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Factors of Persistence in Multilingual ABE Secondary Credential Participants

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Factors of Persistence in Multilingual ABE Secondary Credential Participants

by

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A capstone thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

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DEDICATION

My paper is a dedication to the adult immigrants who have come into my life and shared a bit of themselves. Your hearts are gold; your stories and goals are inspiring.
My job is a pleasure because of you.

Also, to Scott, who has always supported my goals.
Figuratively and literally,
showing up in all conditions
ringing a cowbell.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Chapter Overview

While working with one of my multilingual students as she prepared for her goal of attending college, we started discussing her journey. Though she has been a student of mine off and on for several years, she came to my site after attending several others, and little was known about her journey before her time with me. Immigrating to the United States in her early teens, she was unable to complete high school when the need to find employment took priority. Driven by a desire to complete her education, in her early twenties she found adult basic education (ABE) and one very supportive instructor who got her on the path to passing the General Education Development (GED[®]) tests..

Listening to her recount her struggles with completing this in her second language strengthened my admiration for her achievements. I was left wondering why she has stayed with her goals despite the demands of parenthood, moving, and family and employment issues through the years while other multilinguals faced with similar situations frequently leave ABE programs. Inspired by what she was able to do and how she feels about her accomplishments, I want to gain better understanding of how to help others to achieve similar goals.

In my introductory chapter, I explain the events that led me to work in ABE and eventually to the topic of persistence in multilinguals wanting to complete a secondary credential such as the GED or diploma through ABE. While pursuing a secondary credential is a daunting task for many ABE participants, those doing so in English when it is not their first language have an even harder time seeing the goal through to the end.

As the population of immigrants and refugees grows and as these populations branch out to new areas, it is important for ABE programs and instructors who serve these learners to understand the unique challenges that come with attempting to earn a credential in a second language. More importantly, it is necessary to look to those who have succeeded to see what events and which people encouraged their persistence in these challenging goals. For reasons that will be discussed in the following pages, I decided to research the following: *What factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?*

My History in ABE

The word “stumbled” is what I most often use to describe how I found adult basic education. I was not looking for it, but there it was, and there was no ignoring it. Prior to walking past an ABE room while in a government building, I had never heard about it—not even during teacher education classes in college. That day, I looked at the signs on the door and the posters on the walls and was immediately intrigued. The room felt welcoming in a way I could not explain.

Not long after, realizing that I was not meant to be a stay-at-home mom after leaving middle and high school English language arts teaching to be more available to my family, I was applying for any part-time teaching position I could find. A position as a long-term substitute for a GED preparation program was offered to me—at the same school I had noticed on the occasion mentioned above, and I was hooked. I did not know when I accepted the position that a significant number of the GED students were non-native English speakers preparing for the GED. ABE brought the world to me in the

form of immigrants from far and wide. And so, without knowing it, I became a teacher of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL).

While teaching students at this higher level of English proficiency was not far from my English language arts license, I had no formal TESOL training. However, Minnesota has fantastic professional development opportunities for ABE instructors, and I soon started to gather some TESOL tools, which I credit with laying an important foundation in teaching adult English language learners (ELLs). Some will say that to teach ELLs without the training is a disservice to the learners, and I will not dispute the truth in that in some respects. In fact it will come up in chapter two; however, in a program where funding is significantly lower per student than the K-12 system, ABE teachers are often asked to wear many hats and to serve our students to the best of our abilities. And honestly, we love it. ABE teachers express job satisfaction more than any other group of educators I know. Sure, we are traditionally paid less than teachers with the same credentials, and yes, we often work nights and split shifts, but the students we get to work with and the appreciation they have for us is unmet elsewhere in education.

I met an array of ABE participants, but the ELLs working on GED[®] preparation really intrigued me. Once a week, I taught a group of mixed-level (GED and pre-GED) students how to write the required essay. Here is where I learned to really appreciate those who were trying to do this in English when it was not their first language. Their desire to master the language and write a passing essay was inspirational. We had insightful discussions on the language. Furthermore, working in ABE allowed me to do something that I did not have time to do while teaching 125 or more high school students

daily: discuss and meaningfully conference over their writing. Those ELLs impressed me with their questions and showed me that there was a lot for this English teacher to learn.

Gratefully, that initial long-term substitute job led to another and eventually to a permanent position, where I have been employed for 15 years. I am challenged to be a “one-room schoolhouse” ABE instructor. This means that with only three staff members and an ever-evolving student population, I am called upon to be an adult diploma teacher, a GED® prep instructor, and an ESL teacher on any given day. Through the years, this has required me to work with all levels of ELLs, which finally led to the decision to pursue my Master’s Degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages. One thing I have greatly appreciated in my time at Hamline University is the ability to tailor my projects and papers to where my interests reside. When it was time to design my thesis, I came back to where I had started: non-native speakers of English who are pursuing their GED.

Multilinguals Seeking a Secondary Credential

Why this population with this goal? The years have shown me how difficult this can be for these students, who I will refer to as “multilinguals” moving forward in respect of their proficiency in at least two languages by the time they are taking on this goal. I know of so many who never earned their GED or diploma because of the difficulty of this task and of the many who stop out but keep coming back. The desire to complete does not seem to go away. Earning a secondary credential will improve their employability, their income, their lives, and the lives of their families. World Education (n.d.) cited high school noncompleters as nearly twice as likely to be unemployed and highlights a \$10,000 annual increase in workers with a high school diploma versus those without in data from 2017. We know that pay and employment opportunities increase with a

diploma. Opportunities to have job satisfaction come along with that as does potential advancement and knowing that when an opportunity comes along, they will be qualified. Many of these students also hope to go on to college. One of ABE's primary goals is to help transition learners to work, training, or college, and, thus, knowing more about specifically assisting multilinguals helps ABE programs, the students, and society as a whole.

The common history of some sort of educational inequity strikes me deeply. I have heard story after story of things that went wrong, of missed opportunities and of having to choose sustaining themselves and their families in the present over preparing for a better future. A youth putting aside, or being forced to put aside, their education is more common than many realize. Now these individuals are trying to take on a goal for which they are in many ways underprepared. We can clearly see this in the refugees and immigrants whose home countries did them a disservice by not providing an education or whose socioeconomic systems created a world where a child had to go to work to help support the family. However, these are not the only multilinguals trying to earn a GED or diploma. As a nation, we need to also recognize the inequities of those students who attended school in our country and were underserved. This includes those who immigrated as middle or high school students whose English never progressed enough for them to graduate and those who had to withdraw due to circumstances such as needing to get a job. Increasingly, these students are finding their way to programs like mine.

ABE does not track this specific group closely. When trying to find information on the number of non-native English speakers who earned a GED or diploma, I could find nothing. Yes, there is data on the ESL population in ABE, but none focusing on

those pursuing a secondary credential. There are two separate groups of ABE participants represented in the data collected: those enrolled in ESL courses who are learning English as an additional language and those who are attending ABE for all other reasons. What about those multilinguals who learned English as an additional language and now want a secondary credential? They are grouped in with all other ABE participants working on secondary credentials despite unique circumstances as far as their English language development is concerned.

Earning a high school credential impacts individuals in numerous ways. The stigma of not graduating cannot be ignored. Often noncompleters live their adult lives feeling less worthy than those who finished school. Over the years, I have learned that it is something that many do not admit—a little shadow tucked away hoping that it goes unnoticed. There is confidence gained in completing this goal as well as applicable skills gained through the process. As one student who inspired this research told me, realizing that she was able to help her children with their homework was one way she measured her progress.

From Retention to Persistence

This study initially started with a desire to learn more about keeping participants in ABE programs. What some might label “retention”. Retention is program-centered, hoping to keep students because funding can be based on students’ hours within programs. Once I realized the need to be learner-centered, I started looking more in depth into persistence, the act of staying in programs or engaging in self-study in order for individual learners to meet their goals (Comings, 2007; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). First of all, this shift means getting learners to their goals, rather than keeping them in seats in

ABE classrooms; it is doing what is in their best interests. Secondly, there is shared responsibility when looking into persistence. Programs can do more and be better, but there are also takeaways for learners that are applicable to other goals in their lives.

Researching persistence, I realized how widely it had been studied. Nash and Kallenbach's 2009 study on ABE participant persistence, *Making it Worth the Stay*, is an extensive look at what ABE programs can do to facilitate learner persistence. There is a great deal that a program can implement based on its findings. There were studies on ESL persistence, and I realized that a great deal of what Dörnyei (1998) wrote in *Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning* applied to English language learners of all levels in ABE programs. There was research centering on low-level literacy students. There were studies on the persistence of pre-GED and GED students. Comings et al. especially provided insight on this group with their studies *Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes* (1999) and *Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports* (2000). Where though, could I learn more about my multilingual GED and adult diploma population? There is some relevant work on English learners in community college (Ouellette-Schramm, 2019, in press a, in press b). However, this question has been left, to a great extent, unanswered, and it is where I pick up my study.

I do not mean to imply that ABE has overlooked this population and treated them the same as native-speaking students. No, ABE knows about these students. Some ABE programs focus on them, but when it came to finding research on helping them persist, nothing was turning up. Where can we go to learn more about how to help these specific multilinguals? There were two helpful places to look. One was at those ESL populations in community colleges who are placed in non-credit ESL classes and also have low

persistence rates. The second was to look at literature on emergent bilingual high school students (often classified as long-term ELLs) such as the work by Menken et al. (2012). These students face many of the same struggles of multilinguals in ABE GED and diploma programs. In fact, these students often *become* the multilinguals in ABE GED and diploma programs. It may be that their academic English is not at an advanced level for the reading and coursework of these programs. Furthermore, for many their first languages also fall beneath proficiency levels needed for high school-level work. Therefore, it is often not just an issue of language proficiency, but also of critical thinking skills needed in the upper grades of the K-12 system.

Deciding to put learners' persistence in the spotlight rather than program retention still helps ABE programs. Students who feel like they are making progress toward their goals are more likely to stay. If we want to retain the learners, we need to be meeting their needs and assisting them in the ways that best support their goal attainment.

Factors of Persistence, Not Barriers

Focusing on persistence in ABE programs, I realized there were two perspectives. I could question the barriers to persisting: What gets in the way? Why do learners stop attending? Why does ABE have such a high level of attrition? All of these are great questions for programs to consider, but given how little I was finding on this specific population with this specific goal, I was drawn to determining what was going right for the learners. What kept them coming? What did programs and teachers do to encourage them?

Focusing on factors that promote persistence in the general ABE population, I realized that these supports overlapped throughout the existing research and decided to

use what Reynolds and Johnson (2014) suggested at the end of their study by employing the framework of the four pillars of support as identified by Thompson and Cuseo (2012). These pillars are the individual, family, institutional and community factors present in learners' various situations. While Reynolds and Johnson used the pillars to identify factors of persistence in a general group of ABE students, they suggested using the framework among different groups, and I believe it should be used to focus on multilinguals working on secondary credential completion in ABE.

Because I have learned so much from multilingual ABE participants throughout the years through conversations, interviewing a segment of this population as part of a retrospective case study seemed like the natural direction for my study to take. I wanted to capture their unique perspectives from those who had accomplished their credentials. Little research focuses on what aids multilingual ABE students to persist in secondary credential programs. The focus of this paper is to hear from multilinguals about their own persistence in order to determine what factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs.

Summary

This chapter has outlined how my time spent working with multilingual ABE participants pursuing secondary credentials has demonstrated both the importance and the challenges of their goals. I have established that more can be done to help this specific group of ABE participants persist in their education and why focusing on factors of persistence seems like the best place to start. I established that this topic deserves attention because studies have neglected to consider the persistence of this specific group of ABE participants despite a great deal of research on ABE persistence in general. My

reasoning for a retrospective case study involving interviews of multilinguals who have achieved their secondary credential through ABE programming has been shared.

The next chapter is a literature review examining the question *What factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?* by exploring four subsections: ABE programs and adult secondary credentials, adult English language learners and multilinguals, persistence and its barriers, and factors of persistence.

Chapter three covers the methodology of my retrospective case study of three multilinguals who completed the GED through ABE programs in Minnesota. This includes qualitative data gathered by their ABE programs, in addition to questionnaires and interviews to capture their unique experiences in order to determine which factors of persistence were present in their lives.

Next, chapter four will provide the results of the quantitative and qualitative data collected through the study and the factors of persistence that were identified in the subjects through these methods.

Finally, chapter five offers significant findings from the study as well as the major learning that took place for the researcher. The limitations of the study as well as the possibilities for further research will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will highlight the benefits to the field of adult basic education for multilinguals pursuing their secondary credentials.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Chapter Overview

Across the United States in a variety of adult basic education (ABE) programs from large, urban programs to tiny, rural “one-room schoolhouses”, multilingual students are attempting to earn their secondary credentials. Some of these students are immigrants who never attended school in this country, while others may be high school noncompleters formally enrolled in K-12 education in the United States. Additionally, some are immigrants who earned high school diplomas and potentially post-secondary certifications and degrees but have trouble either supplying documentation or having those credentials recognized in the United States. With a wealth of varied experiences and circumstances, these students have two things in common: trying to pass a high school equivalency (HSE) exam or earn an adult diploma and doing so in English. Because of the level of proficiency in English these individuals have achieved, this paper refers to them as multilinguals rather than English language learners (ELLs). The multilingual students with this goal are unique and underrepresented in the literature on persistence.

This chapter covers literature pertaining to four main topics relating to persistence of multilinguals in ABE secondary credential programs. The first is ABE programs and secondary credential completion options in ABE. The second section will focus on adult ELLs in general as well as those who have reached a multilingual level of proficiency. Then the definition of persistence and barriers to persistence for ABE participants will also be addressed. Finally, literature discussing factors that have been proven to aid

persistence in ABE programming will be covered, and the danger of focusing on noncognitive traits to too great an extent and ignoring the inequities of some multilinguals' educational and personal backgrounds will be highlighted. Persistence in ABE programming is a known issue for multiple reasons and the research on it spans decades. Much of that research addresses the barriers that cause students to stop attending programming. However, there is a growing collection of literature that identifies possible factors for persistence. These studies shed light on actions that learners, instructors and programs can take to foster goal completion in ABE programs. Because I want to understand how ABE can better help multilingual students reach their goals, my research focused on understanding the following: *what factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?*

ABE Programs and Adult Secondary Credentials

It is important to have a general understanding of ABE programs and their purposes and challenges before focusing on the secondary completion opportunities available to multilingual participants. The following two subsections will discuss the background needed in order to fully understand this research question.

Adult Basic Education Background

The purpose of adult basic education (ABE) is to serve learners who have less than high school-level mastery in basic educational skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics or lack a high school diploma. Statistics clearly demonstrate a need for ABE (Mellard et al., 2012; Minnesota Adult Basic Education, n.d.; The National Reporting System for Adult Education, n.d.; Tighe et al., 2013; World Education, n.d.). The nation has over 40 million adults with low literacy, with and without a high school diploma or

equivalent. An average of two million students leave high school before completing their diploma annually (World Education, n.d.). Another group qualifying for ABE services are English language learners (ELL). There are close to 20 million adults with limited English proficiency in the United States (Kennedy & Walters, 2013; World Education, n.d.). Eligibility can vary by state, especially in regard to age, which is usually tied to when a student can withdraw from the K-12 system. For example, learners are eligible for adult basic education in Minnesota if they are at least 17 years old and are neither enrolled nor required to be enrolled in K-12 education. While the number of potential ABE students is expansive, ABE actually serves about 1.5 million people in America each year. (Mellard et al., 2012; The National Reporting System for Adult Education, n.d.; Tighe et al, 2013; World Education, n.d.). According to Minnesota Adult Basic Education (n.d.), the state served 56,000 learners in 2019-20. Accordingly, with these three groups of learners, ABE programs can be differentiated into three types: ABE, covering basic skills instruction; adult secondary education (ASE), for those working on completing high school or the equivalent; and English as a second language (ESL) programs, ranging from beginning English learners to more proficient ELLs with long-term goals such as English fluency and college entrance. In 2017-18 the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) found 40% of participants were ABE students, 11% were ASE and 49% were ESL. Of the students enrolled in Minnesota ABE programs May 1, 2017, through April 30, 2018, 47% were ELLs. “ABE” will be used when discussing any combination of these three programs.

ABE has always had its view on the big picture: if literacy and education can improve individual workers' situations, the economy of the nation as a whole will benefit.

ABE traces its roots as a federally-funded service to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 which established the goal of increasing the ability of all to read and write English and was connected to President Johnson's "war on poverty" (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Hughes & Knighten, 2020). Then, in 1966 the Adult Education Act passed. In both acts, literacy's impact on the economy was the focus (Hughes & Knighten, 2020). In 1999, the NRS began in response to the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 with the purpose of collecting quantitative data on ABE participants to measure demonstrable outcomes for funding purposes (Hughes & Knighten, 2020; Tighe et al., 2013). It is here that we see that a connection between academic performance on standardized tests may be tied to funding in some states. The 2010s brought about emphasis on transitioning ABE students to jobs, training or college (Hughes & Knighten, 2020). This ties their goals again into improving income and employment for ABE learners, and therefore, has an overall impact on the U.S. economy. However, as Hughes and Knighten (2020) and Tighe et al. (2013) mentioned, the goals of these learners are complex and not always tied to work or moving on to post-secondary education, which can cause problems when it comes to tracking student success.

ABE programs are overseen by several types of agencies (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; The National Reporting System for Adult Education, n.d.). Over half are administered through local school districts. About a quarter are via community-based organizations, and the remaining quarter is a combination of correctional facilities, community colleges and other institutions (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; The National Reporting System for Adult Education, n.d.).

Issues in ABE. It is clear that ABE offers a necessary educational option to

populations of learners in need. While the intentions of these programs are noble, they can be plagued with issues often stemming from being underfunded and under researched (Snell, 2013; Tighe et al., 2013). Other common criticisms are the high attrition rates and lack of level gains in ABE learners (Kennedy & Walters, 2013; Kerka, 2005). Finally, some researchers have specifically targeted the ESL programs delivered by ABE and found them problematic (Kennedy & Walters, 2013; Snell, 2013). Attention will be given to two of the biggest issues, how ABE is funded and staffed. Additionally, how ESL is delivered through ABE will be covered because of its significance to the research topic.

Funding. It is widely argued that one of ABE's biggest issues is funding (Schalge & Soga, 2008; Snell, 2013; Tighe et al., 2013; World Education, n.d.). Information from 2017 presented by World Education (n.d.) asserted the disparity in ABE funding compared to K-12. The national average of per-pupil funding nationally was over \$13,800 for students in K-12 while it was only about \$1,000 for ABE participants (World Education, n.d.). ABE can be funded both nationally and by individual states. Data from 2010 on Minnesota's ABE funding indicates that of the nearly \$49.5 million granted to ABE programming, only 12% was federal dollars; the remainder came from the state. With limited federal funding, program quality can vary state by state depending on local contributions.

In Minnesota, this funding is also based on the prior year's participant attendance. This is problematic because allocation is determined by total hours attended by all students (Schalge & Soga, 2008). This means that many programs have open enrollment, allowing new or returning students to begin at any time to gather more contact hours for the program; however, some research has indicated that this practice leads to problems in

programs (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Schalge & Soga, 2008). This is attributed to the fact that it is more difficult to plan curriculum with an ever-changing class population. As Schlage and Soga found, many teachers would prefer managed enrollment in order to better serve learners, but they also recognize the need for garnering student contact hours for funding purposes. As one interviewed teacher said, “Hours mean money” (p. 157).

Staffing. Another criticism of ABE is related to staffing. This is tied to both funding as well as requirements for teachers (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Snell, 2013; Tighe et al., 2013). Due in part to funding constraints, up to 40% of the nation's ABE instructors are part-time, and 43% are volunteers (Tighe et al., 2013). Lower funding also translates to lower pay for instructors, less money for professional development and high staff turnover (Snell, 2013; Tighe et al., 2013). Tighe et al. maintained that lack of professional development for ABE teachers at the national level is a detriment to ABE programming in general, and programs would be more effective with more resources going into professional development. The Center for Applied Linguistics (2010) agreed that professional development is an important factor in support of ABE staff due to changes in immigration patterns and demographics of ABE participants.

In addition to the disparity in funding for ABE programs leading to teachers leaving in order to make better wages, there are inconsistencies in ABE educators that also attract criticism (Snell, 2013; Tighe, 2013). The requirements for ABE teachers vary by state, but a closer look at Minnesota can highlight some of the issues. While there is a specific ABE teaching license, there are few of these programs offered at universities, nor do many people know of ABE when they decide to enter the field of education. Therefore, in order to have sufficient ABE teachers, Minnesota and other states have

determined that ABE teachers can have a K-12 teaching license in any area. They are not required to have training in teaching adults, nor are those teaching ESL required to have an ESL license, though some programs may require it. Thankfully, the state of Minnesota offers extensive professional development to ABE instructors to help with gaps in areas like teaching adults and instructing ELL populations.

English Language Instruction in ABE Programs. A final criticism to be discussed is that directed specifically at ESL within ABE. Because of the lack of specific licensure mentioned as a staffing issue, Snell (2013) has claimed that there is far too little knowledge of second language acquisition in the instructors and volunteers in ABE's ESL programs. Therefore, she believes students would be better served if states allowed those without teaching licenses but with teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) certification to be employed in these programs. TESOL certified instructors could be effective instructors because they have the language acquisition and teaching knowledge that many K-12 licensed teachers might not. Snell (2013) stated that adult ESL programs through ABE have lower status when compared to K-12 and college ESL programs. In addition, Kennedy and Walters (2013) asserted that government-run ESL programs are "broken" (p. 3). They pointed to 2007 statistics that showed 29% of participants leaving before advancing in level and another 32% who stayed but did not make level gains that year. It appears that multilinguals enrolled in secondary completion programs in ABE may be unlikely to work with teachers who have specific knowledge and training in serving their unique needs.

Adult Secondary Credential Completion Programs

One portion of what is covered by the ABE umbrella is adult secondary education

(ASE). Students who did not complete high school can work on completing an adult high school diploma or passing a high school equivalency (HSE) exam. In the United States, there are three such exams: the General Education Development test (GED[®]), the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET[®]), and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC[™]). Individual states determine which exams they will offer. Currently, Minnesota offers the GED and has approved the use of the HiSET, which will be offered soon. In addition to high school equivalency exams, ABE programs may offer a number of diploma completion options. In Minnesota, adults can enroll in a credit completion program in which they receive a high school diploma from a local school district after completing required coursework and graduation assessments. Another option is the Standard High School Diploma, a competency-based high school diploma which is issued by the Minnesota Department of Education. Eligibility for each program differs, but in Minnesota, students must demonstrate academic readiness on one of the accepted standardized tests for ABE (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013).

The Significance of Earning a High School Credential. High school completion can be life-altering. It is well-understood that the average incomes of high school graduates are more than those of noncompleters. In 2018, high school completers over the age of 25 with no post secondary education earned an average of \$730 a week nationally while noncompleters made \$553 (Sugarman, 2019). When the demographics are explored, it is noticed that White noncompleters' weekly incomes average between \$21 to \$78 more than Black, Asian and Hispanic noncompleters. Aside from this wage gap, historically underserved populations, which includes English learners, are more likely to leave high school before completion (Sugarman, 2019). While 9% of U.S.-born

adults 25 and older do not have a high school credential, this number climbs to 29% in foreign-born adults. These numbers make it clear that there is a significant need to help adults who need to obtain a secondary credential to improve their circumstances. It is also clear that a great many of those affected by a lack of diploma are non-native English speakers. However, the NRS, which collects demographic information on ABE participants, does not keep data to show the number of participants who are working on adult secondary completion credentials and who have learned English as a second or additional language. Since beginning my research, the Minnesota ABE database has added a new report in which I can see the number of HSE and diploma recipients within a given date range who listed a first language other than English or were not born in the United States from my site or others within my consortium. However, this still does not track how many students wanted to earn a secondary completion credential but did not.

Eligibility. As stated in the 2021-2022 Assessment Policy (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021), ABE programs are required to assess all students upon entry. Students wishing to complete their diplomas who enter ABE programs with low basic skills or English proficiency should be directed into another ABE program or class to build those skills prior to entering a diploma program. It does not matter if they once attended high school in the United States or not; placement is determined by reading level. Two standardized reading assessments are approved to determine eligibility: Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) Greater Opportunities for Adult Learning Success (GOALS) or Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE). On both the CASAS GOALS and TABE reading assessments, participants must score at about a fifth grade reading level which falls within educational functioning level (EFL) three and

is categorized as Low Intermediate Basic Education.

For a speaker of English as a first language, falling below this level might mean placement into reading classes or independent study for reading skills and strategies. Those who have learned English as an additional language may be similarly placed, or they might be placed in an ESL class. The Adult Diploma Policy of Minnesota ABE (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013) states that this is not intended to be a limiting factor but, rather, a way to avoid “misleading and unethical” expectations on the amount of time it may take the student to complete the diploma (p. 3). Once students can achieve the required minimum score on an approved assessment, they would be able to begin their diploma work.

On the other hand, eligibility to join HSE preparation programs is an area of more ambiguity and is usually determined by individual programs. Students are assessed on reading, language and/or mathematics skills and placed into appropriate classes. Again, depending on the ABE program, lower-scoring students might be placed into reading classes, or they may be put into an ESL class to increase English proficiency. Some sites are able to place students whose basic skills are low into programming sometimes labeled something similar to “pre-GED” so that students might work on lower skills while getting some GED content. In the United States, there are few options for non-native English speakers to demonstrate high school mastery in their home language. The TASC™ exam is only available in English while the GED and HiSET offer a Spanish version. Deciding to test in Spanish depends on why the student wants the HSE and whether or not they need to demonstrate those skills in English.

This general overview of secondary credential completion for adults

through ABE is meant to lay a foundation for understanding both the offerings and the limitations of these options. Often native and non-native English speakers face a longer journey to completion than they realize when they enter a program and assessments reveal that they may need to work on their skills longer than they anticipated. Smaller sites may not be able to offer specialized classes for all learners in all situations. For example, often a multilingual student wanting to earn a diploma but scoring low on entry assessments has no other place to go than an ESL class. Other times they may be placed in a mixed class of native and non-native English speakers that focuses on content, when what they really need is work on academic-level English. Either scenario might not be what fits their unique needs.

This section has provided background on ABE in the United States as well as an overview of its potential and actual participants. The three subgroups of ABE, ASE and ESL were discussed, and common criticisms of ABE were mentioned. Adult diploma and HSE programs were explained as well as eligibility for both. While native and non-native English speakers can pursue a secondary credential through ABE programs, the NRS's lack of data pinpointing how many of those students are multilingual demonstrates that this group may be lost among native speakers with the same goal. Additionally, because some ABE staff may have little knowledge about working with adult ELLs, it is important for programs to understand the unique situations of multilinguals trying to earn a high school credential.

These are the participants that the next section will focus on. First, a look at the number of immigrants in the United States will demonstrate the growing need to serve them in ABE programs. Then a general look at second language acquisition is needed to

understand what these individuals encounter as they adapt to life in the monolingual United States. Next, two subgroups of ABE's multilingual populations hoping to complete a secondary credential are discussed: those who at some point have and have not attended school in the U.S. K-12 system.

Adult English Language Learners and Multilinguals

Learning or increasing proficiency in a second language as an adult can be a challenge. With a growing percentage of the nation's population learning English as an additional language, it is important to understand more about those who may find themselves both in ABE's ESL classes as well as multilinguals working on a secondary credential.

Immigration and English Proficiency in the United States

The number of non-native English speakers in the nation is expanding. The percentage of foreign-born members of the population of the United States has been steadily increasing over the past five decades (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). Recent data demonstrates this increase. In 2000, foreign-born residents made up 10.4% of the U.S. population; in 2006 this number increased to 12.5%. Additionally, 2018 data has this number at 13.7 % (Budiman, 2020). English proficiency among these immigrants varies. Some may have a dialect other than American English as their first language. Of those who do not speak English as a first language, some may have studied English as a foreign language before immigrating, while others came to the United States of America with no English knowledge. Pew Research Center results from 2018 indicated that 53% of immigrants aged five and older consider themselves proficient in English (as cited in Budiman, 2020). After five years, 57% of those surveyed rate themselves as

English-proficient. Therefore, a significant number of immigrants consider their English skills less than proficient indicating a need for English language classes.

Non-native English speaking adults found in ABE programs reflect diverse English language backgrounds. Whether they learned English in their home countries to some extent or not, adult immigrants and refugees are participants in English language classes through ABE. Further, their education histories in general also vary a great deal. Some students will have earned college degrees in their home countries while others will have little formal education at all (Kennedy & Walters, 2013). Some participants may also have attended some amount of school in the U.S. K-12 system. Certainly, the variety of English language learners in ABE classrooms can challenge instructors; for this reason, attention needs to be given to gaining proficiency in an additional language as an adult learner. While theories vary in regard to the level of difficulty for an adult to become proficient, there is little dispute that adults contend with situations and experiences that can make language acquisition a challenge.

Adult Second Language Acquisition

It is commonly accepted that those attempting to acquire a second language as adults face a challenge. This is said to be significantly affected by the age at which the learner first begins to learn the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Parrish, 2019). Immigrant children often achieve native-like fluency in English while their parents fall below this level (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Research indicates that there can be biological and situational reasons for decreased proficiency in adult language learners.

Critical Period Hypothesis. The notion that individuals who began learning an additional language as an adult have limits to their proficiency in that language is most

often tied to the critical period hypothesis, the idea that language development happens more innately in a period that begins at birth and ends before puberty (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Parrish, 2019). Some aspects of second language development are influenced by age more than others. For example, it is widely agreed that native-like pronunciation is more difficult to achieve the older the learner is when beginning to learn the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Many studies back up the idea that second language proficiency is most closely linked to age at which acquisition begins. Patkowski (1980, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013) studied features of second language proficiency other than pronunciation and noted that age at immigration predicted success more than other factors. Johnson and Newport (1989, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013) focused on morphology and syntax and also found that age of arrival in the United States had the biggest impact on participants' scores on the assessment given. In 2000, DeKeyser replicated Johnson and Newport's study with similar findings (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

However, not all research supports the critical period hypothesis. Some studies in which adults and children have similar language learning circumstances have indicated that adults may be more efficient than younger learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). They use metalinguistic knowledge and problem-solving skills to aid their learning in ways children do not. Parrish (2019) drew attention to an adult learner's literacy and learning experiences in the first language as assets to second language acquisition. Learners who begin as adolescents and achieve higher proficiency than those who began in primary school raise questions about the accuracy of the critical period hypothesis as well (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). It has also been noticed that adults may learn the early

stages of a second language faster than children (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Singleton & Ryan, 2004, as cited in Parrish, 2019). In the Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle study, when assessed less than a year after beginning to learn Dutch as a second language in the Netherlands, adolescents were the most successful group, followed by adults; children fell into the lowest achieving group (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 96). All of this illuminates the fact that each individual's second language learning circumstances are different, and there is no one predictor of how they will learn the language or to what level of proficiency.

Situational Barriers to Second Language Acquisition. Whether one does or does not acquiesce to this idea of a critical time for second language acquisition as a possible biological reason for lack of proficiency for adult language learners, there are certainly circumstantial reasons why they may have a harder time with second language acquisition (Parrish, 2019). Language proficiency at any age takes many hours to see improvement (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Snell, 2013). Children who immigrate at a young age or who are born in the United States to immigrant parents typically have the benefit of much more exposure to the English language than their parents. Even those who immigrate after puberty but are in middle or high school are likely to be exposed to a great deal more English than their older relatives.

Additionally, Lightbown and Spada (2013) also believed that the situations in which adults must use English are more complex, and they often need to express more complicated ideas while children are not expected to speak fluently from the beginning. The pressure on adults to master English after immigrating to the United States is said to

create frustration, embarrassment and other negative feelings that could affect their motivation (p. 93).

Nevertheless, the fact that some adult learners of English as an additional language reach high levels of proficiency cannot be ignored. Lightbown and Spada (2013) discussed a learner's goals and motivation as well as aptitude for language learning and the situations and conditions in which they learn. (p. 97). Opportunities for interaction and the amount of adequate input in English are other integral aspects of acquisition for adults (Parrish, 2019). Again, it is clear that individuals each have varying degrees of support for second language acquisition.

This synopsis of adult second or additional language acquisition demonstrates that whether barriers to proficiency are caused by science or by circumstance, there are considerations unique to adults attempting to reach the higher levels of language skills. It is time to turn attention to those adult language learners who utilize ABE services. The following section will move from ABE's ELLs in general to the more specific group of multilingual participants hoping to earn a secondary credential.

Adult English Learners in ABE

Information from the NRS (n.d.) claimed that nearly 50% of ABE participants are English learners. It is clear that ABE provides an important bridge to American culture and society through English language classes for many immigrants and refugees. However, learners enter with a variety of goals (Mellard et al., 2012). ELLs have many reasons for wanting to improve their English language skills including increasing the likelihood of being employed or earning increased pay. Family reasons are at the forefront for many, whether being able to help children with schoolwork or helping their

family members in their home countries. Mellard et al. (2012) found that programs and instructors need to be better at fully understanding learners' goals. The goals and motivations of individual learners may not coordinate with the main goals collected by the NRS. This is based on the number of students, especially at lower educational function levels (EFLs) who cited "another reason" for why they enrolled in ABE (p. 534). In addition, it is widely agreed that data on the progress of participants enrolled in ESL programs is lacking or restricted to scores on standardized tests (Kennedy & Walters, 2013; Snell 2013). Often these students make gains in skills that cannot be measured on a test such as gaining confidence or comfort in their ability to communicate in English.

Besides a lack of full awareness of the reasons why an individual's English proficiency is important and desired, when discussing adult ELLs in ABE programming, most state and federal data will reflect only those in ESL courses as English language learners. One reason is because there are many variations in the ways programs assess participants upon enrollment with a choice of assessments to be used. If participants enter the program with a secondary credential as a goal, they may never be in ESL programs, though their reading may start out at elementary levels. They might be classified as ABE or ASE rather than ESL depending on the assessment they are given and EFL of their score. Therefore, they may not be tracked as ELLs. These are a few reasons why it is difficult to understand just how many ABE participants are truly adult English learners. To limit participants to the three categories of ABE, ASE, and ESL, and assume that they want only to improve their English language or basic skills or to obtain a secondary credential is to ignore the intricacies of what those general goals mean. Therefore, it is difficult to track how many ELLs want to earn a high school credential when they are

able. It is also problematic to determine how many ABE participants enrolled in ASE programs are, in fact, non-native English speakers. Once they are assessed on an assessment such as the TABE or CASAS GOALS, they are tracked in the ABE EFLs the same as native speakers of English, and the groups cannot be separated. Therefore, data specific to multilinguals pursuing secondary completion in ABE is rare, despite unique needs of this portion of ASE participants.

What is known about the participants who are pursuing a secondary credential through ABE who have learned English as an additional language is that they can fall into two categories: those who never attended school in the United States' K-12 system and those who have. The following sections will discuss each group.

Participants Who Have Not Attended School in the U.S. K-12 System. The same range of English language background previously mentioned in America's immigrants can be found in ABE program participants. They could be immigrants who are new ELLs, or their English proficiency could be high enough to be at high school-level ABE programming, whether they learned English as a foreign language before immigrating or learned the entirety of their English after moving to the country. Additionally, they have a range of general educational histories as well. Budiman (2020) reported that 27% of immigrants over the age of 25 in 2018 had less than a high school education, 22% were high school graduates, 19% had some college, and 32% had a bachelor's degree or higher. This is slightly more than the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 data indicating nearly 27% had a bachelor's degree or higher (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). Parrish (2019) reminded us that there are a variety of factors that affect an immigrant's culturalization, and their education, level of literacy and

experiences and attitudes about school all play a part.

Multilingual noncompleters. While some participants attending ABE ASE courses never attended American public school, some are also multilingual students, either U.S.-born or foreign-born, who were noncompleters in the K-12 system. A significant percentage of students in K-12 public schools are ELLs. In 2015, almost 10% of students in U.S. public schools were English learners, and the majority of them were born in the United States and are citizens (Sugarman, 2019, p. 5). There tend to be more ELLs in early grades, and as those students become proficient in English, they leave the ELL subgroup. Those receiving ESL assistance in elementary school stop needing those services more quickly than older ELLs (Sugarman, 2019). To become proficient in academic English can take between four to seven years (Hakuta et al., 2000). Therefore, ELLs who immigrate to the country as middle or high school students are less likely to reach proficiency within the school system. In most states, ELLs can remain in high school beyond four years. Students often have the right to stay to complete their diplomas until the age of 20 or 21 (Sugarman, 2019). However, Sugarman pointed out that many schools try not to retain students beyond four years because it negatively affects school graduation rates which focus on four-year diploma completion.

In 2015-16, the national four-year graduation rate was 84% for all students; however, it was 67% for high school ELLs (Sugarman, 2019). While some may have withdrawn from high school, others may have aged out of state K-12 programs before earning a diploma. One can clearly conclude that there are more multilingual students needing to complete their credentials than monolingual English speakers.

Long-Term English Learners. One category of English learners in the K-12

system are the long-term ELLs, or emergent bilinguals. These are students who have been learning English for more than six years and are still struggling with academic English despite possibly having proficient oral skills (Menken et al., 2012; Sugarman, 2019). Not only is their academic English limited, but often their academic skills in their first languages are as well because they did not receive high school-level education before attending K-12 school in the United States. With reading and writing skills below grade level, they often struggle with academic performance (Menken et al., 2012). Therefore, the rate of failure for these learners in all content areas is high. The long-term EL students in the Menken et al. (2012) study had a 69.2% (D+) average in their classes. With literacy rates below grade level, these students also struggle with standardized tests such as those required by some states for graduation.

If these students do not complete their diplomas through the K-12 system, they may find themselves in an ABE secondary credential program either soon after leaving high school or many years later, with the same low-level literacy rates that they had while attending high school. This is why these long-term ELLs cannot be ignored when discussing secondary credential programs in ABE. They are part of the population of HSE and diploma programs. Furthermore, the same issues faced by them in American high schools, the lack of academic English and most likely academic-level skills in their first languages, are still present in ABE classrooms.

Multilinguals Without a High School Diploma. Specific information on multilinguals wanting a secondary credential from ABE programs is lacking. As mentioned before, they might not even be considered English learners by programs. Testing at a level closer to HSE does not mean they have the language skills needed to

complete a HSE exam or adult diploma coursework. Like long-term ELLs in the nation's K-12 programs, they still have significant needs in developing academic English. While studies on multilingual ABE participants pursuing secondary credentials are also few, there is much more available on multilingual students attending community colleges. The two groups of learners share many characteristics; high attrition rates is one of the most notable (Ouellette-Schramm, in press a, in press b). Like multilinguals trying to achieve a HSE or adult diploma who are placed into ESL or reading courses first, those entering community colleges are often placed into ESL courses before they can participate in credit-bearing courses. It could be that learners get discouraged when there is more work, time or expense leading to their goal than they initially believed.

Despite the abundance of multilingual adults in ABE programs across America, these students seem to be neglected in ABE data. The NRS collects information about ABE participants, but it does not adequately track what percentage of those participants were ELLs or are multilingual (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). The NRS also does not track ELL advancement over time (Kennedy & Walters, 2013). Yearly gains are measured, but nothing keeps a long-term look at the average total number of levels gained over time. This is a huge gap in data collection regarding multilingual ABE students. Furthermore, it can lead to inadequate instruction if the unique needs of multilingual learners are not addressed. Due to this lack of data collection, there is no estimate of how many multilinguals pursue an HSE or adult diploma nor how many complete this goal. Though I can gather information on the percentage of those who complete within my consortium that indicated their primary language was not English, this does not cover how many wanted to earn a secondary credential who did not. All of

this is a glaring oversight for this specific and significant portion of potential ABE secondary credential completers.

This section provided a look at adult English language learners' unique language acquisition circumstances. It provided information on ESL participants in ABE programs before focusing on those students, the multilinguals, operating at a higher level of English proficiency who are placed into ASE's secondary completion programs. The lack of data regarding multilinguals pursuing a secondary credential highlights the nation's lack of insight into the diverse group of students whose English skills can get them into a secondary completion program, but perhaps not meet their needs to meet their goals. Moving forward, the issue of persistence for all ABE participants will be addressed with the knowledge that the focus of this study, the multilinguals attempting secondary credential completion, will not have their own place at the table in this discussion.

Persistence and Its Barriers

When it comes to perhaps the biggest component of all ABE participants' attainment of their goals, the issue of persistence always comes to the forefront (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Comings, 2007; Comings et al., 2000; Kerka, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Ouellette-Schramm, 2019). Simply put, learners will not reach their goals if they do not stay with them long enough to do so. If one truly wants to see the multilinguals seeking secondary credentials complete those goals and move on, like all other participants of ABE, they have to be in the programs long enough to do so.

Definition

It is necessary to define persistence in the world of ABE. Older literature defined

persistence as the length of time that learners attend classes or tutoring sessions (Comings et al., 2000) or stay in programs long enough to reach their goals (Tracy-Mumford, 1994). In fact, much of that literature discussed student attrition or retention rather than persistence (Tracy-Mumford, 1994). Twenty-first century thinking has seen a learner-centered focus on goal attainment and student persistence. Therefore, Comings (2007) defined persistence as intensity and duration of attendance until the learner meets their goal(s). This includes extending the meaning to include times when the student is engaged in self-study and distance learning and not actively attending classes (Comings et al., 2000; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). The definition of persistence moving forward will be as laid out by Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999) as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 3). In measuring persistence, therefore, programs can look at rates of attendance, completion of a course or goal, and time spent in self study (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Finally, it is important to note that such attention is given to persistence because, as Nash and Kallenbach asserted, it is both necessary for academic progress, and it leads to positive outcomes and improved quality of life for ABE learners (p. 3). While some programs may want participants to attend as long as possible for an increase in contact hours, the goals of participants need to be taken into account. Therefore the learner-centered perspective of persistence until a goal is met is important.

ABE students often stop attending for numerous reasons and many eventually come back to the program after their situations have changed (Kerka, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012). The term “stopping out” has been used to describe this behavior and

distinguish it from dropping out, which is seen as a definitive exit from a program. ABE learners may repeat the cycle of entering and exiting the same program many times (Kerka, 2005). Further, learners often continue to do either distance learning or self-study when they cannot attend class. Many learners see this as persisting, though ABE programs may not see it as such (Comings et al., 1999). While Mellard et al. (2012) found no demographic predictors of persistence, other studies have noted that certain students tend to be more likely to persist than others (Comings et al., 2000; Comings et al., 2002; Kerka, 2005). These groups include immigrants moving through leveled English programs, students over the age of 30, and those who are parents of teens or grown children. Notably, students with specific goals and those who had participated in ABE programs in the past were also more likely to persist (Comings et al., 2000). Tracy-Mumford (1994) suggested a cost-benefit decision on staying in programs. Education can lose priority in a student's life when the costs of participation are greater than the benefits (p. 4). Working and other demands of adult life often take priority over school (Hayes, 1988).

In addition to circumstances that take learners temporarily out of the classroom, gauging persistence by remaining until a program is complete can also create issues. Some programs, like those for GED[®] preparation, have a clearer finish line than an ESL program, for example. Vague definitions of completion complicate defining persistence (Tracy-Mumford, 1994). As highlighted in the section on adult ELLs in ABE, students enter a program with a variety of goals (Mellard et al., 2012). A student may feel that they have had sufficient improvement to move on before testing at the highest level on a standardized test. As Tighe et al. (2013) maintained, the goals of funding agencies,

instructors and participants do not always align. Agencies want measurable skill gains as tracked by the NRS. However, teachers look beyond test scores for things like acquiring life skills or contributing to a classroom community. While students themselves might have measurable goals like completing their diploma, they might also see being able to better help their children's learning as obtaining a goal. This shows us that a learner may leave a program feeling that they have met a goal, but it might not appear to the instructor or the program that a goal was completed.

The Trouble with Persistence in ABE

There are patterns of poor persistence throughout ABE. Available data support this (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Golden, 2017; Quigley, 1988; Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Despite the fact that most ABE students are not required to attend and that many programs are free, many leave before meeting their goals. The program in which Golden (2017) conducted his study sees 60% of its enrollees leave the program within two years without earning a HSE diploma. The harsh reality is that no matter how committed to reaching their goals learners appear at intake, up to 74% leave programs (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). So many students leave within the first three weeks that Quigley (1998) has drawn attention to this time period calling it the most critical to retaining students.

The NRS tracks level gains on approved adult assessments such as the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS). These assessments measure adult educational functioning levels (EFL). An EFL is approximately two grade levels in the K-12 system. Unfortunately, less than 40% of ABE learners reading below an eighth-grade level gain one or more EFL

levels in a full year (Mellard et al., 2012). Mellard et al. revealed that one significant difference is that students who achieved EFL gains attended more than those who did not achieve an EFL gain. It seems obvious that higher attendance would yield more gains, but the difference in this study was an average of about 20 hours more instructional time per quarter. Getting students to attend more could lead to more measurable gains and could therefore lead to students persisting when they know that they are gaining ground.

Because of the high level of dropping or stopping out, many programs suggest post testing ABE students after 40 hours of instructional time in order to capture a level gain while the students are still attending classes, but this is not enough time for most adult ELLs to show progress in their English language proficiency (Snell, 2013). Mellard et al. (2012) pulled together data from several studies to generalize that it takes between 80 and 118 hours of ABE instruction to gain one Educational Function Level for ABE students in general. The Center for Applied Linguistics (2010) likewise reported that an average of 100 hours were attended by those in non credit ESL classes who made a level gain.

Barriers to Persistence. Now that it is clear that ABE participants do not always stay in programs long enough to meet their goals or make level gains, the more important question is why is it difficult for them to remain long enough to do so. The barriers to participation and persistence of ABE have been widely studied for decades (Brod, 1995; Mellard et al., 2012; Quigley, 1998; Spellman, 2007; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Common barriers can be placed into three categories: situational, institutional and dispositional.

Situational Barriers. Situational barriers are those that arise from a participant's circumstances. Examples of these include, but are not limited to, finances and work,

transportation, childcare and health (Brod, 1995; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Parrish, 2019; Quigley, 1998) Quigley maintained that programs have little control over the situational barriers of participants. However, some believe that programs can help students find ways to problem solve when these barriers occur (Mellard et al., 2012).

Institutional Barriers. Limitations placed on learner attendance and persistence often come from the ABE programs themselves (Brod, 1995; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Quigley, 1998; Schalge & Soga, 2008; Zacharakis et al., 2011). While Quigley (1998) has said there is little that programs can do about situational barriers, there is room for program improvement with institutional barriers. Institutional barriers include issues with scheduling and the design and services provided by the program (Brod, 1995; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Schalge and Soga (2008) learned through their interviews of participants in an ESL program in southern Minnesota that dissatisfaction with programs was more of an issue than instructors or administrators assumed. Administrators and teachers cited outside issues like childcare and transportation as barriers to attending. However, students noted boredom, anxiety about unpredictable class content, and not getting the help they wanted as problems within the programs. Brod (1995) also found that multilevel classes that did not meet learners' needs, and irrelevant materials were problems within programs.

Dispositional Barriers. Factors such as students' attitudes and perceptions on their ability to succeed are examples of dispositional barriers (Spellman, 2007). Hayes (1988) and Brod (1995) also indicated low self-confidence and self-esteem as deterrents to persistence. Spellman (2007) focused on adult students at community colleges, where barriers of student enrollment and retention hold many commonalities to ABE

participants. Hayes (1988) determined that participants' own histories with education and a negative attitude to classes posed problems and the fact that many faced social disapproval from others in their lives. Quigley (1998) suggested that dispositional barriers are where the most influence in learner persistence resides. He called this the “curious inner world of unique attitudes, personal values and unstated perceptions” (paragraph 8). Mellard et al. (2012) discovered that learners who described themselves as “feeling downhearted and blue” were less likely to make an Educational Functioning Level gain (p. 535). With so many negative experiences of ABE participants in the K-12 system or in their home countries, it is easy to understand why they might have less than optimistic views on returning to education.

This section has defined persistence as it applies to ABE participants and programs. It is noted that programs, teachers and students may have differing ideas of what a learner’s goal is and how to measure its completion. A look at the three types of barriers that learners face and examples of each were provided. Most of these studies focused on general ABE participants, and a few on ELLs in ESL programs. There is very little available specifically on the persistence in secondary credential programs of multilingual participants. In the final section of this chapter, the lens will be flipped and those factors that enhance ABE learner persistence will be brought to light.

Factors of Persistence

There is no lack of research on the reasons why ABE participants stop attending classes and programs. Through the years, those barriers seem to remain consistent. Additionally, there is growing body of literature that focuses on the factors that support the persistence of ABE participants (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000; Mellard et al,

2013; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Quigley, 1998; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Reynolds, & Johnson, 2014; Skilton-Sylvester, 2016; Zacharakis et al, 2011). In 2009, Nash and Kallenbach's findings from the New England Adult Learner Persistence Project, *Making It Worth the Stay*, offered research-based suggestions for ABE programs to foster learner persistence. This study has become a landmark in applicable information for programs. The authors offer six key factors to boost persistence at the program level: a sense of belonging and community, clarity of purpose, agency, competence, relevance and stability. Another landmark study offering factors of persistence is Comings, Parrella and Soricone (2000). Their research offered four supports for persistence that programs can help learners develop: awareness and management of positive and negative forces, self-efficacy, establishing goals, and progress. In addition to ABE-based research, there is also information on community college ELLs that can be applied to ABE students due to the similarities in the ELL populations and their goals (Ouellette-Schramm, in press a, in press b). Making some sense of all these factors requires some way to organize them.

A promising framework for persistence factors is that of the four pillars from Thompson and Cuseo (2012) as applied to ABE students by Reynolds and Johnson (2014). Thompson and Cuseo's work focused on academic achievement of culturally diverse K-12 students. It claimed that the students themselves, their families, communities and schools are the major sources of influence. When all four "pillars" come together and reinforce one another, students are more likely to succeed. Having factors in multiple areas fosters achievement. In Reynolds and Johnson's (2014) work, those individual, family, institutional, and community pillars are considered assets for ABE learners as well. Their qualitative analysis was on 60 ABE students believed to be

“exemplary” by instructors based on academic achievement, quantity of attendance in ABE programs or community service. Reynolds and Johnson used the Four Pillars framework established by Thompson and Cuseo (2014) to identify assets in the students’ lives that will aid in persistence. These assets fall into four categories: individual, family, institutional, and community. Occurrence of these factors is found in many other studies though they might not be separated into the same categories (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Tighe et al, 2013). Reynolds and Johnson (2014) recommended using the four pillars framework to examine use of the assets in other groups, and it is within this structure that the factors will be categorized.

Individual Factors

When it comes to individual reasons for persistence, learners who persist are said to have high levels of motivation and determination as well as resourcefulness (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Students also noted needs, such as providing for their family or employment, as motivating factors. A determination to meet their goals overcame fears and led many to have hope for their future.

Motivation. This is an expansive topic (Dörnyei, 1998; Mellard et al., 2012; Ouellette-Schramm, in press b; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Some focusing on the multilingual population of this current study is required to scale it down. Targeting the ESL population of ABE participants starts with Dörnyei’s “Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning” (1998) and its overview of persisting in long-term goals such as learning a second language. Of note are the expectancy-value theories which are applicable to multilinguals reaching to achieve a secondary credential. Dörnyei explained that motivation to achieve a task stems from two factors: the individual’s expectancy of

success and the value that is placed upon completing the task. Dörnyei also offered discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. What is noteworthy in the mix is the idea that self-determination means that an individual is participating in an activity by choice in order for it to be intrinsically motivating. Mellard et al. (2012) also discussed intrinsic motivation, highlighting the willingness of the individual to participate. This can be applied to adult language learners in ABE as well as those multilinguals who are trying to achieve a secondary credential. Because the majority of ABE participants enroll by choice, there has to be more that supports persistence than the desire of the participants to reach their goals. Therefore, determining whether an individual's interest is personal or situational deserves investigation. Situational interest could vary depending on a learner's circumstances while personal interest is more stable over time (Mellard et al., 2012). For example, students who persist due to the desire to prove themselves would be a personal interest (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). This would contrast with participants enrolling in ABE programs due to a situational interest such as unemployment and the need to earn an HSE credential to find a new job, what Johnson and Reynolds (2014) called a "disorienting dilemma" (p. 40). Johnson and Reynolds noted that the persistent students they spoke with had a "long-standing desire" to return to education (p. 40).

Clarity of Purpose. What Nash and Kallenbach (2009) called *clarity of purpose* is the trait of being goal-oriented. This is a factor addressed in many studies (Brod, 1990; Comings et al, 2000; Dörnyei, 1998; Ouellette-Schramm, in press a, in press b; Tighe et al., 2013). Students who can clearly identify their goals are more likely to persist than others (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Ouellette-Schramm, in press b; Tighe et al., 2013). Ouellette-Schramm (in press b) found that a community college ELL with an unclear

goal mentioned possibly dropping out while two with more precise goals did not. Tighe et al. discovered that persistent students knew what their specific goals were as well as how they were going to achieve them. Of importance here is not just that learners can articulate their goals, but that individuals set and pursue those goals by choice (Dörnyei, 1998; Tighe et al., 2013). Tighe et al. supported this with the example of ABE students who were minors and mandated to be in class to retain their Florida driver's licenses. This class was not as effective as others without mandated participants. Passing the GED was not a goal those students had chosen for themselves.

Progress. As important as goal setting is, ABE learners who see progress toward those goals are more likely to persist to see them through (Brod, 1995; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000; Tighe et al., 2013). Being able to measure progress was mentioned by many across studies. One ABE student in the Tighe et al. (2013) study indicated that testing done by the program motivated her and also allowed her to see her weaknesses and address them. Other students also said that they used tests as a measure of progress. Additionally, Brod (1995) asserted that in order to meet goals, a timeline should be established with regular discussion of the progress being made. One community college ELL could see the start of the next semester as a step toward his dream (Ouellette-Schramm, in press b). Measurements that are relevant and meaningful to the learners are what is important to their persistence.

Self-efficacy. A learner's belief in whether a specific task can be accomplished plays an important role in many of the studies (Comings et al., 2000; Dörnyei, 1998; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Nash and Kallenbach called this factor "competence" and assert that adults have a need to be competent in important areas

of their lives. The studies link self-efficacy to achievement which translates to persistence (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Dörnyei (1998) argued that a person's self-efficacy will also drive what tasks they attempt. Therefore, if a learner has low self-efficacy regarding a task, obstacles encountered in completing the task are more likely to result in giving up, and high self-efficacy keeps a learner task-focused and increases the ability to sustain effort. Reynolds and Johnson (2014) cited self-efficacy as a factor in the students in their study. Getting back to school and persisting required a belief in their ability to succeed. While programs can help foster a sense of self-efficacy in learners (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 2000; Nash & Kallenbach 2009), it is still an individual factor.

Understanding Positive and Negative Factors. Having an understanding of both the positive and negative factors that can influence the persistence of an individual can enhance their persistence (Comings et al., 2000; Mellard et al, 2012). Comings et al. maintained that if learners have an understanding of forces that are pushing them out of programs as well as those that are encouraging them to remain, they can try to lessen the negative and increase the positive. In the study, most participants were able to name three or more positive factors in their lives. Most common were support from others, especially family, as well as self-efficacy and personal goals. Those surveyed also named only one or no negative factors. Of the negative factors mentioned, no one factor was most common. Likewise, Mellard et al. (2012) found that the learners in their study who perceived themselves as having lower numbers of internal obstacles were more likely to attend. The question that they raise is whether those who believe they have few obstacles have greater persistence, or do those who enroll have fewer perceived obstacles?

Family Factors

Participants in ABE programs also discuss family factors for continuing with their programs in several studies (Comings et al., 2000; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013). As expected, family often provides the support for attending classes or taking the first step of enrolling. Many students who demonstrated persistence across studies cited supportive spouses and parents. These family members believed in ABE participants' abilities to complete their goals. In other situations, family is the motivation behind enrolling and persisting. Examples include many instances of parents wanting to give their children better lives or be able to provide help to them with their own schoolwork. In contrast, there were also students who wanted to follow different paths than their own parents and saw completion of a high school credential as a way to change the direction of their lives. In discussing the role parents play, one student quoted in Tighe et al. (2013) did not want to "end up like them" (p. 424). For those participants who are parents, Comings et al. (2000) suggested that having older or grown children rather than the responsibility of younger ones also aids persistence.

Institutional Factors

At the institutional level, teacher-student relationships, a sense of belonging in the program, and seeing regular progress were highly credited factors (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013). Nash and Kallenbach's New England Learner Persistence Project brings the reasons that learners stay in programs to the forefront. The study took place in 18 schools in five New England states and was designed to inform programs about possible changes or interventions. A few of those reasons are discussed below.

Instructor Impact. One might say that learner persistence should not be carried

on the backs of the instructors, but often, it is what an instructor does or does not do that affects a learner's persistence (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Skilton-Sylvester, 2016; Tighe et al., 2013). In the Skilton-Sylvester study (2016), the instructor whose students remained in the program employed some basic practices like calling students who did not attend and knowing what was going on in their lives that impacted attendance. Instructor impact is often tied to creating a classroom community, which will be discussed further on. However, even in situations where there is not as clear a community of ABE learners, ABE instructors still have impact and make a difference. In one of the classrooms observed by Tighe et al. (2013), despite the fact that independent study was the primary method of instruction, students still cited the instructor as key in their progress. The instructor created a classroom that supported and respected the learners.

Structure. As discussed earlier, open enrollment can cause problems in ABE programs despite desires to better serve learners (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Schalge & Soga, 2008). Nash and Kallenbach go so far as calling the frequent coming and going of participants turbulence. Therefore, an asset to persistence is “stability”. There are other ways for programs to offer stability such as routines and a sense of safety for a population of learners who may have stress from previous education experiences or some form of trauma in their histories.

Community Factors

Community assets have also been found to support persistence (Brod, 1995; Nash & Kallenach, 2009; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). These are the people, besides family and teachers, and the programs which offer support for individuals attending ABE. Agencies that offer support in the form of things like transportation,

healthcare or employment are examples (Brod, 1995). Employers or supervisors could be a part of the community of support as well (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Reynolds and Johnson have also mentioned that connections and involvement to groups in the community were an aspect of this factor. Therefore serving others in the community is included as well as those supports that might be offered by agencies.

We see some crossover here with institutional factors because the idea of community within the school was often cited as a factor of persistence (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). As Nash and Kallenbach said, when a student feels welcomed and respected, they are more likely to return because they feel they belong. With ELL students, who are often isolated and unable to communicate with many Americans, ABE programs might be a place where they finally feel like part of a community (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Even for those U.S. born and attending ABE for basic skills help or working on high school completion options, going back to school can be extremely challenging. Quigley and Uhland (2000) studied interventions to increase retention of at-risk ABE students beyond what has been called the critical three weeks. The students were placed into four groups: a control, one that has teachers and counselors working as a team for support, classes that were small groups of five or six, and students that received one-on-one tutoring. The at-risk students who worked in small groups stayed in the ABE programs the longest. While no cause for the small group success was cited in the Quigley and Uhland study, other sources have indicated that community within the school can be a positive influence. For example, Reynolds and Johnson (2013) revealed support from classmates as key with a notion of a common goal and being “in it together” (p. 43). Making connections with classmates

with similar goals and an understanding of the challenges was especially important to female students in this study. Males, on the other hand, seemed more focused on serving their communities rather than receiving support.

Connecting to the idea of community within the school, Quigley and Uhland (2000) also stated that the at-risk students in their study had high field dependency, tending to rely on information provided by the outer world. This includes a high desire for acceptance, belonging and harmony with the individual's environment. Tighe et al. (2013) provided support for this when comparing programs that create a classroom community with those that use independent study with little or no small or large group interaction. Many times, those classrooms deemed less effective in student level gains did not provide participants with any sort of community.

Educational Inequity and Persistence

Persistence factors should not be expected to wipe away inequities in ABE students' histories (Golden, 2017). Focusing on noncognitive factors such as motivation, agency, and self-efficacy needs to be addressed before moving forward. Heckman and Rubinstein (2001) defined noncognitive skills as things such as personality traits and motivation. They noted that while cognitive skills, which are the focus of standardized tests, are easier to measure, it has been found that perseverance, dependability and consistency are the greater factors of school performance. Still, no one noncognitive trait has been identified as a true indicator of future success in school or work.

Nonetheless, Golden (2017) raised real concern with focusing on noncognitive traits for success. Attributing success with noncognitive traits is a harmful trend, Golden argued, because it shifts focus off of the inequitable funding and what Milner (2010)

called “opportunity gaps” (as cited in Golden 2017, p. 348) of programs that serve high numbers of “linguistically, culturally, ethnically and racially marginalized learners” (347). He continued by saying that the labels we choose, such as “achievement gap” shift the blame from problems within education systems onto individual learners, who are viewed as responsible for their individual persistence despite any inequitable treatment. In short, they are supposed to make up for unfair conditions by simply pushing forward regardless of the scarcity of tools and support. Specifically, Golden targeted the idea of “grit” which has recently gained buzz as the essential factor for success.

Ouellette-Schramm (in press b) also addressed this equity piece when discussing using a constructive-developmental lens in her study. The author explained that the purpose is not to find ways in which the learners, who often come from inequitable educational backgrounds, are lacking. The role that both national and international educational inequity plays in the situations that ABE participants have been subjected to must be acknowledged, and the idea that learners need only to develop more grit to persevere needs to be debunked.

Multilingual adults in ABE programs often come from inequitable backgrounds whether here in the United States or in their home countries. Backing up this idea of a scarcity of support is the information on emergent bilinguals (often labeled long-term English language learners) in America’s high schools from Menken et al. (2012). Within the varied education histories of these learners, patterns of a lack of stability, including constant movement from ESL, bilingual and English-only programming emerge. The Menken et al. (2012) study uncovered inconsistencies in high school students’ educational histories as well as linguistically subtractive practices that did not allow them

to reach grade-level in any of the languages they speak. It is extremely important that exploring factors of persistence does not erase the responsibility held by the inequitable situations that our multilingual learners come from in the first place. We can look at support for persistence while not expecting noncognitive factors to save learners from situations that, often, they should not have been in if education systems were meeting their needs.

This final section of the chapter offers examples of the four categories of persistence: individual, institutional, family and community. It also addresses the fact that the goal of a study on factors of persistence is not to find a cure-all for inequitable histories of often marginalized students.

Summary

ABE students in general face barriers that many others have not had to deal with; often enrolling in an ABE program is overcoming fear of failure or taking on another burden in an already hectic life. Many of these students are unemployed, underemployed, or working multiple jobs. In addition, multilinguals in ABE adult secondary programs are trying to succeed at a task that can be difficult for native English speakers. Their success hinges on their English proficiency. No matter how urgent their needs to complete a secondary credential, these multilinguals might have to take English or reading classes before they can enroll in secondary credential programs based on scores on English reading assessments. Even when their reading level allows them to begin working on their goal, depending on their education history, often punctuated with inequities, completing the program can take much longer than they anticipate, which affects their lives, the lives of their family, and society as a whole.

Despite the wealth of research on persistence in ABE, there is little data specific to multilinguals in secondary completion programs (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010). These learners are often grouped with native English speakers in data collection, and little is known about their persistence compared with those attempting the same goals as native-English speakers despite their unique challenges. What is missing is a closer look both at multilinguals who are attempting high school completion via ABE and what encourages them to persist.

Taking all of these aspects into account will help to research the question of *what factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?*

In this chapter, ABE programs and secondary completion options were discussed as well as some common issues within ABE. Research on adult second language acquisition and ELL learners as well as multilinguals in ABE were highlighted. The definition of what persistence is within the realm of ABE as well as the barriers to participants were covered. Finally, factors of persistence from many sources were synthesized before a caution about assuming that any noncognitive skill can make up for inequities in the histories of learners. Chapter three provides a summary of the methods used to answer the research question.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Chapter Overview

Multilingual adult basic education (ABE) participants who have earned a secondary credential through a high school equivalency (HSE) assessment or adult diploma are a unique and diverse population of ABE students. Because little research has focused specifically on these individuals, it is important to look into what factors specifically supported their persistence in HSE preparation or adult diploma programs in order to help them meet their goals. These goals can be significant for any ABE participant, but those who must complete them in what is often not their first language have a more challenging task before them. It can take hundreds of hours of study to significantly increase their English proficiency (Mellard et al., 2012) to a level needed to complete a secondary credential. Given what is known about employment and earning potential for those who have completed high school versus those who have not, earning a credential is often an urgent and life-altering goal. The more ABE professionals know about why multilingual students continue working on the long-term of a secondary credential, the more they can foster those factors. As a result of this study, I gained better understanding of the factors present in several multilinguals' lives as they pursued the goal of completing either an adult diploma or a GED[®]. The study explored the question, *What factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?*

This chapter outlines a study designed to gather information on the factors that contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs. This was

a retrospective case study conducted on multilingual ABE participants who recently earned a secondary credential.

Data was collected in three ways. The first was via a questionnaire which presented pertinent information about each participant. The second was a set of interviews. Those interviews provided descriptive information from the participants' perspectives. Finally, quantitative data from the students' time in ABE in the form of attendance and assessment records was used to help define their persistence.

Research Paradigm

This study was designed as a retrospective case study of multilingual ABE participants who recently completed an adult diploma or GED. By consulting ABE instructors and graduation lists, I located learners who attended sites within my consortium in order to get more objective and candid answers. Both qualitative and quantitative information was gathered in this mixed methods study.

While there are many studies on the persistence of ABE participants, the multilinguals attempting secondary completion credentials are a unique group of students who have not been given the attention they deserve in research in order to foster the completion of their goals. A case study gave me the opportunity to highlight some of the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of these learners as well as allowed me to get a close look at what helped them to persist and accomplish their goals. Mackey and Gass (2016) noted that case studies “can shed light on the complexities of the second language learning process” (p. 224), and in this situation moving beyond being a second language learner to a complex task or set of tasks that must be completed in the participants' second languages. While case studies offer a valuable look at individuals, and in this

case, the factors of persistence present in their lives while pursuing a secondary credential, generalizing about all multilinguals in these situations was avoided. However, by selecting a handful of participants from varied backgrounds with a common goal, I made some comparisons among the group using mixed methods of data collection.

Participants and Setting

This study's subjects were three former learners within my ABE consortium who learned English as an additional language and who completed the GED. By working within my consortium, I had access to data stored in the state's ABE database, and I could get approval for the research from the one school district that oversees these sites.

To identify potential participants, I contacted two instructors from other locations and asked for GED and adult diploma graduates who met the criteria of being multilingual and recently completing their secondary credential. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of qualified recent completers was very low. I was able to find one participant who completed her HSE in 2021. Additionally, the search was complicated by the fact that one of these instructors had not been with the consortium very long and had a short list of learners who had finished since she began. Therefore, I looked over a list of participants of the consortium's graduation ceremonies over the past several years and was able to find two who completed their HSE in 2018.

The participants came from a variety of home countries and educational backgrounds. One participant graduated high school in her home country, China. Another immigrated to the United States after completing high school but before passing the required baccalaureate examination in Tunisia. The third immigrated to this country from Ecuador as a teen and was placed into ninth grade in a Minneapolis high school where he

later withdrew before completion in order to work. Two of the study participants earned the GED in their 30's and the other was in his early 20's.

These participants were initially contacted via phone, email and texting. A questionnaire was sent electronically, and the interviews were conducted online via video conferencing and recorded for review.

Data Collection and Procedure

This case study involved three types of data collection. There was a brief questionnaire sent electronically (see Appendix A), two one-on-one interviews with each participant, and quantitative data gathered on each participant via records collected by the ABE sites in which learners were enrolled.

Questionnaires

Once participants reviewed the informed consent documents, they were emailed an electronic questionnaire created with Google Forms with both closed and open-ended questions to begin the data collection process (see Appendix A). This questionnaire took less than fifteen minutes to complete, and I asked that it be done within a week of it being distributed to them. All participants returned it in a timely manner.

These questions were used to collect information related to participants' demographics and family and education history. Data regarding languages spoken, at what age the participants began to learn English, and employment was also gathered. Most of this data was quantitative while giving some initial insight into each individual's history and circumstances. Some of these questions helped individualize some follow-up questions for the first interview. For example, knowing about the participants' education

history allowed me to either ask about their time in school in their home countries or about time in the K-12 system in the United States.

Interviews

Additional qualitative data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. These were done using online video conferencing and were recorded. The interviews were less than an hour each. Two participants were interviewed twice; however, in order to accommodate the third participant's schedule, both sets of questions were given within one interview while keeping it under one hour in length.

Interviews were selected because of their ability to allow participants to offer descriptive answers of factors that are not observable. As Mackey and Gass (2016) mentioned, participants' own attitudes and perceptions can be captured (p. 225). Interviewing allowed a deeper look into each learner's journey to secondary credential completion, giving an individual voice to each participant.

Additionally, interviewing these multilingual participants allowed me to ask clarifying questions and elicit more information, especially if there was some need to negotiate for meaning when language differences caused communication problems between us. While the English proficiency of these secondary credential completers was advanced, there was still room for language and cultural differences to impede answers.

Finally, the quality of oral answers given via interviews could be better than written ones because some multilinguals struggle with writing in their second language which might shorten their responses. Interviews facilitated an opportunity for the participants to subjectively discuss their experiences and what factors helped them persist.

There are some problems with interviews that I needed to be aware of (Mackey & Gass, 2016). In this retrospective case study, the possibility of memory loss or selective recall was real. Initially, it was my goal to find recent high school credential completers for the study. However, COVID-19's impact on the number of students completing high school credentials in 2020 and 2021 was significant. I was able to find one 2021 GED completer, but I had to go further back for other participants. Two participants completed in 2018. It should be understood that those less recent completers may not have remembered events as well as more recent ones would have. It was my intent that having two interviews would help with recall. Participants could think about their experiences between interviews, and I could view program data including enrollment and assessment dates, and ask clarifying questions in the second interview. However, to honor one interviewee's extremely busy schedule, we only met once for both sets of questions. I was given permission to reach out for clarification once I reviewed the interview transcripts. Finally, knowing what I did about adult learners and the common desire to please teachers or cultural norms that would not welcome anything disparaging being said about a teacher, the halo effect, was another worry (Mackey & Gass, 2016, pp. 166 & 226) with conducting interviews.

These interviews were conducted online and recorded so that each interview kept a manageable length and so that I had time to process the first answers before asking additional questions. The first interview (see Appendix B) served as a time to get to know the participants and allowed them to become more comfortable speaking with me. I asked follow-up questions to answers supplied on the questionnaire, and began to ask questions relating to individual factors of persistence. For example, "Did you think this was

something that you could do?” helped identify self-efficacy in a student. “Why did you want to get your GED?” helped determine if the participant had personal or situational interest in completing their goal. The second interview (see Appendix C) focused on the other three categories of persistence factors: family, institutional, and community support. Questions such as “What was your experience with your teachers?” or “Was there anyone outside of your family and the school who encouraged you?” helped determine what, if any factors of persistence, were present. This was also a time to ask clarifying questions related to answers from the first interview. With the participants who were interviewed twice, the second interviews followed the first interviews by eleven and fourteen days, which gave me time to transcribe and analyze the results of the first interview in order to see if follow-up questions should be asked.

Student Records

My third data collection came from collecting quantifiable data from the students’ records. I had access to the learners’ standardized test results to see what educational function level (EFL) the students were when they began the program and when they took GED exams, and whether they made any level gains while attending. One EFL is approximately two grade levels in the K-12 system. This could be significant if the students enrolled and their scores did not allow them to begin GED or diploma work right away. The students may have had to work on English proficiency before other work could be done, as there are specific scores needed to begin adult diploma programs in the state of Minnesota. However, GED preparation programs vary by site. Some students may have been placed in English as a second language (ESL) or reading classes prior to beginning GED work, or they may have started GED prep while working on English and

reading skills. This information allowed me to see the learners' skills upon beginning the program and if EFL gains were needed or obtained before beginning GED prep or adult diploma classes. Enrollment dates and number of instructional hours in ABE programs outlined each participant's time in ABE. This data measured each learner's ABE participation and how long it took to complete their goals thus illustrating what persistence entailed for each. I was also able to see if any of the participants stopped out of ABE programming before completing their HSE. This quantitative data created a fuller profile of each student and their persistence.

Data Analysis Methods

With the quantitative data provided in the questionnaire and through ABE records, I was able to create a more accurate definition of what persistence meant in each student's situation. Total hours of time in classes and time spent using distance learning programs were available. I could track level gains on their standardized tests and draw conclusions based on levels at enrollment and at the time they were able to pass the individual GED exams. This demographic information was used to describe each participant and their time spent in ABE programming.

After transcribing the interviews, responses were coded within the four pillars framework (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012). This framework was adapted for ABE by Reynolds and Johnson (2014) and recommended for further research on persistence. Those four pillars were categories of support in the areas of individual, family, institutional and community. Individual assets were things such as self-efficacy, motivation, stability and attitude regarding education. Having supportive family members or trying to follow, or not follow, in family members' footsteps were examples of family

support. Institutional factors were those from within the ABE programs such as goal setting, measurable progress and routines. Finally, some influences were outside family and school such as support from an employer, coworker, or from other state or local programs and were considered community assets.

There were many questions to consider both individually and as a group including the following:

- How many factors did the participants mention?
- Did the participants have more factors in one category than others?
- Did the participants have factors in all four categories?
- Were any factors consistently present in all participants?

Human Subject Research

Participants in the study received the Informed Consent Form via email, and each participant and I discussed it before the student agreed to the study. This notified them of the purpose of the study as well as their right to withdraw at any point. The benefits and possible cost of participation were discussed. Benefits could be coming to a better understanding of what it took for them to complete a complex goal as well as the opportunity to apply this understanding to future goals. They also provided information that can help support other multilinguals in ABE with the same goal.

This study was low-risk social research, and the costs to the participants were low. Participants' identities have been protected to the best of my ability. Pseudonyms were used rather than participants' real names. The students' specific standardized test scores were not given, but the educational function level, which is a more general measure, were. Locations of programs attended were general. Participants' identities will be

difficult to ascertain. However, teachers and staff from the programs they attended may know enough about the participant(s) to guess identities. Furthermore, as with any interview process, the participants were at risk of some discomfort during the interview process.

Because this study involved human participants, I submitted an application to the IRB board and was given approval before I began collecting data. I also gained approval from the school district which oversees the employees of the two consortium member ABE sites before beginning to gather data.

Summary

The combination of a questionnaire, interviews and data collected from student records created a three-dimensional view of each of the participants. In a study focused on individuals, it is important to accumulate a variety of information. Quantitative and qualitative information gave a more complete picture of each multilingual and their secondary credential journey.

Chapter Four presents the results of these three data collection procedures. Standardized test scores provide specific data on the levels participants were at when they began their secondary credential program as well as whether they gained educational function levels while attending ABE. It also provides information on what EFLs they were when they were able to attain passing scores on the GED exams. I also note the number of instructional hours attended and those worked with state-approved distance learning programs. Information from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed and coded to find instances of persistence factors in each of the four categories of

individual, family program and community. With this information common factors, total number of supports indicated and other data were identified.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Chapter Overview

Using a mixed methods approach to gather data from three multilingual participants of adult basic education (ABE) programs who were able to attain their high school equivalency (HSE), this retrospective case study explored the question *What factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?*

To answer this research question, data were collected in three ways. First, the subjects of the study completed an electronic questionnaire created with Google Forms containing 29 items (see Appendix A) in either December 2021 or January 2022. The combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions provided the researcher with demographics as well as information on the educational and language-learning histories of each participant. Next, the questionnaire was followed by qualitative research in the form of one-on-one interviews with the subjects occurring in January 2022 via video calls. Finally, the researcher had access to quantitative data gathered by ABE programs while the multilinguals attended. This included dates of enrollment and withdrawal, hours of participation, and scores on the standardized assessments used by ABE programs in Minnesota, namely the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) and Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) assessments. While exploring the data, the researcher looked for factors of persistence categorized into the four pillars laid out by Thompson and Cuseo (2012): individual, family, institutional, and community support.

This chapter describes the three participants and their experiences pertaining to

earning their HSE. This is followed by a look at the factors that were present in each multilingual's life categorized into the four types of support.

Study Participants

The three participants of the study were former learners at ABE sites within the consortium of the researcher. This allowed access to the quantitative data stored within the state's ABE database while allowing for objectivity by the researcher and encouraging more candid answers from the participants. The three participants attended two ABE sites located in the Twin Cities Metro area. Both of these sites offer leveled classes for participants based on their scores on standardized ABE assessments. In describing their class size on the initial questionnaire, all the subjects indicated that their classes typically contained 10-19 students. While all three of the participants ended up being multilinguals who had obtained a GED[®], their home countries, first languages and education histories were quite diverse. The names of all participants have been changed.

Asma

A native of Tunisia, Asma immigrated to the United States when she was 20. Her first language is Arabic, and she is also fluent in French, which she was taught beginning from about third grade. Her English instruction began in seventh grade. Asma completed her high school courses in Tunisia but did not complete the baccalaureate examination required to finalize her diploma. She married and immigrated to the United States. When she first came to this country, she did attend English language classes, but pregnancy soon had her prioritizing her family. However, when the youngest of her four children began school in September 2017, Asma was determined to attend ABE classes and get her GED. Attending college and getting a better job were her long-term goals, and she

knew the first step was to complete her HSE. In her mid-thirties, she returned to the school where she had once had English classes as a new immigrant.

At that time, Asma was assessed as an ABE rather than English as a second language (ESL) learner and scored at an educational functioning level (EFL) four on a reading assessment. This allowed her to begin working on preparing for the GED. Even though her children were all in school, their schedules affected her time at the ABE site. In her interview she spoke of this restricted time:

I have to wait until they get on the bus, and I have to be running over there (the ABE site). The time I get there, there's not even much for me. Then I have to leave before they (other students) leave because my other son went to kindergarten, but they only go until I think 12 or 11 . . . in between I have to catch up for an hour and a half, two hour maximum if I can.

Despite the time constraints, Asma attended regularly from September 2017 to the end of May 2018. Her records indicate that she withdrew for the summer, showing once again that her role as a parent needed to take precedence over her education. Once the next school year began in September 2018, Asma enrolled in ABE again. She completed her GED in November 2018.

In discussing studying for the GED, Asma mentioned feeling pressure to complete it quickly because of her desire to move on and earn her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certification. She said she felt like she was “competing with time”. In total, she was a participant in ABE for about thirteen months and spent over 500 hours at the school. While attending, her reading level was reassessed several times, and she did make a level gain. Her highest score indicated an EFL of five, equivalent to a ninth or tenth

grade reading level. During her enrollment, her mathematics and language skills were also assessed. She also made level gains in each of those areas, moving from EFL three to four in language and from four to six in mathematics. In addition to time spent at school, Asma discussed studying at home. She found GED materials at the library and purchased some as well. She said the extended response essay for the Reasoning Through Language Arts (RLA) required a lot of additional preparation on her part.

Like many multilinguals trying to earn a GED, Asma did not pass each test on the first try. Of the four content areas, she needed to retest in two. She cited the essay as one of her doubts. “I said, No, this is, I guess, only for people who really— they're English first language.” However, when asked why she believes that she did finish, she added, “But it's not true. You know, the more you practice, the more you get it, and, the more you pass one test and you find you're doing good, it give you a lot of energy to do more and to pass the next one.”

Earning her GED was a first step for Asma, just as it had been in her plan. She earned that credential in late 2018 and went on to become a CNA. She is currently employed full-time while attending community college to work on her generals to become a registered nurse. When she began ABE in 2017 after putting her education on hold while caring for her family, she explained her thoughts, “This is the time for me. If I want to get to something, I have to do this first.”

Min

Like so many immigrant parents, Min had to wait for the right time to attend ABE English language classes. Born in China, Min speaks Mandarin and began learning English as a foreign language around age 14. Min did graduate high school in China, and

went on to complete what she calls junior college where she studied economics. She immigrated to the United States when she was 25 and began her family within a couple of years. It was Min's husband who first attended ABE for English classes beginning in 2017. Min says that at that time, she was busy with her two children. However, in 2020, in her mid-30's and with her children both in school, she felt like she had more time she said she could "control". Her original goal was to improve her English, especially her speaking skills. When Min took her assessments upon intake into the program, she scored at an ABE EFL of four.

Min's journey was greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. She enrolled in ABE in February 2020. She was able to complete her intake assessments and orientation, but she attended a mere week at the school after being placed in the appropriate class before the school was closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic. There is a gap in her attendance as the site shifted into both asynchronous distance learning programs and then to synchronous online classes. At this time when her own education was thrown off course after just beginning, Min was thrust into parenting two elementary school children who were now completing the 2019-20 school year via distance learning. In May 2020, her attendance picked up. It is in August 2020 that significant attendance of 20 hours or more a month begins and continues through November 2021.

What put Min onto the HSE track was a curiosity about the GED and what it could offer her as well as a long-standing desire to improve her employment outlook. She learned about the battery of tests first through a poster on the wall of the counselor at her ABE site and then through discussions her ABE instructor and classmates had. Because she tested at ABE EFL level four, her class was a mix of students with various goals, so it

had GED prep students. She often heard about their progress when the teacher celebrated their successes. She said she did some research online “I find the GED is the high school diploma, and you can use this diploma to have a lot of jobs they require for the high school diploma. I think, Oh, maybe I can try to take that test.”

Min is clearly goal-oriented. She set her sights on the GED, knowing that there were jobs that might be easier to get once she had the diploma. When questioned about why she felt the need to earn it if she could prove her high school and college degrees from China, she noted that she felt it would make her more qualified for jobs here. Min also stated that having been raised in China, passing exams is an ingrained goal in their education system. She seemed to slip into the routine quite easily. She did a great deal of research online, much of it by reading about the experiences of other Chinese immigrants.

The 2020-21 school year continued to be online for Min, and it also saw her children having to do some of theirs via distance learning. Min talked about their routine. “I need to prepare them breakfast first, and then help them login to their online class. And then last time is me.” Additionally, Min’s husband owns a restaurant and this had required more and more of Min’s time. While she was working and taking care of the kids and attending ABE, her schedule was very demanding, but she made time for schoolwork. She explained, “So every night I spend from eleven until two. . . Sometimes I only have this time to study.”

In February 2021, Min passed her first official GED exam, Mathematical Reasoning. Min explained how this came to be her first subject, “This is my choice because I read a lot of Chinese students [who] take the GED. They suggested . . . math is

maybe it's our good subject. For you, easy to pass the test. Now you have the confidence to pass another one. So I chose math, because math is less English.” And she was right. She said she only reviewed math for a couple of weeks, and she managed to get what GED Testing Service calls a “college ready” score. Min used online information from other Chinese students to guide her for all of the tests. She spoke of their strategy, “So math, science, social studies, and language arts. So that's why I choose these [to] be my experience, too.” Less than six weeks after math, she passed her science exam followed by social studies in less than three months. She used the word “strategy” frequently to describe her approach to getting through the four content areas. Like the other two participants in this study, RLA took more work. Though she passed it in just under two months after passing social studies, she also had two GED Ready (the official practice test) scores that were not considered passing. (It should be noted that tracking practice test scores in the state database is a newer feature, and this data was not available for the other two subjects who completed ABE three years prior.) A good deal of the skills needed to pass the RLA are also skills needed to pass social studies, so her time preparing for social studies can be considered time preparing for RLA to some extent as well.

For each content area that Min methodically took on, she did a great deal of studying on her own. She found books that she thought were extremely beneficial. She felt that taking time to read and learn the vocabulary in English was key to her passing the tests. In hindsight, Min’s progress looks phenomenal. She went from beginning what she planned on being only English classes to passing the complete GED in less than a year and a half with a significant speed bump brought about by the shift in how her classes were offered due to the pandemic. She did note that she struggled at times. For

example when she started to work on her third test, social studies. “Oh. I want to quit. . . A lot of vocabulary. And it's very hard because we need to learn the American history. . . I read whole books about the American history from the first to the end. So I spent three months on the social studies.”

Another result of the pandemic was the inability to reassess Min’s reading, language and math skills in the way in which that program normally would. When the site reopened in the fall of 2021, Min was able to take progress assessments in two of the areas. This was after well over 500 hours of instruction both through time with instructors and on self-paced distance learning platforms. Min’s reading saw a slight increase but was still within the same EFL level she had upon intake. Mathematics actually increased by two EFLs going from level four to level six.

Min completed her GED in August 2021 and intended to continue improving her English through ABE. However, in late 2021, Min decided to stop attending due to the increasing demands of the family-owned restaurant. Min has more goals ahead of her, however. She explained, “I can go to the community college to pursue my dreams . . . I try to break it down. I want to start in the nurse programs. So, but right now, I really don't have the time to attempt the college. So just stop stopping here right now.” She says she does not even have that hour and a half a day that she had when she was attending online ABE classes. She will start college when she has the time. “I want to reach my goal fast. I don't want to waste my time to finish my career.”

Gabriel

After immigrating, Gabriel started his education in the United States in the K-12 system. Without his parents or siblings, he left his small village in Ecuador when he was

sixteen and was placed in the ninth grade at a high school in Minneapolis. This placement put him two years behind where he was in school in Ecuador. With Spanish as a first language, Gabriel began learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in high school before immigrating, but when first asked about his English education, he did not consider those classes at first. When questioned about this, he explained that his EFL history was not very helpful. The English taught was too formal, in his words, and he said, “You don't learn the conversational English. It's very different.” He feels like he knew very little useful English when moved to Minnesota.

In Minneapolis, he was placed in a combination of ESL and mainstream classes. When asked for more details he said, “Hard for me, the first month? Yeah, the first year? Yeah, it was hard. . . I felt like the first year I was struggling with my English because I didn't understand much.” However, his time at that high school held some successes as well. Gabriel explained, “. . . the next year, the ESL teacher told me, ‘Oh, you're getting better. I'm going to put you in an advanced English class.’” Gabriel was making progress within the K-12 system, but when he finished tenth grade in Minneapolis, he would have been graduating in Ecuador if he had remained. This led to his withdrawal. He was 18, and he explained, “I didn't have a choice. I had to work.”

While attending high school, Gabriel learned about the GED. He completed tenth grade as a Minneapolis high school student but began attending ABE in September 2015 when he would have been beginning eleventh grade. This allowed him to work. In fact, when Gabriel started ABE classes, he had two jobs working as a cook and attended ABE at night twice a week. When questioned about how long he believed that he would need to attend ABE to prepare for the GED, Gabriel said he had no expectations on the length

of the program. When he withdrew from high school, his intent was always to earn his HSE. He said he was going to find a way to finish high school.

Upon enrollment in ABE, he was given a test to assess his ESL level. He scored level six, the highest level, so that assessment was followed by one that evaluated his reading level on the ABE track. That assessment placed him in EFL three, which led to the school he attended placing him into a targeted reading class likely containing a mix of English Language Learners (ELL) and native speakers of English. After attending about seven months with slightly less than 100 instructional hours, Gabriel's reading EFL moved to level four which is equivalent to seventh and eighth grade reading levels.

Looking over his attendance, Gabriel attended between 17 and 22 hours of ABE night classes monthly for seven consecutive months while working two jobs. However, in the summer of 2016, nine months after beginning ABE, Gabriel stopped attending. This was the first of two times that he stopped out of ABE programming. It turns out that he took his first official GED test, Mathematical Reasoning, at the beginning of June 2016 but did not pass. In his words, "When I failed the math test, I was disappointed because I didn't pass that test. And I left. I gave up."

He did not return to ABE for almost a year. In May 2017, he re-enrolled at the same site. However, his time in the program was short. Still working two jobs, he managed to attend only 30 hours of instruction over three months. Gabriel explained, "Because at that time, I had two jobs already. So I used to attend two days, I think it was Tuesday and Thursday. So I couldn't complete the average hours." His records indicate "poor attendance" as the reason he was removed from his classes in July 2017. Now at age 25, Gabriel can see that the demands of his schedule did not set him up for success.

Discussing his decision to work as much as he did while trying to complete his secondary credential, he said, “But I didn't think, you know, if you have two jobs, you're gonna get tired, you're gonna get stressed out. And then you have to go to school. And well...”. As an 18-year-old, he did not understand exactly what he was attempting to take on when he decided to work on his HSE while working two jobs. “And I was out again, and I gave up. I gave up.”

In June 2018, Gabriel gave his GED another attempt. This time he did not go back to his previous ABE school. A coworker who had completed ABE at another site suggested that Gabriel try the school he had attended. There Gabriel was set to work on his HSE right away. “They actually gave me the GED book, so I wasn't taking anymore, you know, reading.” In less than two months, Gabriel passed his first GED exam. This is not to say that the time at the other program was not beneficial. In addition to the level gain in reading, Gabriel also made a gain in mathematics, from EFL three to four, within his first seven months at the first school.

One big change when Gabriel came back to ABE for the third time was his schedule. “When I went to adult education at [name of second school], I only had one job.” Because of this, he attended ABE classes four hours a day four days a week. He said that he dedicated himself to completing the GED this time. He also said that he spent time watching YouTube for help with the content on the tests. Looking over his attendance from 2018, it is clear that this commitment paid off quickly for Gabriel. After his orientation and assessment at the new school, he attended for six weeks before he began passing the exams. Once he started testing, he no longer participated in classes. He started systematically taking tests one-by-one from the end of July 2018 until he finished

on September 25th.

Even though his progress on the battery of exams in 2018 is remarkable, it did not occur without some trouble. His first attempt at the RLA test resulted in a non-passing score. “That one was the hardest one because I couldn't write the essay at the end,” he recalled. However, he realized that scoring well on the other portions of the exam could carry him through what he felt were his weak English writing skills. Less than a month later, he scored significantly higher on his second attempt at RLA and passed. “When I took the second time I was ready for it,” he notes.

Gabriel completed his HSE and went on to become a commercial truck driver. While participating in ABE, he had one child who at the time was not living in the United States and one child who was born while he was completing his GED. When questioned about how being a nonnative speaker of English affected his pursuit of the GED, he mentioned that when he began ABE it was suggested to him that he could take the tests in Spanish. “If I wanted to take in Spanish, it will have been more easier for me. . . It's like being in my home country, so I didn't. I want to learn more English.” Being able to pass the tests in English was an important goal for him.

Summary of Participants

The preceding sections described the stories of three multilingual individuals who decided that earning a HSE was essential to their situations and future goals. Each had different educational backgrounds, but they shared being introduced to English as a foreign language as teens in their home countries and each mentioned feeling that their English needed a great deal of improvement upon immigrating to the United States. While attending ABE and working toward an HSE, each was able to name barriers that

made their goals challenging. However, they all also mentioned support factors that research suggests were integral to completion of their objectives

Factors of Persistence

After collecting questionnaire data, transcribing interviews and examining the quantitative data held within the state's ABE database, the information was coded to identify factors of persistence within each subject's life at the time they were actively attending ABE classes and working on their secondary credentials. These factors were categorized into the four areas of support as identified by Thompson and Cuseo (2012) and as applied to ABE students by Reynolds and Johnson (2014). Those categories are individual support, support from family, from ABE institutions, and from the community.

Individual Factors

Individual factors are supports found within each individual. Motivation, determination, and resourcefulness are examples of traits that are often found in persistent individuals. Having a clear picture of what the goal is, deciding for oneself to pursue it, and believing it can be achieved are also important.

Motivation. As Chapter Two suggested, motivation is an extremely broad concept. Therefore, as in the literature review, certain factors pertaining to language acquisition and long-term goals were the focus of this study. This includes Dörnyei's (1998) expectancy-value theory and the idea set forth by him and Mellard et al. (2012) that intrinsic motivation means that an individual has chosen to participate in the activity. However, the majority of ABE participants are attending by choice, so something else besides the reason for participating needs to explain those who persist longer. Exploring whether an individual's enrollment and work toward the goal are personal or situational

was deemed important. Situational interests are those that can vary by circumstances such as unemployment or the need to find a better job that requires an HSE. While two participants mentioned a desire to earn an HSE to get a job or a better job, none of them were experiencing a “disorienting dilemma” (Johnson & Reynolds, 2014, p. 40) pushing them to enroll. Rather, each participant cited their own desire to prove themselves in what would be defined as a long-term goal. This would fall under the realm of personal interest rather than situational. This aligns with the subjects in Johnson and Reynolds’ (2014) study who noted a “long-standing desire” to return to education (p. 40). Asma’s words about her own situation and why she believes she completed her secondary credential support this, “But if you have it in your heart, like you want to do it for yourself if you want to have a better future. You know you'll do it.”

Clarity of Purpose. Nash and Kallenbach (2009) called the trait of being goal-oriented *clarity of purpose*. Both Dörnyei (1998) and Tighe et al. (2013) highlighted that learners must not only be able to express what their goals are, but they must be pursuing those goals by choice. All three of this study’s participants expressed clarity of purpose. All three were attending ABE by choice. Evidence comes in the form of Gabriel’s conscious decision to leave high school and move into ABE to complete his credential saying, “I will find a way to finish high school or get the GED” and from Asma’s longer-term goal of college explaining that “In my head I wanted to do some college, but I cannot get to that until I do my GED.” Min explained her thoughts through the process, “You need to know what it is your goal and how do you finish that. And every time when I think it's very hard or I want to give up, I always talk to myself. I say, Just one step more. Just one step more.”

Progress. Chapter Two discussed the role that relevant and meaningful measurements of progress play in persistence. Being aware of progress seems to build motivation in individuals with long-term goals. In breaking this down, some of these measurements came from within the institution, and will be discussed with those factors later, while some came from the subjects themselves. For example, Min, unable to go back to the school for progress assessments on tests because of COVID-19 closures, was attuned to her own development. She noticed that she understood more words when she read. Asma, too, noticed her own comprehension was improving. She said that she was “understanding more of the teacher. When she explain, and when they do some things on a board, you feel like, Oh, you can get it now.” Finally, Min believed that once she solidified her GED goal and began more self-study, her progress became more noticeable. “After I decided to take the GED, I read a lot of books. I do a lot practice, so I find that my progress is very, I mean, rapid.”

Self-efficacy. A learner’s belief in whether they can accomplish a specific task is an important factor in many studies (Comings et al., 2000; Dörnyei, 1998; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). This study specifically asked three questions during the interviews to uncover how the former ABE participants felt about being able to complete their secondary credentials:

- Did you think this was something that you could do?
- How difficult did you think it would be?
- Was there ever a time that you thought getting your GED/diploma was too difficult?

There was an overarching sense of self-efficacy expressed in the answers received. Min’s

strategy of the order in which to take the tests based on the experiences of other Chinese students also created a sense of the GED being attainable for her from the start. She explained, “If you take the math first, right? It's very easy. Give you more confidence to take another subject.” Asma expressed the fact that she expected that she would need help to study, but it seemed that she felt that her ABE classes were the support she needed in her pursuit. She explained:

I need help, too. I mean, I don't know everything. I know some of the stuff. . . I didn't find a lot of problems like some other people starting, but I did have problems, too, that I need help to improve it to get my GED. So by me coming over there [ABE classes], even if I'm not attending the whole day, the whole hours, but I feel like those two hours –it was helping me.

When Gabriel began ABE, he claimed that he did not know how long it would take him to earn his HSE. He seemed willing to attend for as long as necessary. However, he underestimated the strain of two jobs on his studying and attendance. Then he faced a setback when he did not pass the first GED exam he attempted. He explained how his mindset changed, “Yeah, the first time that I took the GED test. I said . . . now this something I will not be able to do even. It's too difficult for me. Because I got a lower score. And yeah, that was—I got sad for that.” However, Gabriel enrolled in ABE a third time. This time he was working less. He was dedicated, his term, to completing the GED at that time. When it came to retaking the math exam that he had failed, he said, “When I got the chance to retake the test. I was like, No, I'm not gonna fail this. I'm not gonna fail. And I put a lot of effort into that.” This demonstrates that even someone who has self-efficacy in a task can have setbacks and challenges that might see that self-efficacy

wane on occasion, but the knowledge that coming back to the task and putting in study needed would see him through demonstrates that Gabriel knew he could achieve a passing score in time.

Determination. Choosing a goal for oneself and knowing that it is something that can be achieved are important individual factors. However, long-term goals often need perseverance to be seen through. Individuals might need to hold that goal steady in their sights despite things that may hinder them. The three participants in the student each demonstrated a determination to complete their goal. It was clear that Asma was resolute in her goal. She said, “I feel like you have to have it in your head. You have to feel like you want to do it.” Min talked about how she knew she just had to keep moving forward despite things getting difficult. Gabriel summed up his experience of enrolling in ABE three times before completing the GED this way, “I want to finish this, but something happens. And it keeps calling me, so I have to keep going.” This sense of their purpose and the desire to reach it seemed to carry them through the lows of the process.

Resourcefulness. Reynolds and Johnson (2014) claimed resourcefulness is a feature of persistent learners. All three participants mentioned some level of resourcefulness in their own goal attainment. From Gabriel’s viewing of YouTube videos to Min and Asma’s search for study materials on their own, we can see ways that they all found resources to support their learning. There was also resourcefulness of time in the way Asma fit in school into those few hours a day when her kids were at school and how Min found time to study late at night when her children were sleeping.

The list of potential individual factors of persistence is long, but many appeared in the data collected on the study participants. Considering the different ages and

backgrounds of those interviewed, it is notable that there were some common factors. All three had a clear goal which was ignited by a personal long-held desire for improving their education or employment. While Min discovered the GED only after she enrolled in ESL classes, she quickly identified it as a means to reach her desire to eventually improve her employment outlook. The participants interviewed were resourceful with their time and the materials they used for study. While the belief that they would complete the GED occasionally was challenged, all shared an overarching understanding that with time and effort, the tests could each be passed. Furthermore, ways of noticing progress beyond test scores were cited.

Family Factors

Each study participant had family support to some extent. While none of the subjects had parents living in the United States with them, all three had the support of a spouse. Gabriel had a girlfriend turned wife, who was there for him since his time in high school in Minneapolis and throughout his time working on attaining his GED. Both Min and Asma had their husbands. Min's husband also previously attended ABE English classes at her school. It was noted that all three indicated on their questionnaires that their parents did not graduate from high school. Min and Asma's parents only attended elementary school with Asma's father only attending long enough to learn to read and write. Gabriel stated that his parents only attended middle school but did not attend high school.

Min and Asma were busy raising their children for many years, and both decided to enroll in ABE after their youngest children were enrolled in K-12. As Comings et al. (2000) suggested, having older children appears to aid persistence. Both Min and Asma

also cited their children as reasons for attending ABE. For Asma, enrolling led to her being better able to support their studies. She described that after some time spent in Tunisia, some of her children struggled with the schoolwork once back in United States schools. She wanted to be better able to help them when they had questions about their work. Once she started participating in ABE she said, “I felt after I did that . . . I don't have to answer ‘I don't know.’ I can help them, you know, solve that problem. . . so I said I need to help myself to help them.” Min’s elementary children proved useful at times with her own learning, “Sometimes I if I don't understand a word . . . They give me . . . correct– pronouncing it correctly. If I really don't understand, I asked them and they will explain to me.”

Family factors are often about timing and priorities. Waiting until children were spending part of their day in school left Min and Asma with time to put their own education back into focus. However, they still juggled their families’ needs with their goals. In Asma’s case especially, the desire to be able to assist her children with their schoolwork was a driving influence in coming back to ABE so many years after immigrating to this country. Gabriel's children were not cited as a reason for any of his stopping out or re-enrolling, but he, like the others, mentioned the support of a spouse.

Institutional Factors

What role do ABE schools themselves play in the support of learner persistence? What seems to be important according to studies are the instructors that learners encounter and the routines and communities created within their classrooms (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013). All three participants attended larger schools that were able to support leveled classes. There is stability created

by students attending with other learners of similar skill in this way. Both programs monitor attendance and often have waiting lists for classes. This means that those enrolled are expected to attend a certain percentage of the time class is offered.

Instructor Impact. At the heart of support from the ABE schools is the teacher-student relationship. All three participants stated gratitude and appreciation for at least one of the teachers with whom they worked. Min's unique online experience due to the pandemic could have meant less opportunity to build relationships with instructors, but her ability to have virtual counseling sessions with the ABE staff seemed to help a great deal. Gabriel cited the teacher who individualized his GED instruction to fill what Gabriel called the "gaps" that he needed help with. Not having to learn content that he already knew seemed to make a big difference in Gabriel's momentum. He also noted that the teacher gave him a book which he found encouraging. Min appeared to have one instructor from whom she got a great deal of support. This woman encouraged Min to go take the official RLA GED test after narrowly missing a passing score on a practice GED Ready test. The instructor told Min that she believed Min could pass the official test, so she took it and passed. Min also noted that the instructors were giving students additional materials based on their individual needs and goals. Asma felt she had a good teacher who was able to assist the varied immigrant students in her class. "So, they need a little bit patience for somebody to explain more. You know, and not everybody can understand the same."

The link between the relationships of teachers with students and students feeling respected and as though they belong is obvious. Take, for example, how Asma described her teacher, "She was really friendly. The open mind that she have time for you. Even

though if you're struggling with this subject, she make you feel welcome to talk to her and you know, explain like, because every, not everybody know how to speak good English." A teacher like this can then create several factors for support for the multilingual students. She has established relationships and shown respect; therefore, creating a welcoming classroom for her learners who may have had negative experiences with school in the past or doubts about their ability to learn as adults.

Structure. Each participant was able to describe structure within their schools in the form of some routine they remember from their classes. Gabriel recalled a reading routine that occurred once a week that he found helpful. In addition to the teacher posting a daily schedule, Asma also found the writing routine in her ABE class to be very beneficial. The teacher assigned a daily paragraph. Asma described it this way, "At first, maybe I found it a little bit hard. . . But everyday you write two or three sentences more. You find yourself moving forward, writing more and more." Since all three participants mentioned the difficulty of the RLA extended response essay, this seemed to be an effective routine for Asma. "If I was just practicing at home," she admitted, "I guess I wouldn't practice writing by myself. I don't know if I'm doing it right."

Amid chaotic pandemic life, Min's teachers had routines that helped her with her classes. They were able to find effective routines while delivering lessons in this new way. Min talked about getting the text for the next reading class in advance, allowing her to read and prepare for the lesson ahead of time when her schedule allowed. She stated that she got a lot more out of the lessons when she could prepare.

Establishing Goals. The extent to which goals were discussed with the study participants varied, but it was present for all. Each one cited that goals were discussed at

intake. Gabriel, who when he began ABE was placed in classes specifically designed to increase his reading level, did not seem to recall any discussions beyond those at enrollment until he made an account on the GED website quite a while later. Asma stated there was quite a bit of discussion about goals when she began, and they talked about short-term and long-term plans that she had. Further, after taking progress tests, the staff would discuss her goals with her again and whether she was close enough to take next steps. For Min, the shift in her goal from improving her English to earning her GED was discussed. Her ABE site had regular online conferences, and she was able to discuss her shift in focus with her instructors.

Measurable Progress. Being aware of the progress being made was discussed as an individual factor previously in this chapter, but institutions providing indicators of progress also support learner persistence. Each participant was asked *How did you know that you were making progress?* The approved ABE standardized assessments, CASAS and TABE, helped Asma. “Maybe sometimes you don't know until you do the test,” she explained, “. . . and you see that you're doing better on it, and you feel like, oh, okay, you're ready.” For Gabriel, identifying progress came from passing GED pretests. Passing a pretest can play a significant role in measuring progress because some learners do not progress in the EFL levels but are able to pass the practice assessments. While Gabriel did make one EFL gain, moving from level three to four, he and Min did not see their reading EFL move into the high school level. Asma managed to score an EFL of five before leaving ABE, which indicates ninth and tenth grade mastery. The numbers and levels provided by practice tests and standardized assessments played a role by helping each of these learners see their progress while working toward their goal.

Relevance. This leads to a look at whether relevance of materials and content at the schools played a role in learner persistence. Once Min started targeting one GED subject at a time, she was finding prep materials in each area, and noticing that she was gaining knowledge in those areas. For areas that were already strengths, such as math and science, she focused on learning relevant English vocabulary. In the social studies and language arts content, she required more study. But her strategy of taking on one exam at a time based on the order other Chinese students had recommended led to noticeable progress and success.

In Gabriel's situation, the relevance may have been missing from some of his time in ABE. Because he scored in EFL three in reading when he began, he was placed into targeted reading classes and not always working on identifiable GED content. At one point in the interview, he mentioned the range of backgrounds of the other ABE students. He explained, "When I was at adult school, we were learning fractions. Which, for me, I already did on middle school. But for some of the students were something new. So I had to stick with them and learn with them." However, he did not believe that he did not need to build his skills entirely. He said, "So it was good for me to restart, so when I got the GED test, it was . . . a review of all that I learn." It seems that he did not feel that he needed to spend time doing everything that was being covered in the classes. Things seemed to change for him when he began GED preparation at the new school in 2018. "They actually gave me the GED book that I— so I wasn't taking any more, you know, reading." The content seemed to be more relevant for him, and he seemed to respond to focusing on preparing for the content areas of the set of tests. "But some things I already learned. So it was some, like some gaps that I needed. So they helped me a lot with that.

And then I took— that's when I took the real tests. . . I got happy because I actually learned how the GED classes were.”

Institutional factors come in many different forms. From encouraging teachers to predictable routines, much depends on how a learner feels once they walk into the doors of the ABE site. Having means to measure progress is also important. In this study we have this from the school in the form of assessments and practice tests which helped the study participants gauge that their time and effort was paying off. Goal setting and relevant materials were cited to various degrees in the subjects’ interviews. Gabriel perhaps had a more difficult time with goals and relevance, but he also began his HSE quest at a lower EFL than the other two participants. He had more ground to cover to prepare for the exams. However, when he reduced his work schedule and returned to ABE a third time, the new site seemed to be better suited to his situation and goal.

Community Factors

As stated in Chapter Two, community factors are people, outside of the learners’ families and schools, or programs that offer support to learners. Each participant was asked about who supported them outside of their families and school staff. Only Gabriel had someone specific to name. He mentioned the coworker who encouraged him to try the new GED site. Reynolds and Johnson (2014) found that connections and involvement to groups in the community were an aspect of this factor as well. However, all three participants were so busy at the time they attended ABE programming that they said they were not involved in anything aside from one mention of attending religious services.

Sense of Belonging and Classroom Community. The crossover from institutional factors to community can be seen in the creation of a sense of community

within ABE classrooms. The feeling of belonging that is created when learners are welcomed and respected is often one of the few communities that immigrants have. All three participants spoke about their schools positively, but Min did seem to miss out on some of the classroom community established in in-person classes because she was online. She did not become close to any particular students. Gabriel mentioned getting to know another young man and his sister in his ABE classes. Asma, on the other hand, seemed to benefit the most from relationships with other students. She said, “The group that I had, they all were working as a team. They help each other a lot.” She later ended up working with one former classmate. One thing that did not come up in research but is clearly a community connection is Min’s use of online forums where she was able to find support from the experiences of other Chinese students who had earned their GED in the United States. Their advice helped her form her strategy for working through the content areas of the tests. She read that other Chinese GED students had success starting with math. “So math, science, social studies, and language arts,” Min explained. “So that's why I choose these be my experience, too.” The shared first language and home country plus their experiences set her up for success.

Community factors for these three participants still seemed to center around their schools. We did not see community service or involvement listed by these very busy individuals. None mentioned any support from local services or government agencies, which can also be suppliers of this type of support. However, to some extent there was a sense of community created by the ABE programs, and in the case of Min, she found community support in another place: online.

Summary

The three sources of data collected for this study provided both quantitative and qualitative information that helped the researcher better understand what factors of persistence were present in each learner's life at the time they were pursuing their secondary credentials through ABE. The questionnaires and interviews provided information on educational and language learning histories as well as retrospective descriptions of the learners' situations to identify factors of persistence.

Chapter Five will conclude this thesis by presenting the major findings from this research as well as the researcher's major learning. It revisits the literature and its connections to the findings of this study. It discusses the limitations of the study as well as the possibilities for further research. Finally, the chapter will highlight the benefits to the field of adult basic education for multilinguals pursuing their secondary credentials.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Chapter Overview

Assisting multilinguals to achieve a secondary credential is one service offered through adult basic education (ABE). However, participants in ABE have often demonstrated difficulty persisting in programs and reaching their goals due to any number of barriers. This chapter presents the major findings and implications of the study focused on the research question, *What factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?* It also revisits the literature that provided a guide for the study as well as discusses the limitations of the study before highlighting the possibilities for future research and the benefits to the field of ABE.

Major Findings

In conducting the research for this study, many of the barriers to persistence as well as the factors that enhance it that had been raised in the literature were present in the lives of the participants while attending ABE. It was clear that these multilingual adults faced many of the same challenges that the general population of ABE participants often do. However, focusing on the three study subjects allowed me to take a deeper look into what it takes for a multilingual to persist and achieve a secondary credential. Through this process several things came to light.

Overwhelmingly, it was clear that the three subjects of my study had strong individual factors. These are the supports that are found within each person and which they have the most control over. Each was enrolled in ABE by choice and because of personal motivation rather than situational. They were attempting GED® completion

because of a long-term goal. These ranged from following through on the desire to complete high school, as in Gabriel's case; to be more employable, in Min's case; or to be eligible to attend college as Asma set out to do. Clarity of purpose was also keenly present. Aside from knowing their specific goals, the three participants had a solid sense of how to achieve those goals.

Additionally, each of these multilinguals demonstrated determination and resourcefulness. While supported by staff at their ABE sites, it is clear that they were each the driving force in completing a high school equivalency (HSE). Borrowing and buying additional materials outside of what was offered by the school is one example. Continuing to re-enroll and try again, is another. Approaches such as fitting school around children's schedules and finding 90 minutes to study late at night when they were asleep demonstrates both the strong determination and resourcefulness that was sustained for months by these multilinguals.

Finally, in the discussion of individual factors' prevalence, each learner expressed self-efficacy in achieving their goals. While there were times during their journeys which were more challenging, they overwhelmingly believed that they could get to their goal. Determination, resourcefulness, and self-efficacy all tie directly into Dörnyei's (1998) expectancy-value theory. The learners believed that they could achieve their goals and that the goal was worthy of pursuing.

Another major finding was that having the time to participate played a significant role. Those who were the primary caregivers to their children did not have time to dedicate to their education until the change in schedule that comes from having all their children enrolled in school occurred. In the case of Gabriel, attending while working two

jobs could not be maintained consistently. While some might be able to make progress with inconsistent attendance, coming in at an educational function level (EFL) level of three meant he had some ground to cover. We can see that the issue of time does not fall into one factor specifically. Ages of children is a family factor; however, availability of childcare and some sort of financial assistance for those trying to complete a secondary credential, a potential community factor, could have made significant differences for the learners interviewed. These types of programs and support do exist for some qualified ABE participants through local or state programs, but often the support does not get to where it is needed.

Finally, on a related note, a large takeaway was the lack of community support factors uncovered in the three study participants. None of the participants mentioned community involvement except for some church attendance. Furthermore, Gabriel's co-worker was the only individual outside of family, friends and ABE staff cited as supportive in the interviews. Asma may have unearthed the cause when she noted that she was too busy to be engaged with the community while raising her children and trying to attend school. I believe that the lack of time due to family and work constraints is significant, but I also feel that this factor of community support was not clarified enough in the literature I read. Nor do I feel I asked questions in my interviews that were able to truly get to the types of supports that might have been present outside the homes and schools of the ABE participants.

Revisiting the Literature

In Chapter Two, I explored literature related to my research question and determined that multilingual ABE participants striving for a secondary credential was an

under-researched group. In order to better understand what helps them persist in their long-term goals, I took a look at ABE and its secondary credential options and adult English language learners (ELL). I presented the definition of persistence that informed this study and pinpointed barriers to persistence in ABE participants. Finally, using a framework offered by Reynolds and Johnson (2014), I categorized factors of persistence into four major categories.

ABE Programs and Adult Secondary Credentials

The literature focusing on ABE programs gave a brief history of ABE in the United States with its goal of serving individuals with less than a high school level of mastery in reading, writing and mathematics. Today ABE consists of three subgroups: ABE, covering the basic skills instruction previously mentioned; adult secondary education (ASE), for those working on completing high school or the equivalent; and English as a second language (ESL), designed to improve English proficiency in those to whom English is not a first language. With approximately two million students leaving high school before completing their diploma annually (World Education, n.d.) and close to 20 million adults with limited English proficiency in the United States (Kennedy & Walters, 2013; World Education, n.d.) a need for helping adults who may have learned English as a second language to earn their secondary credential exists. Of foreign-born adults 25 and older, 29% do not have a high school credential (Sugarman, 2019). Some ABE participants, like Gabriel, immigrated to the United States and entered the K-12 education system here but did not graduate. ELLs have a lower national rate of graduation (Sugarman, 2019). In 2015-16, the overall rate was 84% but only 67% for

ELLs. All of this demonstrates the need for secondary completion support for multilingual adults.

Adult English Language Learners and Multilinguals

With as many as 50% of those enrolled in ABE across the nation being ELLs (NRS, n.d.), this is a significant and diverse group of learners. As immigration to the United States expands, an increase in non-native speakers of English is being seen. Some ELLs come to ABE with no background in English learning, while others may have had English as a foreign language in their home countries, as is the case with all three participants in this study. As can be seen in the subjects, educational histories can be quite varied as well. Min held a college degree from China, Asma completed high school classes in Tunisia but did not complete the baccalaureate exam, and Gabriel emigrated from Ecuador before completing high school there.

Added to the demonstrated number of adults needing to improve their English language proficiency is the fact that learning an additional language as an adult is different from both learning a first language and the way a second language is acquired at a younger age. The literature demonstrated both biological and situational factors affect language acquisition. All three subjects of this study began learning English as a foreign language in their home countries between the ages of 13 and 16; this is after the age that the critical period hypothesis considers ideal for language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Parrish, 2019). However, all were literate in their first languages, which Parrish (2019) noted as an asset to learning an additional language as adults, and they had metalinguistic knowledge and problem-solving skills at their disposal which has also been linked to second language proficiency (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Not all ELLs enrolling in ABE are there for the English language classes (Mellard et al., 2012). Some are participating or hoping to participate in HSE programs to earn a secondary credential in the United States. Because a multilingual may be assessed at an English proficiency level high enough to be tracked as an ABE student rather than an ESL one, knowing the exact number of multilinguals who want a secondary credential is problematic within ABE. The three participants in this study were tracked in ABE EFLs. Gabriel was initially given an English proficiency assessment but scored in the highest level, level six, and was soon given an ABE assessment where his reading came in at an EFL level three. Gabriel was placed into a targeted reading class. Min and Asma were assessed in ABE levels, with both beginning at an EFL level four in reading. They were in classes containing students with a mix of goals including greater English proficiency as well as GED and college preparation.

Persistence and Its Barriers

A great deal can be found discussing the need for persistence in order to reach a goal in ABE as well as the trouble for many ABE participants to persist. In addition, many studies have looked at what barriers adults have when it comes to persisting in ABE programs.

Persistence. The definition of persistence used for this study was offered by Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999) as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 3). Therefore, measuring persistence can include attendance, completion of a course or goal, and time spent in self study (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Nash and Kallenbach claimed that

attention to persistence is necessary for academic progress as well as leading to positive outcomes and improved quality of life for ABE learners. When selecting participants for the study, I looked for those who had achieved the goal of completing a secondary credential. The three multilinguals in this study required over a year of ABE instruction to complete their goals. Min was enrolled from February 2020 to November 2021 with a slight slowdown due to the emerging pandemic and its effect on how programming was offered. Asma was enrolled from September 2017 to December 2018 stopping out for three and a half months while her children were on summer break from school. These two learners each spent over 500 hours in ABE classes and on approved distance learning platforms. Also, both mentioned significant self-study. Gabriel first enrolled in September 2015. He completed his HSE about three years later, stopping out and re-enrolling twice. He actively attended ABE for about 15 months during that three-year period and accumulated over 300 hours of ABE instruction time. Gabriel exemplifies someone returning to the program when the demands of his life allowed (Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999).

Barriers to Persistence. The literature on the reasons why ABE participants do not persist is extensive (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Golden, 2017; Quigley, 1988; Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Quigley and Uhland (2000) discovered that as many as 74% of ABE participants leave programs before achieving their goals. Moreover, studies on the barriers to persistence are also common (Brod, 1995; Mellard et al., 2012; Quigley, 1998; Spellman, 2007; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Situational, institutional and dispositional categories tend to take learners away from ABE programs.

First, situational barriers are those based on a participant's circumstances with finances and work, childcare, health and transportation (Brod, 1995; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Parrish, 2019; Quigley, 1998). Gabriel cited the demands of two jobs as a situational barrier to his ABE attendance. Asma stopped out while her children had the summer off from school. When they returned to their classrooms, she did as well, but their care over the summer took priority over her education.

Additionally, institutional barriers are limitations placed on learner attendance and persistence that come from the ABE programs themselves (Brod, 1995; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Quigley, 1998; Schalge & Soga, 2008; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Examples are issues with class schedules and services provided (Brod, 1995; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Brod (1995) discovered that multilevel classes did not meet learners' needs, and irrelevant materials were problems as well.

As an example of an institutional barrier, Gabriel found it difficult to attend his ABE night classes while working two jobs. He struggled to maintain the minimum attendance required by the program, and both times he stopped out "poor attendance" was noted in his file. Programs often have a waiting list of new students, so a learner who is struggling to attend may be removed from the program to make room for another student. In his interview, Gabriel said that this was explained to him by the program and that he was told he could return when he was better able to attend. On the other hand, Asma, who was trying to fit her ABE attendance in between the schedule of getting all her children to school and needing to pick her youngest child up after his partial school day, was given the allowance of arriving late and leaving early. It is clear that flexibility for students is

difficult to balance with keeping class rosters full for those able to attend.

Finally, dispositional barriers are factors such as the perceptions of learners about their ability to succeed (Spellman, 2007). For example, low self-confidence and self-esteem can be deterrents to persistence (Brod, 1995; Hayes, 1988). Quigley (1998) suggested that dispositional barriers are where the most influence in learner persistence resides. Each of the three study participants mentioned times when their confidence wavered related to more challenging portions of the GED; however, it is in Gabriel that we see the greatest effect of low self-confidence on his persistence. In summer of 2016, he took, but did not pass, his first official GED exam. He stopped attending ABE, and in his interview he said that he became disappointed in himself. “I gave up,” he admitted.

In summary, of the three types, it seems that the participants in this study were most often met with situational barriers. Childcare and children’s schedules were prominent ones. So, too, was work. Gabriel struggled with maintaining two jobs and school attendance. While Min was able to complete her GED, she eventually left ABE, where she hoped to continue working on her English language proficiency, when the demands of her family’s business required her to do so. Contrastively, there were very few dispositional barriers that arose. Quigley’s (1998) observation on the effect of dispositional barriers seems true here. With few dispositional barriers, these multilinguals were able to reach their goals.

Factors of Persistence

When focusing on the reasons why some multilingual ABE participants do persist with their long-term goals there was information available on the general population of ABE students (Comings et al., 1999, 2000) as well as parallels to be drawn with ELLs in

community college (Ouellette-Schramm, 2019, in press a, in press b) who share many characteristics of the multilingual secondary credential seekers in ABE. Additionally, information on second language acquisition in Dörnyei's *Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning* (1998) can be applied to English language learners of all levels in ABE programs.

While compiling a list of potential factors of persistence, a framework initially presented by Thompson and Cuseo (2012) and used by Reynolds and Johnson (2014) emerged. Thompson and Cuseo claimed that culturally diverse K-12 students themselves, their families, schools, and communities were the major sources of influence in academic achievement. When these four pillars reinforced one another, students were more likely to be successful. In Reynolds and Johnson's (2014) study of ABE participants, these same four categories of support, individual, family, institutional, and community, were used. Throughout the literature read, factors mentioned fit into these categories, and I adopted this structure in locating factors in my study.

Individual Factors. Aspects of persistence that fall within each person's influence are considered individual factors of persistence. Existing literature identified many possibilities, and those mentioned in multiple studies and deemed relevant to completion of a secondary credential were included. Dörnyei (1998) offered an understanding of persisting in long-term goals such as learning a second language. The subjects of my study made it apparent that individual factors were powerful components in their persistence.

Motivation. Motivation addresses the reasons why individuals are pursuing a goal. The expectancy-value theories presented by Dörnyei (1998) seemed most

applicable to the multilinguals of this study. An individual's expectancy of success and the value that is placed upon completing the task are motivating factors and are presented as keys to persistence.

In interviewing the participants of this study, each saw earning their HSE as a valuable goal. Min wanted to be able to be considered for more jobs, Asma knew that she needed the GED as a starting point for college, and Gabriel held completion of his secondary credential as a goal from the moment he left high school for employment. Each, though met with challenges along the way, believed that they could complete the GED.

Dörnyei (1998) also raised discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. As a layer of intrinsic motivation, he identified self-determination, or participation by choice, to be a requirement. Mellard et al. (2012) called this a willingness of the individual to participate. In support of this, each of the HSE completers in this study were enrolled in ABE by choice.

A departure from the often-cited difference in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation was the distinction of personal versus situational motivation offered by Reynolds & Johnson (2014). Situational interest is dependent upon a learner's circumstances, such as unemployment, while personal interest is stable over time (Mellard et al., 2012). Persistence due to a desire to prove themselves would be a personal interest (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014); this was the case with Gabriel. Asma had more of what Johnson and Reynolds noted as a "long-standing desire" to return to education (p. 40). Min, too, had a long-held goal. For her it was improving her English, which was her first goal when she enrolled in ABE and which had been put aside while raising her children. She then

identified earning a HSE as a helpful goal for improving her chances of employment in a career she had more interest in.

Clarity of Purpose. Nash and Kallenbach's (2009) clarity of purpose is the characteristic of being goal-oriented and is addressed in many studies (Brod, 1990; Comings et al, 2000; Dörnyei, 1998; Ouellette-Schramm, in press a, in press b; Tighe et al., 2013). These studies project that students who can clearly identify their goals are more likely to persist. Further, Tighe et al. (2013) discovered persistent students also knew how they were going to achieve their goals. Clarity of purpose was strongly present in those interviewed for this study. Min's "strategy" for the order to take her tests based on other Chinese students' success is one example.

Progress. Seeing progress toward those clear goals increases the likelihood of persistence according to several studies (Brod, 1995; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000; Tighe et al., 2013). In the Tighe et al. (2013) study, participants indicated that progress measured by testing done by the program was motivating. Asma and Gabriel mentioned increased scores on the standardized ABE assessments as ways they knew they were progressing. Due to COVID-19, Min did not have these available to her for about a year and a half. The study participants including Min used the GED® Ready practice tests as measures of progress as well. Moreover, Min and Asma noticed that they were comprehending more in their classes and readings as they continued attending.

Self-efficacy. The belief in a specific task being attainable carries weight in several studies (Comings et al., 2000; Dörnyei, 1998; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Nash & Kallenbach (2009) linked self-efficacy to achievement which translates to persistence. Dörnyei (1998) added that self-efficacy will

also drive what tasks an individual attempts. When each individual in the study was asked if they believed that earning a GED was something they could accomplish, each answered that overall they believed they could.

Family Factors. The next set of factors can be linked to a learner's family. Studies indicated that family can provide support for persistence in the way of encouragement or motivation (Comings et al., 2000; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013). Supportive partners and parents were seen as factors, but so too were children. Some wanted to be able to better support their children financially or academically, as with Asma hoping to help her son who was struggling in school after a return to the United States. One clear connection to the literature was the age of children. Min and Asma waited until their youngest children were enrolled in school before beginning ABE. Comings et al. (2000) made the connection of older-aged children aiding persistence without defining what an "older-aged" child was. It seems that of the participants of this study, having children who no longer needed childcare, and having that opening of time in the schedules of the parents was the key. The family factors cited by the study participants were not as prevalent as the individual ones. However, it is clear that having children who no longer needed continuous care was a major factor for two participants.

Institutional Factors. The support that ABE programs can offer to participants are tracked as institutional factors. Landmark studies such as Nash and Kallenbach's (2009) *Making It Worth the Stay*, and those from Comings, Parrella and Soricone (2000) present several ways in which programs can have some effect on learner persistence. The list of potential factors included establishing goals, seeing progress, teacher-student relationships, and a sense of belonging in the program. All the study participants

mentioned goal discussions when they enrolled. Min also mentioned periodic online conferences with her instructors where goals were addressed again. Of all the institutional factors, teachers seemed to play the most significant role (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Skilton-Sylvester, 2016; Tighe et al., 2013). Practices like creating a classroom community that supported and respected the learners impacted attendance in the studies. The participants in this study had positive reactions to at least one teacher with whom they worked.

Community Factors. Community assets are the people, outside of family and teachers, and the programs which can offer support for individuals attending ABE (Brood, 1995; Nash & Kallenach, 2009; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). This includes employers or supervisors and also agencies that offer transportation, healthcare or employment. Connections to and involvement in community groups were found to be supportive (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). However, there was little of these kinds of supports mentioned by the participants in this study. Gabriel had a supportive co-worker who referred him to the ABE site in which Gabriel completed his GED. Two of the study participants mentioned church attendance, but not considerable activity or support from within the churches.

The idea of community within the classroom or school was often mentioned as a factor of persistence (Nash & Kallenach, 2009; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). This makes the distinction between this community of other students being an institutional or community factor difficult. Perhaps creating the community lies within the institutional level, but the existence of a community makes it a tangible community factor for those who feel they belong to a group while attending ABE. As

Tighe et al. (2013) found, programs that created a classroom community were found more effective at keeping students coming back than those which did not provide a sense of community. Asma seemed to find a sense of belonging to a group within her school; she mentioned classmates assisting each other in the classroom. Min, hindered by the constraints of the pandemic, was able to find an online community of Chinese students who had completed the GED and offered suggestions to others with that goal. While some components of community factors were present with the three individuals in this study, there was not a great deal cited.

Educational Inequity and Persistence

Before moving beyond the factors that support persistence, we cannot forget what Golden (2017) and Heckman and Rubinstein (2001) reminded us regarding noncognitive skills in the role of persistence. Noncognitive factors such as personality traits like dependability and consistency, motivation, self-efficacy and perseverance were found to be greater factors of school performance than cognitive skills (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). However, no one noncognitive trait was identified as a true indicator of future success in school in that study. In the case of this study, I do not believe that enough information was gathered to confirm or refute Heckman and Rubinstein. While individual factors like determination and motivation were key to the three participants' persistence, I have no way to filter through those factors to see which held the most value.

Golden's (2017) concern was that attributing success with noncognitive traits is harmful. It hides what is often inequity within education systems both here in the United States and in the home countries of those immigrating here. In short, let us not lay blame with the learners, but recognize that multilingual ABE participants come from

backgrounds that often included unfair conditions and a lack of tools and support. While the literature found factors that support persistence, it is important to note that a lack of these factors should not be seen as an effect of the learners' themselves. We cannot simply say that they need more "grit" to get to their goal. They need support to help them reach those goals as adults with complex lives and situations. Let Gabriel serve as a model for this. Expecting a teen to master English in just a few years so that he can graduate from high school while supporting himself financially at the same time is an unrealistic expectation.

Summary

The literature helped establish an understanding of ABE programs and participants as well as gain more understanding at improving proficiency in an additional language as an adult. Both barriers to and factors of persistence in the general ABE populations were also discovered. However, little research focused on what helps multilingual ABE students to persist in secondary credential programs. This is what led to the specific research question to try to determine those factors in my study.

Implications

Overall, the implication that has come into light is that despite a pool of possible supports that could aid learner persistence, individual factors seem to be the most significant. The presence of clarity of purpose, self-efficacy, and personal motivation in all three study participants implies that they are key factors. Therefore, a participant less centered on their goal or with situational motivation for achieving it might not have elements in place to persist. It is also implied that it would be more difficult for an

individual to persist if they felt that they could not achieve the full goal or some aspect of it.

The power of those individual factors leads to institutional implications. These personal supports lie within the learners themselves, and institutions have very little influence on what is going on within an ABE participant when they arrive at our schools to enroll. However, there are things that staff can do to support and bring awareness to those personal factors. It comes back to the idea of individuals being aware of the positive and negative aspects of their situations when they enroll. Discussions between ABE professionals and learners about motivation, goals, and other individual factors have the potential to strengthen those individual factors.

From the onset of the design of this research, I looked to gain understanding in what makes multilinguals striving for their secondary credentials persist over time even though the task may seem daunting. For my own ABE learners, the implications will help guide better counseling and assisting multilinguals with their secondary credential goals. The institutional factors that were discovered as key such as teacher-student relationships, relevance of materials, established goals and regular progress are important for my ABE site. Additionally, knowing which personal factors were most important can lead to meaningful discussions with learners about their goals and motivation and about the potential barriers that they may face and how to deal with them.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The first of which is the limited completion options of the subjects. Only HSE earners were questioned, and multilinguals who earned an adult diploma were not located. At the time of my study, the number of

HSE and diploma completers was impacted by the pandemic. In the case of adult diploma completers within my consortium, the small number of multilingual participants who choose the diploma option was almost non-existent. Also, because at the time of the study, Minnesota only offered the GED as a HSE, there were no participants who completed one of the other two HSE offered in the United States.

Another limitation is the amount of time that had passed since two of the three participants attended ABE and completed their GED. To counteract the retrospective nature of the study, it was planned to be carried out with participants who very recently completed an HSE or adult diploma. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which began over 18 months before participants were located, greatly reduced the number of ABE participants completing these goals between spring 2020 and winter 2022. While Min had completed her GED a few months before the study, the other two participants had earned their GED three years prior. In some instances, specifics were difficult for subjects to recall.

Finally, while time spent in ABE classrooms or using approved distance learning platforms can be tracked, how much each participant did in addition on their own cannot be measured. Both Asma and Min discussed significant self-study. They purchased or borrowed materials in addition to what they did with their instructors. Gabriel mentioned instructional videos that helped clarify content for him. There is no way to quantify this resourcefulness in the participants.

Future Research Possibilities

One clear advancement in future research in investigating factors of persistence in multilingual secondary credential seekers in ABE programs would be to conduct similar

questioning on participants not represented by this study; those who earned an adult diploma or completed one of the other two HSE available in the United States. Additionally, the three participants in this study attended high school in their home countries, with two completing the high school curriculum in those places. Finding multilinguals with less formal education in their home countries and looking into their persistence could be enlightening. The increase in diversity of educational backgrounds of individuals studied might help strengthen or call into question the findings mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The four pillars of support offered by Thompson and Cuseo (2012) provided a framework that could be used with other or more specific ABE populations of participants and could also be applied to the emergent bilingual population of high school students who may need to stay enrolled beyond four years to earn their high school diploma.

Also, since personal factors of persistence were found to be the most prevalent support in the subjects of this study, a more-in depth look at specific individual factors could offer useful information. As mentioned previously, the idea of motivation itself is a vast topic. This study targeted just a portion of the possible perspectives on motivation that seemed most relevant with the long-term goals of language learning and secondary credential completion, namely, personal or situational motivation as well as Dörnyei's expectancy-value theory. Studying motivation's role in persistence in and of itself would offer many possible areas of study.

After determining that community support factors were both difficult to define and rarely cited by the participants of this study, it is clear that a greater look into the idea

of community support is warranted. This could mean a great deal for the advancement of understanding its impact on persistence. With a better understanding of what community support factors are and how they can enhance persistence, ABE staff might be better able to help multilingual secondary credential seekers add these factors to their repository.

Finally, because ABE instructors like myself want to know how to best foster factors of persistence in our multilingual learners, programs could study the effects of counseling learners in ways to build their personal factors. They could also implement ways of increasing institutional factors and study the effects of new practices on learner persistence.

Use of the Results

This thesis will be available to others through access via Hamline University's Digital Commons. There is also potential to share the results with other ABE staff within my consortium and beyond through meetings or professional development.

Conclusion

Since having participants complete the questionnaire and interviews, in pursuit of an answer to the research question *What factors contribute to multilinguals' persistence in adult secondary credential programs?* I have adapted my discussions with my own multilingual students based on what came to light. My coworkers and I have been researching ways to better conference with our learners, and the information attained through this study is informing items I want to discuss with them. Being aware of the positive and negative forces that are present in their lives can help with their short and long-term goal setting. Do the learners have support in place? Why do they want to achieve their goals? Do they understand the autonomy that they have in the process? The

factors of persistence are already shaping how I support my learners and how I help them identify other factors in their life.

Having a greater understanding of the factors that can aid the persistence of multilinguals pursuing a secondary completion credential can have a great deal of benefit to ABE professionals. Knowing what the research has shown about the barriers to persistence and the frequency of ABE participants leaving ABE programs before goal attainment, knowledge of the aspects that support persistence can enhance the support that is offered from ABE programs. I entered this process with questions about what kept learners coming and what programs and teachers did to encourage them.

I do not think that anything uncovered in my study was new in regard to what institutions and instructors themselves can do to support learners. However, the empirical quantifiable data here can be viewed as evidence of best practices within programs. Things such as teacher-student relationships carry a great deal of weight for ABE participants. Feeling that they are seen and understood is integral. As Asma explained, having a teacher with whom she felt she could communicate and who was open to her and her classmates made her feel welcome.

Persistence involves a shared responsibility between learners and programs. Programs can do more to foster persistence with their practices, but they can also influence learners to nurture their own individual factors of persistence.

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Appendix A
Questionnaire

1. Did you earn a GED® or diploma?
2. How old are you?
3. Are you:
 - a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. In a long-term relationship
 - d. Other: _____
4. Do you have children? How old are they?
5. Are you working? What do you do?
6. Were you employed while working on your GED®/Diploma?
7. Did you change jobs while attending ABE classes?
8. Did you move while attending ABE classes?
9. Were there any changes in your family?
10. List the languages that you speak.
11. How old were you when you started to learn English?
12. What language do you speak at home?
13. How many years of education did you have before starting the GED®/Diploma program?
14. Did you graduate from high school in your home country?
15. Did you attend college or university in your home country?
16. If so, how long did you go to college?

17. Was any of your education in the United States?
18. If so, how long did you attend school in the United States?
19. Did your parents graduate from high school? (Separate by mother and father and yes, no and unknown)
20. How did you hear about the GED®/diploma program?
21. When did you start attending?
22. Have you ever attended another ABE program? When? Where?
23. How long did you attend ABE classes?
24. How many hours per week did you attend?
25. Were there any times that you could not attend/stopped attending? If so, why?
26. Did you study at home?
27. How many teachers did you have?
28. Describe your classes: Please check all that apply to your classes at the ABE school.
 - a. Attend a large class (20 or more students)
 - b. Attend a mid-sized class (10-19 students)
 - c. Attended small groups (2-9 students)
 - d. Worked independently
 - e. Worked on computers
29. What will you do now that you are done?/ What have you done since you finished?

Appendix B
Interview One *

1. What was school like for you in your home country? **Or** What was school like for you when you were younger?
2. Why did you decide to enroll in classes?
3. Did anyone encourage you to enroll?
4. What was your goal when you first enrolled?
5. Why did you want to get your GED®/diploma?
6. How did you feel when you started attending the GED®/diploma program?
7. Did you think this was something that you could do?
8. How difficult did you think it would be?
9. Was there ever a time that you thought getting your GED®/diploma was too difficult?

*Factor addressed: Individual Family Institutional Community Multiple factors

Appendix C
Interview Two *

1. Describe a typical day in class. Did the teacher(s) have any routines? Did you know what to expect?
2. What was your experience with your teachers and other staff at the school **or**
What has your experience been with your teachers and other staff at the school?
3. Did you talk to your teacher about your goals?
4. How did you know that you were making progress?
5. Who helped you while you were enrolled?
6. Was there anyone outside of your family and the school who encouraged you?
7. Were there any students that you became close to?
8. Did you receive any help from other local or state programs to attend ABE classes?
9. How are you involved in your community?
10. How has completing the GED[®]/earning your diploma affected your life?
11. How do you think being bilingual/multilingual affected your time spent on this goal?
12. Why do you think you finished?

*Factor addressed: Individual Family Institutional Community Multiple factors