didn't know what she was going to do: housing was tenuous and she needed to earn a living. Her cousin connected her with a job at a cleaning company. Isabel took the bus to work every day and found a two-bedroom apartment through a friend at her job. Her mother moved to Minneapolis and her father moved in with her.

As Isabel's son reached five months old, she watched her boyfriend bounce in and out of jail. With no other child care options, she let her boyfriend begin watching her son during the day as she picked up more and more hours with the cleaning company. Isabel badly wanted to go back to school, but couldn't – she needed the money to support her son and to pay the rent. The frustrations with her boyfriend mounted as she realized that she was only one committed to providing for their son. Isabel said to him one day, “You have felonies, how are you going to get hired? It's not okay.”

Things came to a head when Isabel's son was ten months old. Her boyfriend started doing drugs – something Isabel had never been interested in experimenting with, particularly once she had her son. One night is particularly vivid in her memory, “It's really weird, but now I believe that everything happens for a reason.” It was late in the evening and Isabel was talking on phone with her sister. Suddenly, her boyfriend began loudly accusing her of communicating with another man. As his accusations rained down,

he held their son in one arm and began to assault Isabel with his free hand. “As he tried to hit me, he didn’t hit me, he hit the kid. I told him to put the child down, to give me my kid.” As she tried to wrench her son away, her boyfriend struck her so hard that her eyes filled with blood. Isabel knew she was through with the relationship.

The next day, at her mother’s urging, she filed a restraining order. “I knew he would never change. It would be a life with trouble, with police coming over every day. I knew I would never be able to get an apartment because of his record. If I stayed, I knew that I would never be able to do the things I wanted to do.”

Isabel lost herself in her work. She was promoted to a management position with the cleaning company. She was given a raise. Her life revolved around providing for her son. Although she frequently worked from noon until 2 a.m., she often thought about returning to school. “I knew that I was smart enough to finish. I knew what I had before all of this. I just didn’t have the time.” The barriers seemed impossible to surmount. “If I go to school, I can’t work – where will I live, where will I go?”

Two years ago, Isabel started dating another manager at the cleaning company. One day he asked why she hadn’t gone back to school. She told him, “I want to, but I can’t.” After a year of dating, Isabel and her new boyfriend moved in together. When she felt down, Isabel reminded herself that things could be worse: she could still be in Hastings, locked in a room with no job and no chance at returning to school. She refused to pity herself, she knew she could survive anything. While working, she began to feel the joy of accomplishment. She saved her money and began to build her credit. She bought a vehicle and even took her son on a vacation. She also began to rebuild her relationship with her mother.

Last year, she invited her mother to move in with her and her boyfriend. Around the same time, her boyfriend began to strongly urge her to return to school. He said, “I want your son to be able to say that, after everything that she went through, his mom still did it.” Isabel tried a few adult education centers without success; they just didn’t feel right. She’d been going to another school for two weeks when her best friend from middle school, the one she’d always referred to as “cousin,” told her about Job Corps. Her friend was attending Job Corps at the time and thought the program would be a good fit for Isabel. Her boyfriend’s words have stayed with her throughout the entire process. When she enrolled, he said, “If you’re going to do this, you need to finish.”

Accustomed to working fulltime and being independent, it has been hard for Isabel to think about accepting help from her mom and her boyfriend as she started school. Coming to Job Corps meant that Isabel had to make sacrifices: like quitting her job due to scheduling conflicts with school. Her boyfriend is supportive; he treats her son and her mother well. He brings her to school whenever he can. He continues to work for the cleaning company but also works part-time as part of a construction site clean-up crew. She and her mom have grown closer over the past year and have even started attending church together. “Going to church is helping me to let go of that old stuff,” Isabel says.

Though she tries not to dwell on it, she’s both saddened and angry by the actions of her son’s father. His lack of positive involvement in her son’s life is a source of pain. She uses the frustration as fuel to propel her towards a better life. “I’m going to school, I’m going to finish. After I get my GED, I’m going to go to college. I going to do whatever it takes to be something. I’m going to do whatever it takes to give my son

everything.” Her son, who is now four, drives her crazy sometimes, but is her daily inspiration.

She thinks about what it will take for her to finish Job Corps. “I’m more motivated right now than I was when I got here.” She sometimes marvels at how she got to where she is today. When she first started Job Corps, she felt like she didn’t understand the material, particularly her reading classes. She didn’t feel sure of herself, but she continued to try and has never given up.

Isabel has passed her first GED test, Language Arts. Passing the test meant getting creative with language. “I studied in English and then translated the words to Spanish so I would know what they meant. Most of the Spanish words were really hard for me because I didn’t go to high school in Mexico – I didn’t know that vocabulary. Although I took the GED test in Spanish, I translated many of the words back into English.” Her success on the Language Arts test has given her the confidence that she can pass her final three tests. Next up, she’s working on Science. Her aim is to pass her final test within the next two to three months.

“My goal is to go back to where I was in middle school. I set my goal that I will pass these three tests, so I will. I’m not going to take a year, no. I want to go to college to be a police officer. It’s not the same as the Army, but it’s something that I want to do. Maybe one day I will be able to help someone. I want to be able to tell my kid that no matter what, you can be what you want. No matter what happens, you’re going to be able to do it. I want to show everyone that I can do it. When I was doing bad, everyone said that I was going to end up dead or in jail. I want to show them that it’s not true. I want to

be able to show my dad, my mom, and my sister that I can do it. Even though all of these things happened to me, this is nothing. Whatever comes, I am able to take it.”

As she thinks back on her days at Johnson High School, Isabel remembers one of the counselors. He stands out in her mind because she remembers feeling as though he didn't like her. He told her that if she didn't get that little piece of paper, her diploma, that she would never go anywhere, that she would be stuck. “He was right. I need that piece of paper. I need to move on.” Even though his words felt negative at the time, Isabel chose to be inspired by them. No matter what happens, Isabel looks at things in a positive way. She moves forward and refuses to be kept down. “I believe in God. I have learned that God will never give you more than you can actually take. The things that have happened to me are just a little tiny part of my beginning.”

Her journey has given her a deeper appreciation for how far she has come. “When people look at me and think of me as a person who had a kid at seventeen, they just have no idea. Without my son, I don't know what would have happened to me. I have no idea where I would be right now. He was the best thing that could have happened to me. He made me look at things differently.”

Isabel is contemplative as she talks about advice she would give to others who are experiencing hard times. “No matter what happens, just remember that it's not the last thing. You're not stuck. You can still move on.”

#### After the Interview

In the days following the interview, Isabel continued to struggle with her attendance; she was also cited twice for being out of uniform during the training day. Getting her son to daycare, then getting herself to school meant following a thorny bus



schedule that often took hours of travel time. To further complicate matters, Isabel learned that she would need to have an emergency surgery that required her to miss classes. Isabel went to great lengths to communicate information about her medically related absences. She even called my office from the hospital to ensure that her medical leaves were in the system. She was concerned that she would be separated from Job Corps due to missing class for her surgery.

Before starting summer break, Isabel took and passed her driver's license test. Her relief and excitement were evident. Getting to school on time will be much easier when classes start back up in August.

Isabel has not yet retaken her reading TABE test. Her math TABE score has increased by 2.8 (two years, eight months) grade levels and her classroom participation has improved significantly in both her GED and Certified Nursing Assistant classes. After months of studying in both English and Spanish, Isabel has passed the GED Social Studies test; she smiles every time I remind her that she is 50% complete with her GED. Always serious, always on task, Isabel has begun to connect more with staff members. As Isabel maintains her single-mindedness toward her goals, she is reaching out to the community around her.

Common Characteristics			
<i>Disrupted Learning</i>	<i>Impact of Family</i>	<i>Traumatic Experiences</i>	<i>Desire to Change</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Moved from Mexico to Minnesota during junior high.</li> <li>-Began skipping classes during high school.</li> <li>-Dropped out of school when she became pregnant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Her father lived in Minnesota during her elementary school years in Mexico.</li> <li>-Ongoing discord with her mother over Isabel's interest in the Army.</li> <li>-Motivated to be successful in order to create a better life for her son.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Was kidnapped at the Mall of America when she was very young.</li> <li>-Witnessed fighting and violence due to her boyfriend's gang activity.</li> <li>-Was told that she could not live at home any more after she became pregnant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Worked her way to a management position at a cleaning company.</li> <li>-Decided to return to school, even though it has meant stress and financial hardship.</li> <li>-Studying for the GED in both Spanish and English in order to best understand the material.</li> </ul>

### Jordan

Jordan is a twenty-four-year-old African American student from Tennessee. He came to Job Corps in order to earn his high school diploma and enroll in the Culinary Arts trade.

### Jordan's Educational Profile

Jordan decided to come to Job Corps to get his life back on track. His initial TABE scores placed his reading at a fifth grade level and his math at a 6.5 grade level (sixth grade, fifth month). Jordan tested positive for drugs upon entry into the program and was enrolled in mandatory substance abuse counseling. He has struggled with class absences and tardies.

Jordan met with his counselor about a month ago because of his frustrations with his progress in the program – he was thinking about calling it quits. Jordan has received citations for sleeping and occasionally causing mild disruptions in the classroom. He is currently on an academic contract for lack of progress in his Language Arts class. Staff report that Jordan has started to demonstrate some leadership skills on campus.

### Jordan's Story

Jordan was born in Memphis, Tennessee. When he was very young, his mother and father separated. His mom decided to move the children to Minneapolis, Minnesota for a couple of years in order to live with family.

The first thing Jordan remembers about learning is being potty trained by his uncle. His uncle would place him on the potty training toilet and tell him that he couldn't get up until he went to the bathroom. When Jordan would hear his uncle leave the house, he would sneak off the toilet until he heard his uncle return, at which point he would run back to the bathroom as quickly as his legs would carry him.

Jordan started kindergarten when he was still living in Minnesota. His most vivid memories of that time are of his friend, a small boy nicknamed "Pipe." He has no other strong recollections of that time – a lot of things were happening and details are difficult to come by. Sometime during his early elementary years, Jordan moved back to Memphis with his family. He enrolled at a school called South Park. He remembers being stressed out at the time. "I used to get into fights all the time. I would just get into fights with random people."

"When I was younger I had a lot of rage. I don't know where it came from. I like to stay to myself, so when people bother me, I get fed up." Jordan has grown up a lot

over the years. “It’s so hard now to get me mad. When I was little though, if you got me mad, I would just go off, you know. Now when I get angry, I just walk away. I’m still angry on the inside, but I’m holding it in.”

Jordan says that his early school years are “fuzzy.” When he first moved to Memphis, sometime during first or second grade, he mostly recalls hanging out with his cousins. During third grade, Jordan says that he started to straighten up a little bit, but that he was “still a problem child.” His mother was frequently asked to come down to the school to assist with Jordan. “I was always in a fight, or cussing the teacher out, or something. I was always doing something wrong.”

“It was hard for me to learn when I was little, I don’t know why. My mom used to try to sit down with me and read. She used to try to teach me how to read. It just wouldn’t click with me for some reason.” Math, however, was always a different story. “Math problems, those I could get off the top. Numbers, yeah, I’m good with numbers.” Jordan says proudly. “I love numbers.”

Struggling with reading made Jordan feel like an outsider in the classroom. “I felt like I was different from others. I felt like I wasn’t as smart as the other students.” The contrast between his skill sets in different classes was often frustrating. “When it came to math I felt like I was just the smartest student ever. But when I was reading, it seemed like everyone knew more than I did. They knew how to say things better than I did. How to read faster than I did. It was hard.”

As he thinks back on his struggles with classroom behavior, he thinks it was a combination of feeling behind and the strong influences of his cousins. “I think my behavior was part of hanging with my cousins, too. Or, not having my father in my life. I

did a lot of things that I shouldn't have done. But things happen, you know, when you're raised around the wrong people. It happens." His older cousins made a deep impact when he was an impressionable young boy. "I always wanted to run with them."

He wore his cousins' hand-me-downs, their clothes and shoes. They even bought him new outfits to wear. He loved his cousins, even though their close relationship sometimes brought problems. While he was living with them during elementary school, Jordan was hit during a drive-by shooting. He was lucky, he says – the bullet just struck his elbow and didn't cause any real damage. These days, he rarely sees them at all. One of them is in prison. The other is a mechanic who still lives in Memphis.

Jordan says that he switched schools often throughout his elementary years since his mom liked to move. "She never liked to stay in one place. She liked to move a lot, but switching schools was kind of hard. I was one of those kids that adapt to people really fast, but I liked to stay to myself." Jordan is lighthearted when he thinks about his younger self. "Like, 'Hey, how you doin' . . . leave me alone. Today is my day, tomorrow I might choose you later.' That's how I was."

He remembers being asked to read out loud during third and fourth grade. Such a request was enough to send him into a temper tantrum in the classroom. "I would just go crazy on the teacher, spaz out. It was hard for me to read and it seemed like they would just pick on me about it." His memories of those times are still fresh. "When they said that it was time to read out loud, I would scoot down in my chair so they wouldn't notice me." Reading activities that promoted students selecting one another to read out loud in class were particularly painful. "I felt like they knew that I didn't read as well as they did, but that they would call on me anyway."

Jordan just wanted to be left alone. Eventually, he was evaluated for special education services and began to receive additional assistance with his core subjects. When he started middle school, he had a regular class schedule in the morning, then in the afternoon went to special education classes.

During fifth grade, Jordan often skipped school. When Jordan's mom found out that he was skipping school, she told him that he wasn't allowed to play football. This made Jordan incredibly frustrated – football was his passion, one of the things that he looked forward to in life.

Sixth grade was different; Jordan went to school every day. During sixth grade, Jordan's behavior got significantly better. There were no reports of poor conduct and his grades had improved. Jordan attributes the change to his mom's influence. "My mom used to whoop me a lot. I had anger problems, but when she used to whoop me, I would want to fight my mom, just go off on her. At the same time, though, it just clicked in my head: why fight my mom, you know. I started straightening up for some reason."

The summer before seventh grade, Jordan's school called his mom and asked her to come in for a meeting. Staff at the school told his mother that Jordan was "too smart" for seventh grade and that he would be automatically promoted to eighth grade. "I was wondering how I was 'too smart' to go to seventh grade, when my reading level still wasn't as high as it was supposed to be." Jordan was still taking special education classes as he started his eighth grade year. To this day, he is confused about the strange situation – he's never gotten any clarification. All of his other friends started the school year in seventh grade.

During eighth grade, things went downhill. “I can get frustrated very easily. When I’m getting something and I’m on a roll and someone isn’t there to help me right away, I can get in a mood.” One day Jordan was in the special education classroom and needed help with a question. When the teacher didn’t respond right away, Jordan grabbed her wrist as she passed by him. At the same time, another student took hold of her other hand, effectively pulling her in two directions. Two days later, a police officer arrived at Jordan’s school and took him out of the classroom. He was informed that he was under arrest. Jordan was confused and had no idea what was happening. “I hadn’t been in a fight for at least two weeks, I was like, what is going on.” The officer told him that he had harassed and put a bruise on a teacher. “So, I’m walking down the hall in handcuffs feeling embarrassed.”

Jordan spent a day in a juvenile detention center before he was released back to his mom. The next week, during a follow-up meeting with the school, Jordan learned that he would be suspended from school for 180 days. This meant that he was required to enroll in an alternative school. Jordan knows that he is strong, but he still can’t figure out how he hurt the teacher so badly. He believes the other student grabbed her arm harder than he did and wonders if there was some kind of mistake. As his eighth grade year began to wind down, Jordan moved back to his regular school but things continued to be stressful. A week before the end of eighth grade, Jordan was suspended for wearing earrings in the shape of marijuana leaves. He’s still disappointed that he wasn’t allowed to attend his eighth grade graduation.

That summer, when Jordan was thirteen, trouble began to escalate. Jordan was fighting more and joined up with a group of kids he knew from school that robbed

houses. “Memphis is not a place I would want my child to grow up,” he says. “It’s my home, but I wouldn’t even want to go back there. It’s scary – Memphis is like Chicago.” Jordan’s mother was becoming increasingly frustrated by his run-ins with the law. As the summer progressed, he’d been in and out of the juvenile system several times. At one point, he narrowly escaped getting sentenced to a year in “juvie,” a juvenile detention center. After being picked up for a robbery, the police found a gun in Jordan’s backpack. The weapon, however, belonged to his friend and fortunately did not have Jordan’s fingerprints on it, so he was never charged.

As Jordan turned fourteen and prepared to head back to school that fall, things were hard at home, too. His mother’s ex-boyfriend was causing problems for the family. One day her ex-boyfriend showed up intoxicated and began acting abusive toward his mother. When Jordan stepped in to protect her, the ex-boyfriend stabbed him in the face. “I saw something shiny, like from a light,” he remembers. It took months for his face to heal, months of sleeping in a chair since he couldn’t rest his head in bed. After weeks of questions from classmates and struggling to stay awake in school, Jordan took comfort in his cousin’s words of support, “You’re like Scarface, you’re a boss.” The thin scar that now drifts across his face is an ever-present reminder of his acceleration into mental toughness.

In the midst of everything, Jordan’s mom said, “It’s time to go.” One of her cousins had been encouraging the family to move to Georgia. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to get away from the negative influences. Jordan, the oldest, made the move with his mom, his two brothers, and his sister. They were ready to start fresh.



As he began his ninth grade year, Jordan's mom went to his new school in Georgia to talk to the football coach. She got him set up with the team. Jordan felt genuinely happy; he was playing football again, doing the thing that he loved most. "My attitude was good because I was around a lot of positive kids." He was enrolled at a suburban school that embraced sports and diversity. Jordan had never seen so many different types of students. Used to attending schools where the majority of students were Black, Jordan said that it took a long time for him to adjust to the new school culture.

"When I moved there, everything was good until I started hanging out with the wrong crowd again. It was all I knew. Trying to hang out with good people just wasn't my style . . . it seemed so boring." Spending time with a riskier crowd gave Jordan the excitement that he craved. Despite the constructive environment and activities, leaving his old life behind proved to be too difficult. Soon after the school year started, Jordan left his family and went back to the city to live in an apartment with some friends, a mix of teenagers and older guys. "I was in an organization," Jordan says. "I was doing horrible things that I shouldn't have been doing . . . I now know better."

Jordan lived with the group for close to half a year. He still attended school at the time. "That was where some of the money was," Jordan says wryly. High school was a good place to sell drugs and Jordan attended classes simply as a way to interact with his customers. Jordan knows the reality of his school transcript at the time. "My grades were bad," he says. After about six months, Jordan decided he need something different. "The drugs and crack heads were just too much. I needed to have my space." Going home suddenly seemed appealing. "When I just couldn't do it anymore, I went back home. I missed my mom, 'cause I'm a momma's boy." Jordan laughs. "My mom and I are close,

although there are things I leave out from what I tell her.” Even if there was excitement and danger to be had, being home had its appeal. Over the next year, things slowly got better.

The year that Jordan was fifteen, tragedy struck. Jordan’s mom was driving the family van on the Spaghetti Junction expressway in Georgia. Jordan, his brothers, and sister were riding in the back when a truck collided with the side of the van. His seven-year-old brother was killed in the accident. Several of the other family members were badly hurt. “It was hard. I didn’t want to go to school.” Even if he had wanted to get back to classes, it would have been impossible. Due to his injuries, Jordan was unable to walk for two months. “There was a lot going on at the time. I didn’t want to go to school anymore. I just wanted to stay out on the streets.”

Years later, the pain of losing his little brother is still keen. “It hurts. When I wake up in the morning, I like to think about him being in Florida. He used to wake up in the mornings with his hands behind his head and just look at the ceiling. I would peep in on him and be like, ‘Are you okay?’ and he would say, ‘Yeah, I’m just thinking.’ He was just seven years old and he’s already talking about how he’s ‘just thinking’ about good things in life. When I’m about to cry, I just think about him on the beach with his feet kicked up.”

Jordan remembers what it felt like to be a role model. “Me and him were close. If I wanted my hair cut, he wanted his hair cut. If I got new shoes, he wanted new shoes. If I got a new shirt, he wanted the same shirt.”

Moving forward hasn’t been easy. “When I was older, I realized that these things happen. When it happened though, I just kept thinking that I should have never lost my

little brother at that age.” He didn’t feel like he could talk to anyone – not even his mom. “I couldn’t go to school, I couldn’t eat. I was fighting everybody then. I got into a lot of fights. I gave up on life.”

After the accident, Jordan didn’t attend school for nearly four months. Talking to his supportive grandmother helped him decide to go back. He also knew he owed it to his little brother. “I was a big motivation for him.” Going to school felt like the right thing to do. As he returned to classes, Jordan was informed that due to the significant amount of time he’d missed, he would be required to repeat his ninth grade year. The set-backs seemed to be endless and Jordan found himself returning to his life on the streets selling drugs.

“My mom had always tried to keep me on the right path, but after a while it just felt like she started to give up on me because I just kept doing the same thing over and over and over. She was fed up with all of the things I was doing. I was the oldest, I was supposed to be setting a better example for my younger siblings. I wasn’t doing that.”

Jordan’s strength and motivation at that time came from the leader of his organization, his gang, a guy referred to as the “big homie.” Jordan’s big homie counseled him and encouraged him to stay in school and earn his high school diploma. “The way things work in our organization is that we’re supposed to become somebody. You know how young kids are? Just going around and shooting people? Like, oh, he has a blue flag on him or he has a red flag on him, so we’re going to fight. That’s what some of what we were doing was about, but that wasn’t our main thing.” Life in the gang had become about more than representing a certain color or territory. “Our main thing was to succeed and to help out our families. That’s how the organization is supposed to work.”

Big homie was a mentor and would give Jordan words of encouragement, saying things like, “Man, I got my high school diploma. I might be out here in the streets, but look at me, I got my diploma. I got my stuff together.” The bond between the two ran deep and they often talked about their commitment to their families and their futures. They called each other brother.

Much of the money that Jordan earned went home in order to provide food for his family. His mother was still suffering from injuries associated with the accident, making it hard to work regularly at the time. “I had to step up, because if I didn’t, no one else would.”

When Jordan was sixteen, he was stabbed in the chest during an altercation. Certain that he was going to die, he started to reevaluate his life. “I was on probation at the time as well. If I didn’t go to school, they were going to put me in jail.” Determined to earn credits, over the course of the next year, he started working harder in school than he ever had before. Jordan remembers that the pattern seemed never-ending: “Going to school, back in the streets, going to school, back in the streets.”

Outside of running the streets, football had always been the only area where Jordan felt as though he excelled. After the car accident, however, the doctor told Jordan that playing again was just too big of a risk – getting hit wrong could mean never being able to walk again. Since football had been one of the only things he’d ever liked about school in the first place, a future without it seemed bleak. A sudden bright spot in high school emerged when Jordan enrolled in an elective culinary class when he was seventeen years old. Many years earlier, when he was nine or ten, his grandmother had shared her love of cooking with him. She taught him how to make pork chops and find

his way around the kitchen. He remembers helping her to cook a pig head, one of his grandma's favorite meals. At the time, he never told anyone about his interest in cooking. He was afraid that it made him look weak.

At the beginning of the semester, one of the students' first assignments was to prepare their favorite dish. Jordan made hot wings. Before he'd even arrived home that evening, his teacher had already called his mother. Over the telephone, his teacher opened the conversation by saying, "Your son is burning up the kitchen!"

His mother, used to a barrage of negative calls, anxiously replied, "Burned up the kitchen? What'd he do now?" After the teacher reassured Jordan's mother that he had not started a fire in the classroom, she went on to tell her that Jordan was getting along well with the other students and seemed to have a real talent for cooking.

"It was a big change," Jordan recalls. There had never before been a call home like that one.

At the same time, Jordan was enrolled in a credit recovery program. Over the next several years, he continued to make up for the academic time that he'd lost. Due to his previous identification as a student able to receive special education services, Jordan was permitted to attend school up until age twenty-one.

Jordan was aware of the years going by. When he turned eighteen, he knew that getting a felony would have long-term repercussions on his life. "I was afraid that my mom was eventually going to lose me to the streets." Jordan's mom was frank with him. She told him that she didn't want to lose another son.

The passing of Jordan's grandmother when he was nineteen was sobering. He didn't have his diploma yet and was aware of how quickly time was going by. He still misses her and thinks of her often.

When Jordan turned twenty-one, "They kicked me out of school." According to his transcripts, Jordan only had half a credit left in order to receive his diploma. The school policy, however, was clear. Since he had aged out, Jordan would not be allowed to complete his high school diploma. He believes that the school's decision may have also been related to the negative actions of his past; he knows he had a history. He's contemplative now. "I learned that you need to have a good history in order to deserve good things."

Jordan was frustrated, but decided to simply accept what happened. "I tried, you know. Trying is the most important thing." The acceptance quickly turned to complacency. Instead of working toward a goal, he began to fill his days with sleeping and running the streets again. The life he was leading seemed impossible to leave. "I didn't know what to do or where to go." He thought about exploring other school options or trying to get his GED, but continued to procrastinate. "All I was really thinking about was getting money and being with the guys."

Selling drugs was lucrative. "We had a lot of money," Jordan says. The lifestyle, however, was not sustainable. Jordan's girlfriend was caught by the police with drugs in the trunk of her car. At the same time, one of his close friends was arrested for a violent crime. As the police investigation began to escalate, Jordan knew he had to get out. Things happened rapidly. Jordan lost his housing, the members of his gang were forced to

separate, and the cash flow all but stopped. “After that, I was like, I can’t do this anymore. I need to get my life together.”

Homeless, Jordan found himself struggling to survive. He lost weight because he wasn’t eating regular meals. Smoking weed every day sometimes felt like the only thing keeping him calm. The lessons he learned were hard ones.

Several years earlier, Jordan’s mom and his brother had moved to Minneapolis to be close to family again. He says that her move was mostly prompted by his own actions. “There were always people at the house,” he says. Things were always going down and the level of stress was just too much for her, she had to get away. “She wanted her peace.” When she heard that Jordan was in dire straits, however, she got in touch.

His mother encouraged him to move to Minnesota to get away from trouble. His mom said, “I need you up here – I don’t want anything to happen to my son.”

Finally ready, Jordan launched himself forward. “I changed my life and said that I needed to go to school.” Leaving the past behind isn’t always easy to do. “Sometimes I beat myself up,” Jordan says. “It was just all that I knew.” Jordan thinks about how fast his younger siblings are growing up. His younger sister is doing well. “She’s really smart. She likes to sit and read books. I’m proud of her, too, because she just graduated from Job Corps.” Jordan’s sister earned her high school diploma and completed her trade at the Job Corps Center in Atlanta. She is preparing to go to college. Although she is younger, Jordan sees her as a role model. “I want to follow in her footsteps.” When his sister first enrolled at Job Corps, she called Jordan to share her success.

She said, “If I can handle it, I know you can, because my attitude is way worse than yours.” Jordan laughs at the memory. She told him, “I know you can do it.”

Jordan eventually decided to start the program in honor of his grandmother and little brother. “They are who I’m doing this for.”

Jordan sometimes surprises himself by how much he has changed. Since he started his Language Arts class at Job Corps, he’s checked out a couple of books to read in his free time. His strategies have changed, too. “I’ve been forcing myself to sound out words.” He believes that his reading has improved significantly over the past several months and credits his teacher for continuing to push him.

When Jordan looks ahead to the future, he sees himself in a successful career and a stable romantic relationship. He wants to be wealthy. “Ten years from now I want to wake up every morning, look at my bank account and say, this is what I did. I want to work hard like everyone else. I felt like I was working hard as a drug dealer, but when you really get a job, you’re really working, it’s something. Dealing drugs was hard work, too. You just don’t get a check stub. You’re always worried though. Worried about getting shot, or somebody trying to rob you. You have to be aware of everything. You’re worried about whether or not you’re going to jail.”

The hardest things about starting Job Corps were giving up weed and getting along with so many different types of people – two areas Jordan continues to work on. He was recently offered a part time job, something he decided to apply for while going to school. He’s just waiting on the results of his drug test. “I know that I passed,” he says confidently.

During his application interview to Job Corps, Jordan’s biggest concern was his marijuana habit. It had been his coping mechanism for so many years and his crutch for getting through classes at school. Job Corps’ zero tolerance policy for drugs meant that



things had to change. He has turned to rapping, both writing and performing, to fill his time. “Music calms me down,” he says.

The regular writing and rapping has given Jordan a way to explain his emotions. It’s a part of him and has given him a real way to express himself. “People look at me like I’m a big, black man from the ‘hood. They stereotype me. I want to be one of those people who shows people that they shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. Talk to me. Listen to what I have to say. Don’t judge others, you don’t know what they’ve been through.” Jordan is thinking ahead to college. He’d like to study business and management. “If I put my mind to it, I can do anything.”

Every day, Jordan hears other students talk about quitting. He tells them that they’re being short-sighted. “I wake up every morning, open my closet doors and just want to pack up all of my stuff and go home. But this is what I want. I can’t say that I’m doing this for my little brother and my grandma, then just give up. I’m going to keep going.”

Imagining graduation day makes Jordan emotional. “It’s what I want and I think about it all the time. My grandma always wanted to see me walk across that stage and graduate.” When he thinks back on his journey, Jordan believes that God has something in store for him. As he realizes that he’s on track to walk in the February graduation ceremony, Jordan is overwhelmed by how far he’s come. “It doesn’t even sound like me,” he says.

#### After the Interview

The day after the interview, Jordan turned in several completed assignments for his Language Arts class – he told his teacher that he had worked late into the night in

order to get them done. A week later, he started working on his adult high school diploma. He is working vigorously toward achieving his final credits and has even come to school on a Saturday to put in extra time.

Rules are still an occasional struggle. Jordan recently received an incident report for losing his temper in the cafeteria and yelling at a staff member. During the same week, he received a written commendation for taking the initiative to spend an hour thoroughly cleaning the men's bathroom on his dorm floor.

In his academic classes, Jordan has improved his reading by .9 (nine months) grade levels. His math score has improved by 4.1 (four years, one month). At the student awards ceremony this month, Jordan was recognized by his instructor as the Math Student of the Month. He was also awarded a \$400 scholarship for winning an off-center culinary competition that he participated in with several of his classmates.

<b>Common Characteristics</b>			
<i>Disrupted Learning</i>	<i>Impact of Family</i>	<i>Traumatic Experiences</i>	<i>Desire to Change</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Changed schools several times during elementary school due to family moves.</li> <li>-Missed large portions of school due to a devastating car accident and gang activity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Early childhood anger that he associates with the absence of his father.</li> <li>-Negative influences from his cousins.</li> <li>-Ongoing support from his mother, sister, and grandmother.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Was shot when he was eleven years old.</li> <li>-Stabbed in the face by his mother's ex-boyfriend.</li> <li>-Death of his younger brother.</li> <li>-Experienced multiple violent situations due to his gang involvement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Had a goal of returning to school to finish his high school diploma.</li> <li>-Motivated by his sister's success.</li> <li>-Stopped smoking marijuana in order to move forward with his education.</li> <li>-Wants to succeed as a way to honor his brother and grandmother.</li> </ul>

### Final Thoughts

The process of interviewing Asha, Isabel, and Jordan has profoundly impacted the way I view the students that I interact with on a daily basis. Having these brief snapshots, this look into a student's educational journey, will forever alter the way that I perceive my role as an educator. I have a heightened awareness of the life that each student has led before starting Job Corps and a new appreciation for the courage that it takes to move forward after traumatic events. My level of connectivity with the students has increased dramatically and I am better able to support and guide them on a daily basis.

As I talked with Asha, Isabel, and Jordan, their overlapping experiences moved to the forefront of our conversations. All three experienced disrupted education when they missed significant amounts of school due to life events that made it difficult to learn. As the students verbally walked through the reasons they missed so much school, it was often as if they hadn't realized the extraordinary impact of interrupted learning. Asha was occasionally hard on herself during the interview. Although she missed school due to a political uprising, she still wishes that she had done more or worked harder.

Familial impact played a large role in each student's journey. For Asha, her relationship to her family is largely positive: her mother was responsible for her early access to formal education and is constantly encouraging her to do her best in all things. Isabel's frustrations with her mother's disapproval of the Army had deep consequences; throughout her passionate interview, I wondered if her mother ever had any idea how much Isabel's Army dreams had meant to her. A stressful family life had an early impact on Jordan and his older cousins were responsible for his childhood introduction to life in a gang. All of the students cited family members when they talked about their motivation for completing the Job Corps program.

The effect of trauma is an inescapable reality for the three students. Asha and Isabel have largely reconciled the pain in their pasts and are focused on the next chapter of their lives. Jordan's wounds seem to be much deeper and have a larger impact on his day to day well-being. As I documented each student's educational history, I was constantly aware of how it ran parallel to their actual life story. In order to keep the focus on students' educational journey, I chose to omit some graphic or violent details shared by each student during the course of the interviews.

Outside of asking questions, I spoke very little during each interview. However, as my conversation with each student came to a close, I spent a few minutes paraphrasing an idea I'd come across during my research. I told the students that although we cannot change our pasts, the things that have happened to us, we can change how we view their impact on our lives (Mullet et al., 2013). This academic concept suddenly became very personal and emotional as each student considered it in the context of their own educational journey, their own desire to change. Asha, Isabel, and Jordan are determined to alter the trajectory of their lives. They are motivated by their families and by the dream of a brighter future.

In my conclusion, Chapter Five, I will discuss my connections to research, the limitations of my findings, as well as suggestions for future research and studies. Most importantly, I will examine the critical nature of school connectivity to student success.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### Project Overview

I began this project over a year ago with the goal of examining my interactions with students. I knew I was too complacent and that my interest in students had become an exercise in tracking data instead of building relationships. As I started my Capstone Project, I asked a question that would ultimately change the way I view my role as an educator: *How do the life stories of non-traditional students impact their journeys?*

I've always had a passion for stories; I love hearing how another person views the world. Freire (1970) says that dialogue, true conversation, can transform us and give us a sense of identity. Throughout the evolution of this project, I've seen my interest in stories morph into a real understanding of the impact educational narrative has on student success and engagement. Knowing where a student has come from provides a road map for planning the journey forward.

The hours I spent in conversation with Asha, Isabel, and Jordan shook me emotionally. Things I knew peripherally – that my students had tough lives and frequently interrupted educations – became stark realities as I saw them within the context of a young person's life experiences. While it simply isn't possible to thoroughly interview all of my students in the way I did during this project, going forward I plan to use an abbreviated interview template with all new students (a copy of the form is located in the appendix). My objective is to provide students with a guide to developing a link

between their past and their future. To create a space where they are able to view their lives as a story; a work in motion, an unfinished masterpiece.

As this project comes to a close, I will briefly reflect on important connections to research, discuss limitations of the findings, suggest possibilities for future studies, and talk about the critical nature of connectivity.

### Connections to Research

Muller (2012) says that by connecting past educational experiences with current classroom objectives, we can help students overcome their perceived areas of weakness. As I talked with the three students, they each identified times in their lives where things went sideways and nothing happened according to plan. The interview process allowed room to move past the *stuck story* (Mullet et. al, 2013), to thoughtfully ask students to evaluate their self-perceptions.

During our conversations, I asked students questions that challenged their old stories, their negative frameworks. Morrison (1991) describes this process as a way to help students see life beyond their past boundaries. By gently probing, I encouraged students to answer questions such as: “Then what? How did you do that? What made you want to do something different?” These simple follow-up questions mirror Mullet et. al’s (2013) strategy of conversational coaching, the act of helping students to tell their stories while reframing their personal narratives in a positive way.

It is worthwhile to note that each interview began in roughly the same way: the student sat quietly, appearing slightly nervous as I prepared the voice recorder. After the first couple of questions, however, the mood always began to shift. The students leaned forward, their voices more confident as they talked about their lives. Burk (1997) says

that personal stories have power – they cause us to become an active part of our own learning process. These real life connections are critical, according to Abrahamson (2011): “People gain a better understanding of one another using concrete examples . . .” (p. 3).

The interview process was occasionally more intense than I’d anticipated. Trauma experienced by the individual students often emphasized the differences in our educational backgrounds – the problems I faced as an elementary and high school student seemed much smaller by comparison. This lack of initial commonality makes learning about my students’ educational histories even more imperative (Guy, 1999). As I conversed with Asha, Isabel, and Jordan, I felt my world expanding. Rather than guessing at strategies, I suddenly had a much clearer vision of what each student needed. There was power in partnering, in seeking this connection.

Throughout the project, I constantly returned to Abrahamson’s (2011) research. At the beginning of each semester, he asks his students to write about themselves. Not for a meaningless assignment, not for a grade. They write in order to be known by their teacher. I see so many implications for this type of exercise as I think ahead to my future work with students. While in-depth interviews with every student in the program isn’t possible, implementing a scaled-down version of the educational biography will still allow me to connect with new students as they transition into Job Corps. Going forward, I will continue to reflect on the structured approach to classroom narrative that is suggested by Nicolas et al. (2011): respect a student’s right to non-participation, develop a sense of community, begin with low-risk activities, instructors must also be willing to share stories, and value the importance of personal stories and experiences.

The students who participated in the project blossomed after they completed their biographical interviews. All three began regularly stopping by my office to share good news or ask for assistance with solving a problem. I saw the project leap from research to reality as students' levels of motivation and engagement reached new heights.

### Limitations of Findings

Although I consider the results of my Capstone Project to be largely positive, there were definite limitations that emerged throughout the process. Due to time constraints, I had to limit the biographical interview process to three students. While I saw immense value in completing a thorough educational life history with each student, such a process would be quite difficult to duplicate on a regular basis.

Because of the nature of the project, I decided to interview students in the beginning phase of the Job Corps program – the three students had been on center for less than four months and were still getting acclimated to their vocational and academic work. Limiting educational interviews to one stage of the program meant that I only researched students as they started Job Corps. I would love to interview Asha, Isabel, and Jordan six months from now; two years from now. How have their lives and perspectives changed? Where are they on their journeys?

Due to the nature of my job, quickly building positive relationships with students comes naturally to me. This project fit my personality and passions in an authentic way. Educators wishing to replicate the project should consider their own personalities and work with their strengths. What type of interview structure will lead to the most positive interaction? Genuine connections require an honest evaluation of what works for us as educators.



### Future Research and Studies

Although there wasn't time during the interviews and observations, I often thought about the possibility of adding a project element to the interview process. Each student could be asked to create an artistic expression of their educational history. It could be a timeline, a picture, a poem, a video – any medium of the student's choice. These highly personal statements could accompany each student's individual biography. Additionally, adding a publication element could provide an expanded look at the impact of a student's story. How does narrative change when it is shared? Types of publication might include: sharing the story with other staff and students, making the story available to community members, or serving as a jumping-off point for other methods of student expression.

I've wondered what this project would look like if it were conducted over a longer period of time. Conducting follow-up interviews throughout a student's Job Corps career would perhaps highlight more significant changes in students' perspectives. I would also like to compare and contrast students at different points in their Job Corps careers. How does a student's narrative evolve as their journey progresses? What is the impact of storytelling? Does a student who is thoroughly engaged in the idea of their educational history have an advantage over one who does not?

It may also be valuable to examine the concept of student educational biographies from the perspective of multiple educators. How does understanding a student's scholastic background impact pedagogy? In this case, tracking a larger sample size of students and conducting regular teacher follow-up interviews would create a fascinating dynamic in the learning community.

### Why Connectivity is Critical

An in-depth examination of the educational journeys of non-traditional students confirms the critical nature of connectivity during the learning process. While the biographical interview process caused me to marvel at each students' grit and resilience, the real significance of each conversation was more subtle. The power was not in the story itself, but in the telling, the act of sharing. The words, once spoken, became an act of connection, a touchstone for perspective, rather than a symbol of pain.

Having the opportunity to share our stories of success reinforces that image in our minds (Clark and Rossiter, 2006). When Isabel talked about her early success in school, her face glowed with pride. Asha's memories of studying with her siblings in a crowded apartment while a war raged outside reminded her of how strong she is and how much she has overcome. When Jordan told me about the time his culinary teacher called his mother to compliment his cooking skills, the timbre of his voice changed as he recalled the deep impact of that memory.

Providing non-traditional students with the opportunity to share their stories, to process their classroom fears and reinforce positive experiences, is a powerful way to promote success on a student's educational journey.

This project has real implications for me and my students. Each week as I meet with the new students at our welcome lunch, I am going to challenge them to think of their Job Corps career not as a beginning, but as a part of their history, the next chapter in their life story. I will also share Isabel's words with them: "No matter what happens, just remember that it's not the last thing. You're not stuck. You can still move on."

## Appendices

## Appendix A: Letter of Consent

**LETTER OF CONSENT**

March 4, 2015

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ ,

I am a graduate student working on an advanced degree in education at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. As part of my class work, I plan to complete research with students who are in the beginning phases of the Job Corps program. The purpose of this letter is to ask you to participate in the project. The final project will be published and will also be available in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons.

The topic of my project is how students' life stories influence their educational journeys. I plan to interview students about their experiences with education throughout their lifetime. The interviews will be recorded and will last for one to two hours. The interview questions will be given to you ahead of time. Besides the interviews, I will also look at things like TABE test results as well as other classroom information. Your case notes, incident reports, and, if applicable, IEP, will also be reviewed. A short classroom observation will also take place following the interview. After completing the project, I will share the information in a report.

There is little risk if you choose to be interviewed. All results will be confidential and anonymous. All participants will be given a different name to protect their privacy. The interviews will be conducted at a place and time that work well for you. The interview recordings will be destroyed after completion of my study.

Participation in the interview is your choice, and, at any time, you may choose not to be interviewed or to have your interview content deleted from the capstone with no consequences. You will not receive any payment as a result of participating in this study, and your student standing will not be changed.

I have received approval from the School of Education at Hamline University, our Center Director, Dave MacKenzie, and the Job Corps Regional Office to conduct this study. My project might be included in an article in a professional journal or a session at a professional conference. At all times, your identity and participation in this study will be confidential.

If you agree to participate, keep this page. Fill out the agreement to participate on page two and return it to my office no later than March 9, 2015. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Sincerely,  
Janna Graham

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

### **Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview**

*Keep this full page for your records.*

I have received the letter about your research study. I understand that you will be talking to Job Corps students to learn about how their life stories impact their educational journeys. I understand that being interviewed has very low risk for me, that my identity will not be shared with others, that I will not receive any payment for participating in the study, and that I may stop the interview part of the project at any time without any problems.

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Signature

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Date

## Appendix B: Getting Started: Thinking About Your Experiences

<b>Getting Started: Thinking About Your Experiences</b>	
<p>What were you doing before you came to Job Corps?</p> <p>Give as many details as you'd like about your life and school experiences.</p>	<p><i>Your thoughts:</i></p>
<p>What are you doing at Job Corps?</p> <p>What have you accomplished so far?</p>	<p><i>Your thoughts:</i></p>
<p>What are your plans for the future?</p> <p>Where do you see yourself one year from now?</p> <p>Five years from now?</p>	<p><i>Your thoughts:</i></p>



## Appendix C: The Educational Life Story Project: Interview Questions

**The Educational Life Story Project: Interview Questions**

1. What are your first memories of learning?
2. What was school like when you were very young?
3. What role did your family play in your education?
4. What challenges did you face when it came to being successful in school?
5. Who were your mentors? Who really encouraged you and caused you to want to do your best?
6. Was there a time when you felt really good about yourself as a learner?
7. What led you to Job Corps?
8. Where do you see yourself one year from now? Five years from now?

## Appendix D: Your Educational Journey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Trade: \_\_\_\_\_

## Your Educational Journey

Tell your story by answering each statement with complete sentences.

*Example: The most important thing I learned as a child . . .* When I was a little girl, I watched my mother treat everyone that she met with kindness and respect – she even carried food in her car to give to homeless people! Her actions taught me that it is important to be kind to everyone.

*Where were you born? What is your family like?*

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*The most important thing I learned as a child . . .*

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*This is my first memory of going to school . . .*

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*Describe a time when it was difficult for you to go to school . . .*

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*Talk about a time in your life when you felt very successful . . .*

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*Who has been the most important teacher in your life?*

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*What are your personal goals for the next two years?*

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*One thing about you that people would be surprised to know . . .*

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