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Second chances: Making meaning from adult literacy students returning to school

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Second chances: Making meaning from adult literacy students returning to school

by

Helene Joyce Grossman

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

2012

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to several people who, at different times in my life, offered me the encouragement to return to my haven—education. Thank you to the following people:

To my dear father, who always championed my efforts and encouraged me to laugh.

To my mother who taught me that even when life is hard, you can rise above the clouds.

To my husband, Howard, who always said, “We are getting our PhD.” Thank you for your patience and support.

To my daughter Paige, who is a great teacher and a lifelong learner (as well as a wonderful mother).

To my son, Ethan, who has found his place in the world.

To my daughter Peri, who provided late evening conversations when I needed to be distracted.

To Mick, for making his dad laugh when I was working too hard to amuse him.

To my grandson, Sam, who still wonders why I had to go to school in the summer and if I could give shots when I became a doctor. I hope I inspire you!

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To my sister, Sandy, my brother-in-law, Burt, and my niece Dara, who taught me about courage.

To my niece Maris, who will always support me.

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ABSTRACT

Sokolowski (2000) summarized the phenomenological attitude by saying, “We look at what we normally look through” (p. 50). Through interviews and document analysis, this study looked at the lives of six students and their decision to return to their education to earn a high school diploma. The purpose of this study was to illuminate how the students made meaning of their return to education, considering their life experiences and significant people who influenced them in their lives.

The findings of the study reflect that although the students may have experienced trigger events that led them to transition back into a school environment where they felt that they mattered, their liabilities continued to distract them from meeting their goals. Not addressing their needs, such as lack of problem-solving skills, lack of or minimal resources to support them in addressing personal and family issues, and the absence of a stable support network, may prevent them from finishing their GED. In addition, their fragile determination may be overcome by the influence of people who chip away at their self-esteem and commitment, including significant individuals who, as polar catalysts, may be encouraging and discouraging at different times.

Adult literacy program staff can support students by providing opportunities to build a social network among students, being intentional about identifying potential barriers to success and personal liabilities, and guiding students to use their assets to counteract what could potentially deter them. The students’ strengths, the people who influence them, their educational lifeline, and their ability to set and achieve goals related to their education can be actualized through these efforts.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Nearly 15 years ago, Lori left behind drugs, alcohol, and homelessness and turned her life around. She decided it was time to get her high school equivalency diploma by attending the GED program at Valley Ridge Community College so she could find a job she loved that paid her a decent wage. Lori’s husband told her she could do it, but she was not so sure. “I got scared every time I thought of going back to school,” said Lori. “I kept thinking I’ll never get math! I went to see the instructor, and she told me I’d already done the hardest part—coming in to class.”

Ben enrolled at the Rockwell Community College Adult Learning Center in July of 2008. At the time, Ben was a widowed, single father of four struggling to help his children with homework he did not understand. His 8-year-old daughter had surpassed his reading and math level by third grade, and frequently stumped him with homework questions. Ben knew it was only a matter of time before his younger children would have the same questions. Involvement in his children’s education was the primary catalyst for Ben’s return to the classroom.

These are examples of success stories of Iowa’s adult literacy students who returned to continue their education because of personal hardship, a desire to help their children with their homework, or a need for a better paying job. Not having experienced success in their previous educational efforts, Lori and Ben made decisions to return to their education to change their futures, realizing that they would face challenges and need fortitude to succeed. What brought them back? What people in their lives and life events encouraged them to
make the difficult yet life-changing decision to join the ranks of literate adults with a high school credential? What enabled them to succeed in completing their GED?

Adult literacy students come to the community college programs in Iowa for a wide variety of reasons. They may enroll in adult basic education, English as a second language, or GED instructional classes, depending upon their skill level upon entry. These instructional programs are designed for adults lacking competence in reading, writing, speaking, problem solving, or computation at a level to function in society, employment, or in a family. Many students in these classes lead lives that are often challenging for them, their families, and their community. The lack of basic skills requires them to cope with low-paying jobs, problems helping their children with homework, low self-esteem because of their prior experiences with education, and possible financial or health problems associated with the inability to read and understand directions.

Aslanian (2001), who studied why adults return to school, stated, “To understand an adult’s life schedule is to understand his or her need for learning” (p. 57). In an earlier study, Aslanian (1989) hypothesized that transitions and triggers, small or large, are the key factors in understanding why adults return to school. “Moving from one status in life to another requires learning” (Aslanian, 1989, p. 6). In addition, “an identifiable event triggers an adult’s decision to learn at a particular time. The need, the opportunity, even the desire to learn, are necessary but not sufficient” (Aslanian, 1989, p. 7).

Schlossberg is another researcher who studied the topic of students returning to school as adults (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998). Schlossberg’s transition theory, a theory of adult development, provides a theoretical framework for studying why adult literacy students return to their education, including those factors that will impact their
experience. Her work also addressed the coping supports available and needed by the students and strategies that may support students experiencing change (Evans et al., 1998).

Understanding what motivated these students to change their lives will improve the ability of educators to provide the support students need to ultimately reach their goals and benefit themselves, their families, their community, and society.

**Problem**

There is a serious disconnect between the number of adults in Iowa needing a high school diploma and the number participating in adult literacy programs. According to GED Testing Service (2010), 10-15% of Iowa adults do not have a high school diploma. However, of the 289,280 adults in this target population, only 2.1%-3%, or 6,351 adults, took the GED tests in 2009 (GED Testing Service, 2010). Another disconnect is seen in the success rates of participating students. In 2010, close to 30,000 adult literacy students participated in Iowa’s community college adult literacy programs, but just one third made an educational gain. In addition, close to 9,500 students enrolled in GED instruction, but less than half earned their GED (Schenk et al., 2011).

Although there is some available research about why higher skilled adults are motivated to return to their education, there is limited research related to what motivates or triggers the GED-level population to decide to return to school. One way to expand the available knowledge base is to fill this gap in the literature and provide a voice for the returning low-skilled adult literacy student. By situating the study within existing literature and by employing a phenomenological perspective, it will be possible to understand the phenomenon of their return to school by capturing the essence of their combined experience and potentially improve their chances of success.
Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the meaning low-skilled adults attribute to the experience of returning to school at a community college’s adult literacy educational center in a small town. For the purpose of this study, the return to education is generally defined as entry into an adult literacy program to earn a GED or high school equivalency credential. Ultimately, listening to these adult learners’ voices and making meaning of why they return to their education can provide needed insight into how to improve policy and practice. Through the description of their decision-making process and the people and life events that influenced their decision, the essence of their experience was derived to increase clarity among adult educators about what drives students to return, often while facing numerous life challenges.

This understanding will expand the limited body of research on this topic to enlighten student services advisors, adult literacy coordinators and teachers, workforce staff, policymakers, and administrators as to how programs can better recruit, retain, transition, and serve the students. In an effort to understand why so many students do not stay long enough to complete their credential, it is important to study why these students return to school, particularly in light of the recent economic crisis, when more adults are finding themselves without a job and without the basic skills necessary to secure a new position in a competitive market.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study addressed what meaning adult literacy students ascribe to their return to school. Questions for this study included the following:
1. How do adult literacy students describe their decision-making process to transition back to school?

2. How have people and life events influenced adult literacy students in their decision to return to school?

3. What meaning do they ascribe to these influences?

**Research Strategy**

Esterberg (2002) proposed the concept that qualitative research allows researchers to bring our own reality, our own connections to a study. She wrote, “We need to develop our own understandings of how our positions shape the research topics we choose and the methods we use to study the social world. Literally, what we see is shaped by who we are” (p. 12). Because the voice of the researcher was included in the essence of the study, this definition clarified that qualitative research defines the study.

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology is “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3) and is a “way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (p. 3). My epistemological view or philosophical stance was constructivism, a way of seeing how an individual constructs knowledge. Crotty (1998) described constructivism as an epistemology that focuses on the meaning making of the individual mind. Individuals make their own meaning of their life experiences, and each meaning is valid and worthy of respect with little room for critique. Building this study involved the reality of the individual participants as seen through my own reality, so constructivism was the appropriate epistemology.

The theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance behind a methodology (Crotty, 1998). It helps to focus the qualitative study and drives the methods selected to collect data,
and “is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Similarly, Crotty (1998) further defined theoretical perspective as providing “a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria” (p. 66). In addition, Crotty explained, “Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world” (p. 66).

The theoretical perspective I chose to use was basic interpretivist. Merriam (2002) defined this perspective as one in which the researcher seeks to understand how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, how they interact with their social world. “This meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6).

Phenomenology was the methodological framework for my research. Creswell (2007) described phenomenology as a study that focuses on several individuals and the meaning they each make of an experience or phenomenon. The collection of experiential data ultimately resulted in a description of the experience and its essence. I approached the research with bracketed assumptions about what I thought were the reasons the students returned to school and brought their life stories into a thematic analysis of what they collectively experienced.

**Significance**

In a very limited research arena, this study provides a previously untapped perspective about low-skilled adult literacy students. The significance of this study lies in the illumination of why students come to adult literacy programs and why they are making this life-changing transition, how the people in their lives affected their decision, the significance of life events, and their thinking as they made their decision to return to education. In addition, understanding why they come to adult basic literacy programs, what drives them,
and what their goals are can impact the field of adult literacy research, practice, and policy and offer much-needed insight to educators. Some of the data collection tools I developed and implemented will also impact orientations and student counseling.

Transition theory, as applied to adult literacy students, has the potential to impact the practices and processes at community colleges related to recruitment, orientation, instruction, and retention practices for adult basic literacy students. Transition theory research provides significant information for policymakers to assist in answering questions about what brings students back to education and to answer questions about the influence of what is going on in their lives, supports that are needed to assist in their transition into literacy education, and how best to engage students during their education for improved retention.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Basic interpretivist:* Merriam (2002) defined this perspective as one in which the researcher seeks to understand how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, how they interact with their social world.

*Convoy of Social Support:* Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) wrote about Kahn and Antonucci’s Convoy of Social Support. Using a series of concentric circles with the person at the center, the model demonstrates how people identify their support system, including family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc., and how the convoy of support protects, changes, and moves as it evolves over time.

*Constructivism:* Crotty (1998) wrote that constructivism is an epistemology “focusing exclusively on the meaning making activity of the individual mind” (p. 58).
**GED**: “General Educational Development (or GED) tests are a group of five subject tests which, when passed, certify that the taker has . . . high school-level academic skills” (“General Educational Development,” 2011, n.p.).

**Literacy**: According to the ProLiteracy (2011) website, literacy is defined as “the ability to read, write, compute, and use technology at a level that enables an individual to reach his or her full potential as a parent, employee, and community member” (para. 1).

**Member checks**: This strategy is employed to ensure validity. The researcher asks participants to comment on their interpretations of the data (Merriam, 2002).

**Peer debriefing/review**: This strategy includes discussions with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations (Merriam, 2002).

**Persistence**: This means “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” (Coming, Parella, & Soricone, 1999, p. 2).

**Phenomenology**: Creswell (2007) described phenomenology as a study that focuses on several individuals and the meaning they each make of an experience or phenomenon.

**Qualitative**: Esterberg (2002) proposed the concept that qualitative research allows researchers to bring their own reality, their own connections to a study. She wrote, “We need to develop our own understandings of how our positions shape the research topics we choose and the methods we use to study the social world. Literally, what we see is shaped by who we are” (p. 12).

**Reflexivity**: The term *reflexivity* is used methodologically to refer to the process of researchers recognizing their own biases, theoretical predispositions, and preferences. The
inquirer is part of the social phenomenon, and the research process needs to be examined critically to ensure validity of accounts (Schwandt, 2007).

Rich and thick description: This type of writing employs a strategy to ensure external validation or generalizability (Merriam, 2002).

Student services/affairs staff: “Student affairs (also known as student life or student affairs practitioners) staff provide services and support for students at institutions of higher education to enhance student growth and development in the United States and abroad” (“Student Affairs,” 2011, n.p.).

Transition: “Schlossberg et al. (1998) defined a transition as ‘any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles’” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33).

Triangulation: This involves “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31).

Trigger: Hardin (2008) employed the term trigger event in a study referencing major life changes that cause major stress for adults, something that students may be less tolerant of and may consider reason enough to leave their education should it be in process.

Summary

I have been the speaker at many GED graduations since beginning my work as State Director for Adult Literacy in Iowa. Invariably, I make eye contact with a few of the students for whom this event is clearly emotional. Recognizing their family and friends who have come to cheer them on, they may be joyous or solemn during the event. My own emotions often mirror theirs as I read in their faces that they have fought long and hard to get to this point in their lives.
Unfortunately, with over 4,000 GED graduates each year in Iowa, I am unable to sit with each student and talk about their lives and what has brought them on this journey toward high school completion. However, this study will illuminate the essence of their experiences by offering an opportunity to be welcomed into the lives of a few students to learn about their experiences, the people who helped them decide to return to school, and the significance of this event in their lives. I will also learn about their failures and challenges, those who may have sabotaged or derailed them, and what they believe educators need to know to help them succeed.

This chapter provided an overview of this dissertation and is followed by Chapter 2, which provides a review of the literature relevant to this topic, theoretical framework, and methodology. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, research design, and methods used in this study. It also includes a description of the research site, participants, and selection process. I also address my own qualifications to implement the study. Chapter 4 introduces the study participants; Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study, and Chapter 6 includes discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for further study, as well as my reflections.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are a variety of lenses a researcher might use to study the literature about why adult literacy students return to their education. A researcher might look through a psychological lens, examining the specific thought processes the students experienced when making the decision, or a sociological lens might shed light on how interacting with others influenced their decisions and experiences. The lens used to study the literature for this research was holistic, connecting the theories and ideas of multiple perspectives to best capture the essence of the whole experience of the students. The process followed in executing this literature review included an extensive search of the Internet and library journals using terms including adult literacy motivation and retention, transitions, transition theory, under-skilled adults, adult access, triggers, adult education, and persistence.

This chapter is organized by the topics of Defining Adult Literacy, Theories and Concepts, the Academy Supporting Adult Learners, and Setting Goals. Within the section on Theories and Concepts, various theories related to transition, validation, and support are included.

Defining Adult Literacy

Adult literacy in Iowa is delivered through the 15 community colleges. Local programs are funded through a combination of federal funding under Title II of the Workforce Investment Act and local contributions. There are strict federal guidelines as to who may participate in these programs. Requirements for inclusion are that learners must be 16 years old, may not be jointly enrolled in high school, and must be enrolled in an eligible program (Schenk et al., 2011).
Adult basic literacy instructional programs offer a progression of basic-skill attainment. Instructional programs offer noncredit courses in English as a second language (ESL), adult basic education (ABE), and General Educational Development (GED) instruction and testing. ESL instructional programs are designed for individuals with limited English proficiency (speaking, reading, writing, and/or comprehension) to increase their competence in English. ABE instructional programs are designed for adults lacking competence in reading, writing, speaking, problem solving, or computation at a level to function in society, employment, or in a family. GED instruction provides support for students seeking to earn a high school equivalency diploma.

According to the ProLiteracy (2011) website, literacy is defined as “the ability to read, write, compute, and use technology at a level that enables an individual to reach his or her full potential as a parent, employee, and community member” (para. 1). Low literacy connects to unemployment, health issues due to the inability to read prescriptions or doctor instructions, and results in expenditures of over $225 billion in workforce costs, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment (ProLiteracy, 2011). Across the United States, adult literacy may be offered through school districts, community colleges, community organizations, and faith-based organizations.

Data are collected by the GED Testing Service (GEDTS) as to why adults choose to take the GED tests. In the GEDTS’s 2010 statistical report, statistical information helped to paint the picture of the GED-level population. A total of 655,000 adults worldwide completed the five GED tests in the battery, with 1.6% of the adults without a high school diploma taking at least one test, 1.4% completing their tests, and 1.0% passing. The average age of all testing candidates was just over 26 years old; 70.2% reported completion of the
10th grade, and 30.7% of the GED candidates waited more than 10 years to take the test (GED Testing Service [GEDTS], 2010).

In Iowa, adult literacy programs are offered through the 15 community colleges, with each college offering instruction in a variety of locations and facilities across their counties to ensure services for rural and urban areas. The 2000 U.S. Census report indicated that 289,280 adults in Iowa lacked a high school credential, with 6,705 taking the GED battery of tests, which is 2.1% of the target population (GEDTS, 2010). Of those testing, 3,790 completed and passed the tests. The data showed that Iowa GED candidates indicated the top five reasons for testing as personal satisfaction (54%), get a better job (40.3%), attend a 2-year college (28.2%), be a positive role model (19.6%), and attend a 4-year college (13.4%; GEDTS, 2010).

Additional data are collected in Iowa on the state’s data reporting system for adult literacy that indicate the major reasons why students enter the adult literacy programs based on their choices on their program entry form. Educational staff may ask the students to check off a goal for returning to their education, but the goals may be program based rather than personal. The goals may also be more for program accountability and may not connect to the personal life of the student. In addition, programs often encourage students to make selections on the intake form used across the state that are more practical, informative, and measurable than those the student initially selects.

Recent data indicate that Iowa’s adult students (other than those working on English language skills) identified improving their basic skills and acquiring a GED or high school diploma as their primary goals and achieving a personal goal as the secondary goal. This information, collected and recorded during the student’s entry into the program, provides a
limited view of why Iowa’s adult literacy students return to their education, because although reasons are stated, little is known or asked regarding the lives of the students at the time they decide to return to school or the events and people that influenced the decision.

Offering adult programs at the community colleges in Iowa is an expensive effort, since Iowa does not have any targeted state funds. The local match, sometimes as high as 200%, provides the funding needed to meet the needs of the community, particularly as federal funding continues to decline. In other states, waiting lists are long and frustrating for staff as well as students. However, in Iowa the needs of all students are met, often to the financial detriment of the community college.

Theories and Concepts

Since much of the available literature relates to why adult learners who do not lack basic skills return to college or why adult literacy students drop out of school, understanding what prompts low-skilled adult literacy students to return to their education can give meaning to their experiences while enlightening educators about what will attract and retain them. Therefore, to best illuminate the issues related to adult literacy students, literature was reviewed related to transition theory, with particular attention to Schlossberg’s theory. Transition theory delves into the life events that may trigger an adult to make the decision to return to education and the process of making the shift to student. Another area studied is the concept of how the returning students feel (do they matter and feel validated?) and the significance of these feelings. In addition to life events having an impact on the return-to-school decision, the social support network is important. Positive and negative influences affect the return and persistence of students.
Triggers and Transitions

Adults who determined at some point that they needed to leave their education often struggle to make the decision to return. One of the community colleges in Iowa has the marketing slogan, “Life’s calling!” The slogan indicates the same reality that describes why the individual chose to or was forced to leave school. Literature related to adults returning to school describes the psychological and social implications of the departure, as well as the return.

Aslanian researched adult transitions and trigger events that result in returning to school. “Going back to school is less significantly a transition in itself than a consequence of some other change, actual or anticipated, in individual circumstance” (Aslanian, 1980b, p. ix). The results of a later study by Aslanian (2001) found that most adults consider career transitions as their motivation to return to school in order to change careers, advance, or stay current in what their present career requires. In an earlier study, Aslanian (1989) hypothesized that transitions and triggers, small or large, are the key factors in understanding why adults return to school. “Moving from one status in life to another requires learning” (Aslanian, 1989, p. 6). In addition, “an identifiable event triggers an adult’s decision to learn at a particular time. The need, the opportunity, even the desire to learn, are necessary but not sufficient” (Aslanian, 1989, p. 7). This researcher maintained that something takes place to kindle the desire to learn and identified the categories of trigger events as career, family, health, religion, and citizenship. Triggering events, which set the time to learn, can be earth shattering, such as a difficult divorce, loss of a job, or the death of someone close, but they can also be less dramatic but just as pivotal, including sending off the youngest child to college or moving to a new location (Aslanian, 1989).
Aslanian (1989) credits Knox with connecting adult learning and life changes. Aslanian’s study found that there is a need for new learning when a life change takes place, “it can be any change in a life role, and education can help with it” (p. 7). It is this trigger event that is the catalyst for new learning, and “transitions are the reasons for learning. Triggers set the time for learning. Both are essential” (Aslanian, 1989, p. 7). In addition, Aslanian (1989) and Goodman et al. (2006) included numerous references to Levinson’s study into the lifecycle timetable adults follow, which includes “stable (structure-building) periods alternating with transitional (structure-changing) periods” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 7).

Supporting these concepts, Beder and Valentine (1987) conducted a study of why adults make the decision to participate in adult education. In the 1999 National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) study of adult persistence (Coming et al., 1999), Beder was quoted as defining motivation as “the force that helps adults overcome barriers to participation in their lives” (p. 18). The Iowa study by Beder and Valentine was based on interviews with 323 ABE students in 1985. In their study, the researchers “knew that we would have to dig deeper to discover other levels of motivation—motivations rooted not in program goals but in the life situations of students . . . a richer and more important level of motivation” (Beder & Valentine, 1987, p. 10). They concluded that “students attend in order to actualize their motivations” and that “the content of instruction can be tailored to individual preferences, and the ‘teachable moment’ could be put to good use” if the motivation of the student was known (Beder & Valentine, 1987, p. 14). The implication here is that knowing the motivations of adult literacy students is beneficial to adult literacy staff and would ultimately be beneficial to the students.
The factor Beder and Valentine (1987) labeled as launching “a desire to restructure and take control of one’s life” (p. 16) led the researchers to conclude that adult literacy students in their study were more intrinsic than expected. As cited in Wikelund, Reder, and Hart-Landsberg (1992), Beder and Valentine found that literacy education is more than a vehicle to improve or acquire skills, and they referred to the process as a “symbolic activity” in which learners may expunge their internalized (and socially reinforced) feelings of inadequacy, and it is a “vestibule activity” necessary to enable participants (logistically and psychologically) to make changes in their lives” (p. 8).

Recognizing that there are multiple levels of motivation can influence the focus of this study. Beder and Valentine (as cited in Wikelund et al., 1992) drew from numerous studies to identify 10 motivations for attending adult literacy classes: self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion from everyday life, literacy development, community/church involvement, job advancement, launching into full adulthood, economic need, educational advancement, and response to the urging of others.

Adults are also drawn to continuing their education if they see a personal, identifiable benefit to the effort. These benefits could be additional income, a positive impact on family literacy, or self-improvement. “Individual expectations can be powerful motivators to initiate participation and to persist,” a concept related to expectancy theory where there is probability that efforts will result in the desired outcomes (Wikelund et al., 1992, p. 14).

Hardin (2008) also employed the term trigger event in a study referencing major life changes that cause major stress for adults, something that students may be less tolerant of and may consider cause to leave their education. In addition, such issues as psychological distress, identity crisis, lack of academic preparation, and a false sense of academic readiness
can be barriers for student success (Hardin, 2008). Hardin summarized the students’ efforts with the statement that “most adult college students are a portrait of life’s transitions” (p. 50).

The adult literacy population may not only lack basic academic skills but other skills as well. There may be challenges with family, health, jobs, and self-image. The inability to obtain or retain a job that requires a person to have basic reading and math skills may keep the students in a state of frequent change of job, relationships, and home. Kasworm (2008) fittingly referred to adult students who are unsure of themselves and their futures. . . . They often seek college entry through a life crisis. . . . These adults display emotional chaos as they develop a student identity, contemplate future success in collegiate classroom, and psychologically manage their turbulent life circumstances. In addition, they may have unresolved life issues that draw on their energy and time, as well as potentially negative past experiences of learning. (p. 28)

The literature related to triggers and transitions supports the concept that there is often a catalytic variable that encourages the decision to return to school. A well-known researcher in transition is Nancy Schlossberg.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

Transition theory is strongly connected to Schlossberg, who has written numerous books about the transition to college, retirement, and counseling adults. Schlossberg developed her transition theory in 1981 and later revised it with colleagues Waters and Goodman in 1995. “Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as ‘any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles’” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 111). A key component of Schlossberg’s work is the description of four main categories of adult development theory, which connect four perspectives: contextual, which connects the social environment to individuals; developmental, which includes age-related, stage-related,
and domain-specific development in studying change; life-span perspective, which focuses on the individuality of continuity and change; and transitional, which focuses on cultural and individual components of life events involving change (Evans et al., 1998).

Schlossberg’s research shines a light on the concept that “adaptation was affected by the interaction of three variables: the individual’s perception of the transition, characteristics of the pretransition and posttransition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 110). From these variables, a student can access coping resources, considered by Schlossberg to be assets, liabilities, or neutral elements. Schlossberg further identified three components of the transition process, which are labeled as “approaching the change, taking stock, and taking charge” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 111). The “taking stock” section introduced the “4 S’s”: situation, self, support, and strategies, all coping resources. Within each of these factors are a person’s individual assets and liabilities, which help to determine the person’s ability to cope with a transition. The assets and liabilities change over time and may cause the same person to react differently to the same situation at a different time or place. It is the individual’s view or perception of what is taking place that affects the balance of his or her assets and liabilities.

Within the situation phase, the individual may assess such elements as the catalyst for the transition, timing, what is within his or her control and what is not, changes in roles, duration of the transition, and other life stresses happening simultaneously. In addition, previous experiences with similar transitions have an impact, and the individual assesses the impact on his or her life. Self includes consideration of personal and psychological resources, such as gender, socioeconomic status, stage of life, health, ethnicity, and age, although age refers to where the person is in his or her life, rather than the age in years. Psychological
resources include the person’s coping tools, such as ego development, outlook, commitment and values, and self-efficacy. Support includes those relationships that will stay the same, those that will change, and those that are role dependent. Strategies include three main categories, described by Schlossberg (1994) as responses that change a situation, responses that control the meaning of a problem, and responses that manage stress. The four coping strategies include direct action, information seeking, inhibition of acting, and internal psychological behavior.

Schlossberg labeled the phases of transition as “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” (Evans et al., 1998). In defining transitions, Schlossberg described those that are anticipated, such as a graduation; those that are unanticipated, such as a sudden death; and those that are nonevents because they do not happen, such as the loss of a pregnancy or lack of acceptance into a college (Evans et al., 1998). In addition, these transitions have an impact on an individual should they happen to the person, should a person close to the individual be affected as a result of an event, or if the event is still anticipated. All of these transitions have the potential to cause stress for the adult. However, the assets and liabilities of the student determine the extent of the impact, and the individual’s perception of the transition is a key component of the coping process (Evans et al., 1998).

Evans et al. (1998) described the integration of Schlossberg’s transition model with the Cormier and Hackney counseling model to assist college staff to support students by providing a structure for considering what helpers can do to assist students going through a transition. An assessment tool, the Transition Coping Questionnaire, and an accompanying guide, cocreated by Schlossberg, could assist educators in assessing the students’ coping
resources and capabilities, particularly if it was customized for adult literacy students (Evans et al., 1998).

**Validation and Mattering**

Adult literacy classes are frequently offered at night in facilities that may be far away from the college campus. Parking lots may be dark; student services offices may be closed; and supports such as easy transportation, childcare, and food service may not be available. These factors may be interpreted by students as signs that they are not welcome or that their needs are not significant. Research into the importance of helping adults to feel that they are important to the educational institution sheds light on why many do not feel comfortable returning.

Chaves (2006) wrote about the challenges adult students of all ability levels face when returning to school, including “identity development, students’ sense of mattering and validation, gender differentiation, and the central effects of one’s own background” (p. 140). In citing other researchers, such as Schlossberg and Rendón, Chaves (2006) contended that colleges need to recognize the presence of the adults on campus and demonstrate that they matter.

Rendón (1994) supported this concept with the suggestion that mattering can be accomplished through validation that occurs in and out of the classroom. Rendón defined validation as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 46). In addition to the efforts of instructors, peers can provide validation. Rendón supported the belief that validation can result in a student’s increased belief in his or her self-worth, affirming that he or she has something to offer. Chaves (2006) applied Rendón’s theory of validation to adult
students and extended the concept of validation to seeing the value of the knowledge and experience adult students bring to the classroom. He supported using these characteristics as learning resources for the student.

Rendón’s theory of validation has six elements, which the researcher applied to Latino students in her 1994 study. However, the application of the elements to adult literacy students is also relevant. The first element puts responsibility for initiating validation strategies on educational staff rather than on the student, who may be reluctant to ask questions of college staff. The second element connects validation to self-worth, and the third element recognizes that “validation is a prerequisite to student development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 645). Additional elements suggest that validation can occur in and out of class with a variety of people supporting students in this effort, and it is “a developmental process as opposed to an end in itself” (Rendón, 1994, p. 645). The last element encourages fostering validation early on in the college experience.

Rendón (1994) described validation as both academic and interpersonal, both needing college staff to intentionally connect with students to help them believe that they are “capable of doing academic work and to support them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment” (p. 16). Rendón (2002) specifically outlined several strategies for faculty to employ in fostering academic validation, including showing genuine concern, being approachable, treating students equally, working with students individually as needed, and providing meaningful feedback. However, these skills need to be taught to faculty and staff.

Schlossberg’s (1994) theory of marginality and mattering complements Rendón’s work as it weighs in on the importance of validation. Schlossberg defined marginality as “not fitting in,” and mattering as “our belief, right or wrong that we matter to someone else” (p.
5). Schlossberg identified four dimensions to mattering, including feeling noticed by others, feeling cared about, feeling that others will be proud of one’s achievements and understand any failures, and feeling needed. Schlossberg connected persistence to students’ need to feel that they matter to the college environment and recommended strategies for student support services staff to help students feel that they matter, including specialized services adapted for adult needs; information about and opportunities to develop skills related to adult development, transitions, and college experience; advocacy; a clearinghouse for campus services and resources; referrals to adult student resources on campus and in the community; and adult student support groups, networking, mentoring, and counseling, including outreach and peer support (Evans et al., 1998).

Feeling marginal does not encourage a student to persist in education. There are numerous strategies that might be employed by the college to help the students feel that they are an integral part of the learning community. However, these strategies often require funding and time, two scarce commodities at the community college level.

**Social Support**

In addition to needing validation from college staff, adult literacy students require a personal support system. Goodman et al. (2006) wrote about Kahn and Antonucci’s Convoy of Social Support. Using a series of concentric circles with the person at the center, the model identifies the individual’s support system, including family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, and shows how the convoy of support protects, changes, and moves as it evolves over time. The distance from the center circle represents levels of closeness and importance, with the inner circle showing whom the individual most closely relies on for support.
Levitt (2000) is another researcher who addressed social development across the life span in her research, which includes the Convoy of Social Support model developed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980). Levitt (2000) defined attachment relationships as those for which an individual would feel grief should the relationship dissolve. She described the convoy model as capturing the function of protecting the person and the “dynamic nature of the social network as it moves with the individual over the life cycle” (Levitt, 2000, p. 81). The model includes change and continuity, as well as continuous evolution. Change, as it is portrayed in the model, can result from changes in the individuals or changes in the environment.

Levitt (1991) saw the social support convoy as representative of the close relationships of the individual and pointed out that within the inner circle of the Convoy of Social Support, there are usually three to five people, including parents, close family members, and one or two close friends, a small number over the life span, which, according to Levitt, remains constant. As Levitt wrote,

The presence of at least one close relationship contributes to the individual’s well-being. Attachment relationships at any point in the life span serve the function of providing the individual with a secure base from which to encounter the inevitable stresses of life. As with infants, relationships across the life span vary in the extent to which they actually provide this for the individual. (p. 200)

Some of the relationships may be connected to those connections the student developed very early in life, experiencing change during the individual’s life. Levitt (1991) supported the belief that at least one close relationship is crucial for personal well-being. Additional points about Levitt’s research pertinent to the support system of adult literacy students include the contention that developmental changes in the relationships may result from changes in cognitive ability, raising the question of the impact on the relationships during the process of working toward a GED.
**The Academy Supporting Adult Learners**

As Koltai (1993) suggested, the role of community colleges in addressing the needs of adult students has changed since the 1980s by attracting those who are employed, newly unemployed, or needing specialized training by offering accessible locations and flexible hours. By offering career programs and transfer agreements with high schools, colleges, and universities, community colleges expanded their net of service to the community. Another factor in the expanded role of community colleges in meeting adult education needs is the increase in nonnative English speakers, often coming to the United States without literacy skills in their own languages (Koltai, 1993). In addition, Koltai found that community colleges have seen an increasing need for remedial and introductory courses, sometimes called developmental. Students sometimes have unrealistic expectations regarding their ability to pursue advanced degrees and have to adjust their expectations.

Koltai (1993) was discouraging about the needs of future students: “Community college leaders must recognize and resolve the challenge presented by the need for additional remedial and basic skills courses, especially when increases in this part of the curriculum come at the expense of more advanced, sophomore-level courses” (p. 110). Although the funding sources have not followed the need, Koltai saw the community colleges as achieving the “overarching purpose of education: making winners out of ordinary people” (p. 112).

Research into how learning about adult literacy students can improve how educators serve them is an important component of this study with potential impact on the field. Carbone (1982) wrote about a 1980 study by Aslanian and Brickell about why adults return to school. The study was intended to help educators and institutions anticipate the needs of adults. Carbone stated,
In trying to gain some predictive basis to attract and plan for growth of the adult student population and, consequently, use our buildings, curriculum, faculty, etc., better, we in the community college are obliged, if we are to plan accurately and properly, to look at what precipitates an adult’s return to formal education. (p. 64)

Carbone (1982) cited the 1980 study, which found that there are seven areas in which adults might experience trigger events that would ultimately cause a transition to formal education, including career, family, leisure, art (aesthetics), health, religion, and citizenship (Aslanian, 1980a). The authors of this study saw direct implications for community colleges and considered understanding students and being responsive to their needs vital (Carbone, 1982). The results have potential implications for recruitment, instruction, and retention strategies, and Carbone urged offering education and orientation to staff, flexible scheduling of classes, and providing resources for staff.

Kasworm’s (2008) research reiterated the concept of adults seeking college entry following a life crisis or some “form of significant individual need” (p. 28) and offered suggestions for college staff to support the returning adults. Kasworm suggested that supportive messages, personal attention, and advising opportunities, career counseling, and an environment specifically welcoming to adults are crucial. Hadfield (2003) supported this view and encouraged staff and faculty to avoid considering adults who depart from the educational process as not retained, contending that students will return if “we do our job correctly” (p. 19).

In addition, Hadfield (2003) claimed that customer service is the most important strategy for encouraging adult retention: “Excellence in customer service is the single most important factor in determining the future success or failure of our programs for adult learners, now and for the foreseeable future” (p. 19). Hadfield outlined the following
characteristics of an adult-learner-friendly college: listening to their needs, helping the students feel they are part of the community through flexible student support office hours, ease of entry and registration, lighted buildings during evening class times, institutional support of adult-learner organizations, childcare, free and available parking, family-friendly social activities, and “no long lines for anything” (p. 21).

Other strategies described by Hadfield (2003) include engaging students in conversations about their needs; awarding credit for the knowledge and skills of the customer; identifying changing needs in the job market and in expectations of workplace skills; having caring and trained teachers; encouraging learning opportunities that immediately apply learning concepts; listening to the complaints, questions, and suggestions of the students; having actions match words; supporting ongoing measurement of customer satisfaction; and having all staff, from the top administrators to the front line, demonstrate these principles.

Setting Goals

The importance of setting goals is supported by a 1999 NCSALL study of persistence among adult literacy students in which respondents listed multiple reasons for returning to school, with the largest number answering that obtaining the GED or acquiring reading and writing skills was their reason (Coming et al., 1999). Work-related goals, a desire for self-improvement, and a hope to continue on for more training or to attend college were also frequent responses. Of those who responded that a specific individual goal was the reason, 72% persisted as opposed to 54% of those who did not identify a specific goal (Coming et al., 1999). The implication is that setting a goal sets a bar for students to reach as they proceed in their educational efforts. The NCSALL report cited Beder’s research in support of
“the formation, understanding, and commitment to individual goals” as a response to his suggestion that “adult students are weighing the benefit of reaching their life goals against the cost of participating in the education that will help them achieve those goals” (Coming et al., 1999, p. 61).

The NCSALL report (Coming et al., 1999) further encouraged program staff to assist adult literacy students in the management of the positive and negative forces that will impact their education as a strategy to help the students meet their goals. Using Lewin’s force-field analysis theory, the NCSALL study looked at barriers and supports and determined that “programs must help students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence. Building on that understanding, each student must make plans to manage these forces so that persistence is more likely” (Coming et al., 1999, p. 6). The effort should also include strategies the students may employ and how to adjust their plans during their education. In addition, the programs should help students build self-efficacy about being able to meet their goals by helping the students to believe that they can be reached (Coming et al., 1999). Using the force-field-analysis strategy can assist the students to state a goal, identify the pathways toward meeting the goal, identify all potential barriers to reaching the goal, picture the pathways and barriers as forces acting in opposite directions, and strategize about how to reduce barriers and build pathways (Goodman et al., 2006).

Coming et al. (1999) proposed that the goal-setting process begins before the students come back to school, when they experience an event that causes or triggers them to seek education. Similar to Schlossberg and Aslanian, these researchers described these events as dramatic, such as needing to return to get a job, or less dramatic, such as wanting to help a child with homework. The event could even be something as simple as suddenly having free
time due to retirement or having children in school. It is this event that provides the returning
students with a goal, and it is important for the students to measure their progress (Coming et
al., 1999) with portfolios and authentic assessments useful for demonstrating that the students
are moving toward their goal.

In Claus’s (1986) study of the impediments to and facilitators of adult students’
success during their first semester at a community college, he outlined five steps adults must
complete to achieve their goal, including “1) making a commitment to return to school,
2) learning to manage the learning process, 3) developing subject matter competence,
4) planning for employment, 5) becoming employed” (p. 4). Although not written
specifically for adult basic literacy students, this progression of steps fits this population
well, as many students enter their program because of a desire to either get or retain
employment. Claus found that “having goals and strong motivations, regardless of whether
they were purely economic or partly personal and self-worth oriented, seemed to contribute
to students’ success in school” (p. 27). Claus’s research and study results were used to shape
recommendations for community colleges to better serve adult learners. Recommendations
for college staff included encouraging interventions related to the lives of the students
outside of school, classroom experiences, and improvement of academic services (Claus,
1986). Many recommendations mirrored those of Hadfield (2003), including childcare, adult
student support groups, and training for staff to make them more sensitive to the issues of
adult students.

**Summary**

Much of the literature reviewed addressed adults returning to traditional community
college programs rather than adult basic literacy programs located at community colleges.
However, adults with limited literacy skills or those who have never achieved a high school credential often make the decision to return to education based on a trigger event or transition in their lives. Often these adults, facing numerous personal, social, and economic challenges, are influenced in a positive or negative way to avoid or to return to school by the people and events in their lives. The forces they face may overwhelm them and discourage the process or sweep the potential students forward as they move the individuals toward or away from meeting this goal. This concept connects to transition theory and the impact of a student’s “assets” or “liabilities” when coping with change resulting from a transition. Students at all levels of ability need to feel that they matter and benefit from validation. This is just one area in which college staff can make a difference and guide students closer to success in meeting their goals.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Background

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the meaning that may be ascribed to the experience of low-skilled adults returning to school at a community college’s adult literacy educational center in a small town. This understanding will expand the limited body of research on this topic to enlighten student services advisors, adult literacy coordinators and teachers, workforce staff, policymakers, and administrators as to how programs can better recruit, retain, transition, and serve the students.

The research questions guiding this study included the following:

1. How do adult literacy students describe their decision-making process to transition back to school?
2. How have people and life events influenced adult literacy students in their decision to return to school?
3. What meaning do they ascribe to these influences?

Through the research process, the participants shared details and insights related to their return to education, including the impact of significant life experiences and the people in their lives who have been either a positive or negative influence in the process, and how they have made meaning of their experiences.

Research Framework

The epistemology of constructivism, the theoretical perspective of basic interpretivism, the methodology of phenomenology, and the methods of interviews and document analysis focused this research study. The emphasis was on the individuals’
experiences, the meaning that can be made of those experiences, and how I, as the researcher, then interpreted and described, through rich, thick language, the essence of why the participants returned to their education.

Esterberg (2002) proposed the concept that qualitative research allows researchers to bring their own reality, their own connections to a study. She wrote, “We need to develop our own understandings of how our positions shape the research topics we choose and the methods we use to study the social world. Literally, what we see is shaped by who we are” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 12). Because I have familiarity related to returning to education as a result of my own experiences, it would be challenging for me to completely remove myself from the study. Therefore, I framed the study using qualitative inquiry and research design.

Qualitative inquiry, according to Schwandt (2007), “aims at understanding the meaning of human action” (p. 248). Although Schwandt addressed the ambiguity of the definition, he stated that “broadly speaking, qualitative methods are procedures including unstructured open-ended interviews and participant observations that generate qualitative data” (p. 7). Merriam (2002) defined qualitative research as an approach where meaning is “constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). Interpretive qualitative research focuses on how individuals make meaning of this interaction. In describing the characteristics of interpretive qualitative research, Merriam stated “that researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences; that is, how do people make sense of their experience?” (p. 5). In addition, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Qualitative research is inductive and results in a richly descriptive product that is from the perspective of the participant (Merriam, 2002).
The process begins with “assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research questions inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). This research study matched the characteristics Creswell (2007) advocated for qualitative research, including being conducted in the natural setting in which the participants were having the experience; the researcher collected the data using tools including document analysis and interviews; multiple forms of data were used to make sense of what was collected; data were analyzed inductively with participants involved in theme development; the focus was on the meaning that the participants made of their experience; the research process was emergent; a theoretical lens was used; the inquiry was interpretive with the readers, researcher, and participants all having their own interpretation of the study; and a holistic picture of the problem or issue was created through the research process.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

Crotty (1998) clarified that ontology refers to “what is” and epistemology to “what it means to know” (p. 10). My epistemological view or philosophical stance was social constructivist. Crotty wrote that in this worldview, meaning is not discovered but constructed, and we are invited to reinterpret as we “approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning” (p. 51). Building the study involved the reality of the participants as seen through my own lens.

Creswell (2009) described social constructivism as an approach where researchers “hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 8). It is the researcher who, relying on the participants’ views and interactions with others, “makes sense of (or interprets) the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell,
2009, p. 8), with the realization that his or her own background will influence the interpretation.

Transition theory, particularly Schlossberg’s work, framed the research. However, the transition work of other researchers was integrated. Transition theory provided a framework for illuminating the change process for adult literacy students. This included possible catalysts for resuming their education and their abilities to cope with the reentry process and all the challenges accompanying the changes in their lives. Since Schlossberg’s work strongly connects to the purpose and research questions of this study, particularly as it addresses assets and liabilities that affect a student’s ability to cope with challenges, it had a strong influence on this study.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Crotty (1998) described theoretical perspective as the “philosophical stance lying behind a methodology, a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and criteria” (p. 66). He added to the description with the concept of assumptions, which shape researchers’ theoretical perspective in connection with the world they study. Succinctly, “different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). The theoretical perspective of interpretivism connects well with the epistemology of social constructivism.

Merriam (2002) defined a basic interpretive study as one in which the researcher seeks to make meaning of how the participants make meaning of something in their lives. The researcher is an “instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Methods used often include interviews and document analysis to find the common themes across the data collected. The description of the themes and the
interpretations are developed using rich and thick language, and the researcher refers back to the literature reviewed to determine how the interpretations or meaning making concluded by the researcher are situated in the literature previously studied. The final interpretation is how the researcher makes meaning of the data, and a key result is *verstehen*, or understanding.

**Methodological Approach**

In this dissertation, the phenomenon of adult literacy students returning to school was studied. Creswell (2007) described the steps to use with phenomenology, and these steps served as a guide. I employed methods related to the phenomenological approach, including in-depth and multiple interviews to offer an understanding of what the participants shared through this common experience. I looked for significant statements, their meanings, and themes that became clear while participants portrayed the common essence of their life experience—the phenomenon of returning to school. I identified significant statements in the data and clusters of meaning, and used thick, rich description in my writing to bring to light the themes seen through participants’ experiences. In addition, a description of the context or setting was included. I wrote about the essence of participants’ experiences and positioned this information within the existing literature. I also included a reflection on my own life experiences that reflected those of the participants.

Sokolowski (2000) and Moustakas (1994) provided definitions and descriptions of phenomenological studies. Sokolowski (2000) described phenomenology as “the science that studies truth” (p. 185) and its limitations. Similarly, Moustakas (1994) defined the phenomenological approach as “a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective, structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). The phenomenological researcher gathers descriptions
from participants who have had the experience to be studied, and meanings are made. Quoting Heidegger, Moustakas provided this definition: “Phenomenon means to bring to light, to place in brightness, to show itself in itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of day” (p. 26). Continuing in his definition, Moustakas stated that phenomenology is also described as a method of knowledge that attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (p. 41)

Moustakas (1994) addressed significant aspects of phenomenological research, including epoché, intentionality, transcendental phenomenological reduction, bracketing, and horizontalization. Epoché is defined by Moustakas as “to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33). It requires that researchers look at experiences without presuppositions to see the reality before them, clear of ordinary thought so they may see what is before them with purity of mind and senses. Intentionality requires researchers to be “present to ourselves and to things in the world, that we recognize that self and world are inseparable components of meaning” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28).

In the transcendental phenomenological reduction, “each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Sokolowski (2000) embellished this definition with his description of the phenomenological attitude. He stated that transcendental reduction leads researchers away from “the natural targets of our concern, ‘back’ to what seems to be a more restricted viewpoint, one that simply targets the intentionalities themselves” (p. 49). It is the epoché that is the neutralization of researchers’
natural intentions and bracketing that occurs “when we suspend our beliefs, and we bracket
the world and all the things in the world” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 49).

Horizontalization, as discussed by Moustakas (1994), addresses the concept that
every perception matters to researchers’ interpretation with perspectives added as they extend
meanings. He wrote, “As we look and reflect there are acts of memory relevant to a
phenomenon that reawaken feelings and images and bring past meanings and qualities into
the present” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 53). In addition, “Horizons are unlimited. We can never
exhaust completely our experience of things no matter how many times we consider them or
view them” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). Sokolowski (2000) summarized the phenomenological
attitude by saying, “We look at what we normally look through” (p. 50).

As Moustakas (1994) stated, “The method of reflection that occurs throughout the
phenomenological approach provides a logical, systemic, and coherent resource for carrying
out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p.
47). He further applied principles, processes, and methods to human science research by
summarizing the “core facets” (p. 58) to include (a) focusing on the appearance of things just
as they are given; (b) addressing wholeness by finding a unified vision or the essence of the
phenomenon; (c) seeking meaning from appearances while arriving at the essence through
intuition and reflection; (d) using descriptions to “keep a phenomenon alive” (p. 59);
(e) recognizing the personal interest of the researcher and his or her ultimate connection to
the phenomenon with consideration of memory and history; (f) seeing the integration of the
subject and object as “what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and
with whom I am” (p. 59); (g) considering intersubjective reality or the “continuing
alteration of validity that occurs as people articulate and describe their experiences” (p. 57);
(h) considering data of experience, which include “my own thinking, intuiting, reflecting, and judging” (p. 59) as the primary source; and (i) forming the research question to “guide and direct me in the phenomenological process of seeing, reflecting, and knowing . . . developed solely to illuminate the question, and provide a portrayal of the phenomenon that is vital, rich, and layered in its texture and meanings” (p. 59).

**Research Site**

Adult literacy programs are provided through Iowa’s 15 community colleges. Each college has a main site at which adult literacy programs are offered (which may or may not be on campus) and numerous satellite sites across the counties served by the college to provide access to students. Some programs have dedicated facilities for adult literacy students that may be located in a downtown area, close to where many of the students live and work. Churches or YMCAs may be close to provide childcare, and transportation access is also a consideration.

Research for this dissertation was conducted at River View Community College’s Adult Literacy Center (the Center), located in the downtown area of a community serving four counties in Iowa with a total population of 94,863. The population of the community has changed in the last decade, with an increasingly diverse population. River View Community College has a unique approach to adult literacy and offers a dedicated downtown center that responds to the needs of its students, many low-income and English language learners, by offering an accessible location and a varied schedule of classes for many ability levels. The Center, which opened in 2003, is colorful, offers a personal approach, and provides a comfortable environment away from the regular campus, which can be daunting for adult learners. Programs include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for persons from any
country or culture, General Educational Development (GED; high school equivalency) classes in English and Spanish, citizenship classes, computer classes in English and Spanish, and customized classes for local businesses. The focus is on service and convenience, including a family literacy program and free childcare for students enrolled in daytime and evening classes. The Center prides itself on the community atmosphere and extensive, ongoing support system.

In addition to adult literacy classes, the Center utilizes technology to assist students with personal development of study, literacy, and employment skills; offers software to boost language skills; and provides academic software, typing tutorials, and a computer lab available to students to improve educational experiences. Through a federal grant, the Center offers pre-CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) classes, technology lab instruction, and a family literacy component. Most classes are free or very low in cost, which attracts students to this unique learning environment.

Besides my long working relationship with the staff involved in adult literacy, I have lived in the community in the past. Therefore, access to the Center was workable, and the director was helpful in identifying the staff that worked with GED students and was eager to have her staff learn about the research study findings when the document was complete. In addition, the president of River View Community College was supportive of the research.

**Participants**

Students with various literacy levels attend classes at the Center, so careful consideration of the preferred characteristics of the study participants was required for purposeful selection. In designing the research, I considered the optimal proficiency level of the students for the study and determined that students at the preliterate level who may have
little or no English and only basic oral, reading, and writing skills would not be included because of their limited ability to provide written documents for analysis. In addition, English language learners new to the country or community often have a different set of needs for returning to school, as they want to acquire language skills to communicate in a new environment, so I did not seek participants from this population. There are multiple GED classes offered at the Center each week, so there was a generous group of potential participants for the study. I assumed that the GED-level students would have sufficient verbal ability to understand the interview questions and sufficient writing ability to complete the documents requested for analysis. In addition, the students all take the same five GED tests, so I expected that their experiences at the Center would have similarities that would increase the consistency of their present educational experiences. My conclusion was that the study would include GED-level students.

I also determined that the participant pool should be diverse. For the study to address a variety of perspectives, six participants were selected to participate in the study from the GED level of classes representing a mix of gender, age, background, ethnicity, family experience, and previous persistence in educational endeavors. It was also pertinent to select participants who were likely to remain in the program during the timeframe of my research and who, when grouped, would create a cross-section of students.

Data Collection Procedures

As Creswell (2007) suggested, I used multiple sources for data collection, including semistructured interviews and documents. I proceeded through the steps of locating a site and gaining access. My next steps included creating a purposeful sample, collecting and recording the data, resolving any field issues, and storing the data. Creswell saw data
collection as a “series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 118).

Preceding the start of my study, all required Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol was followed, and informed consent forms were provided to all potential participants (see Appendix A). I shared IRB approval from Iowa State University (see Appendix B) with the Institutional Research Department at River View Community College to be sure I met with their approval. Although the administration had supported this research (see Appendix C), I met with them to clarify my study and address any questions or concerns on their part before I proceeded. A conversation also took place with the adult literacy coordinator and the GED staff I would be working with for the study, to be sure they were comfortable with the process and had questions answered.

Document Analysis

Document analysis provided pertinent data for this study. The first source of data was a written document completed by those students willing to participate in the study at the Center. The assignment asked potential participants to write a short essay describing why they decided to return to school. On the initial document, they were asked to describe themselves, including age, race, employment status, family structure, gender, ethnicity, and a brief description of previous attempts to earn a high school diploma. This information was reviewed for all potential participants, and I selected six from the group to proceed with my study.

For additional document analysis, I asked each of the participants to work on an Educational Milestones Lifeline (see Appendix D), a timeline on which they showed significant events in their lives and paralleled those events with their educational milestones,
including stepping in and stepping out of the educational process. They were asked to chart
the times when they made decisions about their education, what was happening in their lives,
significant conversations they had, people or events that influenced their decisions, and how
their decisions came to be made.

Another document I used for data collection was a map that was based on the Convoy
of Social Support model of Kahn and Antonucci (1980; see Appendix E). This tool provided
important data related to the people who provided support to the students during their
decision to return to school, including their educators. In addition, drawing on Lewin’s force-
field analysis theory as a foundation (Goodman et al., 2006), I asked the participants to
prepare their own Force-Field Analysis worksheets on which they identified those positive
and negative forces that have encouraged them in and discouraged them from completing
their education (see Appendix F). Finally, I asked each participant to write a letter to the
person who influenced him or her the most regarding his or her decision to return to school.
This person may have been a support or a detractor, and the letter’s delivery to the person
was the decision of the student.

Interviews

As Creswell (2007) suggested, prior to conducting interviews, I created an interview
protocol to use to assist me with staying on track with my research questions and for
organizing data following the interviews (see Appendix F). Reminders about documents to
address during each interview and tasks to assign before the proceeding interview were
included, as well as a reminder to thank the interviewee and ask if he or she had any
questions during each session.
I referred to Seidman’s model for qualitative interviewing, consisting of three in-depth interviews with each participant for data collection, concrete details of the lived experience of each participant, and reflection. Seidman (1998) claimed that “every word people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (p. 1). Seidman presented a three-interview structure for in-depth, phenomenological interviewing that I followed. Using open-ended questions, I sought to understand the essence of the participants’ experiences. As Seidman stated, “People’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (p. 11).

The first interview followed the completion and review of the initial class essays. After the study participants were identified, contacted, and an initial appointment was made for the first interview, I reviewed the personal information submitted and asked for any necessary clarification. This was also a time for the participants to ask me any questions about their involvement in the study. At the beginning of the first interview, each participant was asked to select his or her own pseudonym to be used for the study to protect his or her identity. I asked participants about their essay and focused on their past experience related to their return to education. During this interview, we constructed the Educational Milestones Lifeline together.

The second interview provided more details about participants’ experiences. As Seidman (1998) suggested, this interview was not a time for opinions, but it was a time for discovering “details of their experience upon which their opinions may be built” (p. 12). We revisited the lifeline to address additional details the participants may have wanted to add, and questions were asked for clarification. During this interview, we talked about their Convoy of Social Support, and we filled out the template as a means to collect data related to
their relationships with individuals who have supported or discouraged them in their lives, particularly in reference to their educational endeavors. I asked specific questions about the presence or nonpresence of individuals, such as educators. The participants were asked to think about the Force-Field Analysis and to begin a letter to the person who influenced them the most. They were asked to come to the next interview with thoughts about each of these documents.

The third interview was for reflection and summary. I discussed the letter with the participants, and we completed the Force-Field Analysis together. Final questions about their return to education were addressed, and they had a chance to provide any additional thoughts they wanted to share. In the third interview, Seidman (1998) stated,

> Making sense or meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their present lives. (p. 12)

As Seidman (1998) suggested, I maintained the proposed interview structure and scheduled the three interviews for 45- to 60-minute sessions from 3 days to 1 week apart. This compressed timeframe kept the participants involved and allowed for almost immediate clarification of any responses. With “in-depth interviewing we recognize and affirm the role of the instrument, the human interviewer” (Seidman, 1998, p. 16). Seidman recognized that the meaning made as a result of the interviews is more than the participant and the interviewer as separate entities. The relationship and interaction enriched the collection of data. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.
**Journaling**

To ensure consistency and dependability of my data, I kept an informal research journal in which I recorded details of my experiences and perceptions. As Merriam (2002) suggested, I also included how I collected my data, how I determined the categories, problems or issues I encountered, and any decisions I made that impacted the study. The journal not only helped me to recall details but also assisted in maintaining an audit trail. Merriam also suggested that the journal include “a running record of your interaction with the data as you engage in analysis and interpretation” (p. 28), and the journal I kept did include this information.

**Data Analysis**

To make sense of the data, I followed several steps related to phenomenology as cited in Creswell’s (2007) description of the procedures recommended by Moustakas (1994). These steps included identifying the phenomenon to study, bracketing my own experiences, collecting data from study participants, analyzing the data by reducing them to significant statements, and combining the statements into themes. I then described the “what and how” of the participants’ experiences to develop the overall essence of the shared experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). My use of phenomenological methods of data analysis as described by Merriam (2002) included phenomenological reduction, where the researcher focuses on the phenomenon itself to comprehend the essence; horizontalization, where data are set out as having equal weight; and imaginative variation, where the data are examined from a variety of perspectives.

Creswell (2007) suggested data analysis steps of coding, which included “reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments, combining the
codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables and charts” (p. 148). Coding of the transcripts was employed to help organize the information into segments of text, by grouping, and assigning categorical titles that summarized the contents of each group. This was accomplished using color coding to map the responses and to identify and connect interview sections with related content. After the interview transcripts were color coded, I looked for the interrelationships among categories and recoded as necessary, wrote a textural description of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon, and developed a composite description of the phenomenon.

To assist with describing, classifying, and interpreting, as well as representing and visualizing, I analyzed the transcripts and documents to discover trends and themes, and I sought out significant statements made by the participants and developed summary statements that captured the essence of their experience. The codes or themes represented the phenomenological approach with a focus on the experiences of the participants. After finalizing the categories into descriptive themes, I connected my findings to the literature and looked for coded data that were unique or did not fit.

Creswell (2007) specifically addressed phenomenological data analysis and representation in the description of the various steps in the process, with unique characteristics becoming evident in the descriptive phase where the researcher will “describe the personal experiences through epoche and describe the essence of the phenomenon” (p. 156). In the interpretation step, the researcher is encouraged to develop a textural description of “what happened,” a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants, and finally the essence (Creswell, 2007, p. 157).
Goodness and Trustworthiness

Merriam (2002) described goodness in a qualitative study as “whether the study was conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner, such that the results can be trusted” (p. 24). Merriam offered two tables to assist in analyzing qualitative research, one of which provides descriptors related to the problem, methods, findings, and discussion. In an effort to evaluate the qualitative research conducted in this study, questions were addressed related to the research and the tables provided. I employed Merriam’s principles of goodness and trustworthiness using a variety of methods.

Member Checks

Member checks, as defined by Merriam (2002), take place when initial interpretations of the data are shared with study participants in an effort to determine if the researcher is on track. During each of the three interviews I conducted with the study participants, we discussed the documents and addressed the accuracy of my interpretations from the previous interview.

Triangulation of Data Sources

To ensure the goodness and trustworthiness of my study, I triangulated the data using multiple interviews, observation of the participants during the interviews, and document review. Merriam (2002) referred to triangulation as “using multiple investigators, sources of data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (p. 31).

Peer Debriefing

I employed peer debriefing by discussing my preliminary findings with classmates and colleagues to get their opinions about my interpretations, as suggested by Merriam.
(2002). During this discussion, my peers were invited to offer suggestions about my interpretations and the selection of themes.

**Rich and Thick Description**

Another strategy to ensure goodness and trustworthiness is the use of rich and thick description to assist readers in determining the transferability of the study findings.

Encouraging participants to clarify, describe, and elaborate in their own words assisted in this process. In addition, reflections written in my research journal captured immediate responses and descriptions for later inclusion.

**Reflexivity**

Finally, my own critical self-reflection was offered in a reflection journal that provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my assumptions, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study.

**Interview Process**

Another contributing factor to the goodness and trustworthiness of the study was the interview process. Seidman (1998) contended that the three-interview process can assist the researcher in accomplishing validity. Three separate opportunities to engage with participants over a brief period provided an opportunity to check for consistency. In addition, by interviewing several participants from the same adult literacy center, comparison of the site experiences could be checked.

**Researcher Positionality**

Schwandt (2007) described reflexivity as a process in which a researcher examines his or her own feelings, biases, and theoretical predispositions about a topic. It is self-reflection. Having returned to my own education several times as a result of life experiences,
I was a resource for my own topic but needed to maintain validity by focusing on the richness of the data collected from the participants.

As Creswell (2007) stated, “Phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also seen as an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation . . . of the meaning of the lived experiences” (p. 59). Therefore, it became critical that my own return to education numerous times following losses and life traumas did not unduly influence my interpretation of the data collected. Similarly, Creswell described Moustakas’s phenomenology as focused less on interpretations of the researcher and more on what can be gleaned from the experiences of those participating in the study. Epoche, or bracketing, enables the researcher to look at data with a fresh, untainted approach by addressing the experiences of the researcher and then moving on to the experiences of others (Creswell, 2007).

In reflecting about my positionality, I was concerned that the participants might be swayed by my previous position as State Director of Adult Literacy. Similarly, because I had directed the programs at all community colleges, I needed to bracket my position and relationships with the staff to be sure they did not influence me or the thinking of the students. However, I was true to the goodness and trustworthiness standards outlined by Merriam (2002) and followed Esterberg’s (2002) guidance in my interview and coding processes.

I was poised to listen and learn from the students’ accounts of challenge and defiance, courage and determination. It was then a privilege to share those stories in my writing and to bring together themes that could potentially add to the knowledge base of the field. Their
stories can, when combined into an account that makes meaning of the essence of their experiences, make a difference to adult literacy education.

**Limitations**

Since research only took place at one center of one of the 15 community college adult literacy programs in Iowa, the focus was limited, and there could potentially be different results if another location or multiple locations were studied. Another potential limitation was that the participants may have been reluctant to be open and honest about what had taken place in their lives. They may also have chosen to answer interview questions as they believed they should, rather than honestly. They may have chosen not to share their thought process about deciding to return to school if there were legal or emotional issues tied to their experience, and sharing information about family and friends may not have been comfortable for them. Another concern was that their stories belonged to them and there is no way to verify the information. Another potential limitation relates to positionality. As the former State Director of Adult Literacy, I was hopeful that my presence would not intimidate the students I interviewed, and it was likely that they would be unaware of my position, but implications may not be known. These potential limitations did not cause any difficulties in the research process.

**Delimitations**

The study was bounded to the GED-level students in the adult literacy program at River View Community College, I did not interview ESL students because their stories are often driven by the need to learn a new language in a new country, a direction I preferred not to explore in this study. I also chose not to include the lowest level of adult literacy students because the value of the writing assignments for document analysis might have been limited
due to their writing ability. In addition, it might have been beneficial to my study for me to take up residence in the area for a while to conduct research over a longer period of time, interview more students, or include students at other locations. However, personal and professional responsibilities prevented me from pursuing these directions.

I also did not delve into studying the topic from the educator’s point of view. I wanted to keep my perspective focused on the student viewpoint for comparison and analysis. Teachers may have preconceived notions about their role in the lives of the students and their impact. I preferred to compare what the students shared about their Convoys of Social Support, their thought processes, and their lives without the additional perspective of their teachers.

Summary

The first three chapters provided a foundation for the research, a literature review to demonstrate where the study is situated in existing research, and now a roadmap of the research method process. Each chapter builds the research plan to support the study of why adult literacy students return to their education. In the next chapter, the participants in the study are introduced, and their life situations are explored.
CHAPTER 4

THE ADULTS WHO RETURNED FOR THEIR SECOND CHANCES

The first three chapters of this phenomenological study provided an introduction to the dissertation, a literature review, and the methodology related to making meaning of the return to education for adult literacy students. This chapter describes the six adult students who participated in the study and provides a portrait of their lives, including family, personal challenges, educational milestones, and present life situations.

Six adults participated in this qualitative, phenomenological study striving to make meaning of the return to education to earn their high school equivalency diplomas or GEDs. The interviews were conducted over a 3-week period of time and included four females and two males, all between the ages of 20 and 40. Only two of the six were married, and they were recently married to each other. They were also the only non-Whites interviewed, both of Mexican heritage. All six had children, but of the six, only four had their children living with them. Two of the six were employed. All six had dropped out of school and were returning for the same purpose, to earn a GED.

Ruby Brown—Depending on Herself

Ruby Brown is an attractive woman in her 30s with long, auburn hair and a cautious smile. Her vocabulary is extensive, not congruent with her pre-GED educational status. When asked about her family and friends, Ruby answered quickly that her mother is deceased and that she does not have any communication with her father. As for friends, Ruby indicated that she really does not have a lot of friends, and that is her choice. She chooses not to be close to many people because of the loss of her parents when she was younger. Ruby’s relationship with her parents affected how close she is to friends because of a trust issue.
Ruby loves to read in her spare time, often losing herself in books of poetry and philosophy, her favorite being Nietzsche. During the weeks of our interviews, Ruby was unemployed, having previously worked at the Animal Rescue League, helping out and cleaning kennels, a job she liked. However, she had to quit the job to have more time to go back to school, her priority. As Ruby said, “School was first.”

Ruby has four children, three living in her home, spanning ages 13 to 19. Her second child, a senior this year, deals with sociability factors but is very intelligent. Ruby’s younger two children are girls, ages 13 and 15. Ruby’s oldest child lives outside of the home, out of the state, with his father. Her oldest son has Prader-Willi syndrome, a condition similar to a form of autism. Ruby’s mother raised him until she passed away about 2.5 years ago, and Ruby limits her contact with her son in an effort to keep his life stable. Her son is living with his dad, and when others interfere from the outside, it makes his everyday life unmanageable for him.

Ruby willingly shared the details related to her dropping out of school. She became pregnant by the time she was completing the eighth grade and dropped out to have her baby. Ruby was living on her own, and she said her life at that point was a little out of control. She described her life as hard and admitted that she did not always make the best choices about how she could take care of herself. When asked how she supported herself, she answered that she “used to dance, and do all kinds of things. Whatever I had to do.”

When asked about how people would describe her, Ruby answered that she is straightforward, boisterous, and right to the point. She believes that these characteristics will help her with schoolwork because she is able to get in and “get it done . . . and not try to prolong it, prolong it, prolong it.” Similarly, when asked about some traits that might
challenge her ability to complete her education, she replied, “I get anxiety; I get worried very easily.” When asked how she copes with these issues, she said, “I guess that I take a little bit of time out and reevaluate it and start again and try to calm myself down. Just go outside and sit for a little bit.”

When Ruby was asked about her major challenges to finishing the GED, she was confident that although math was challenging her at the time, she saw no issues that might keep her from completing her GED. “I think that once I get done with math, then the last two tests on my GED will be a breeze.” She had no doubts that she would succeed. At any times in her life that she has faced a challenge, she has just become a stronger person by pushing through.

When asked to compare her thinking when she dropped out of school in eighth grade and when she decided to come back in May of 2010, Ruby responded that her mother was the catalyst for both life events.

Um . . . basically I think what caused me to leave was . . . I was having a difficult time with trying to readjust with living with my mother after I had lived with my grandmother for my whole life. And then my mother’s passing made me want to go back to school because I know that I need to be more independent and be able to rely on myself and myself alone.

When asked about the timing for her dropping out and her return to education, Ruby replied,

Um, when I left school um . . . I was pregnant with my child and now my children are all getting older, and they are all getting ready to leave school . . . so I’m at a point where I need to do something, ya know.

Ruby also indicated that she had no control over her life when she dropped out but had a “handle on things” now, which is a big difference. “I mean it; my life was completely out of control at that point in time. It’s pretty solid now.” In eighth grade, it did not take long
for her to decide to leave school. However, although she considered it very seriously over the last 5 to 6 years, it took 20 years to decide to return. She summarized her reasons for dropping out as pregnancy and not being able to cope with home life; knowing that she now does not have anyone to rely on is the reason she returned. She was quick to correct herself by adding that she can rely on herself and her kids.

Ruby lived with her grandmother until she was 12, and she then moved back in with her mother for about 2 years, which did not go well.

I mean, my eighth grade year was probably not the greatest year. I mean, I was already having difficulties trying to adjust to living with my mother, and the situation at home was not necessarily the greatest with my mother. And then I got pregnant and I had just moved back to town, and I had decided that I just couldn’t go back to school. I just couldn’t do it.

At the conclusion of our first interview, Ruby revealed that she had suffered many losses in recent years, which affected her decision to take control of her life and education. Having lost her mother and grandmother within a year of one another, she also shared, “And then in that point in time, my boyfriend lost his father, and his brother committed suicide—so all in about a 3-year time, we have lost like four people."

**Christian Isaac—Ready for Life**

Christian Isaac may be quiet, but he is the first person noticed in a crowd of students. He is slight in build but has steel blue eyes, which at first appear to be threatening. He is covered over much of his face and visible body with tattoos, some more carefully executed than others. It is the tattoos on his face that cause him to attract attention. Above his eyelids are the incongruous words, “Sweet Dreams.” In addition, his shaved head allows for a clear view of numerous other tattoos. It was within a few minutes that I learned how mistaken my first impression was of Christian when he broke into a broad smile that made his eyes softer
and engaging. He is 30 years old, White, single, and at the time of our interviews, he was unemployed. Christian was eager to talk with me.

Christian informed me that he grew up with three other siblings. Nobody in his family has ever had much education. He dropped out of school in the 11th grade because he was in trouble all the time. He is a single dad and has two children, ages 5 and 7, living with him. Until recently, he had been working at a fast food restaurant, but after 4 years, he no longer works there. He has been looking for a job for over a month, and he is trying to get his GED at the same time.

Christian established that his mother helps him with everything. “She’s my taxi cab driver—takes my kids to school, everything. She helps me do what I need to do.” He has two brothers and one sister. Because they grew up together without a dad, they try to remain close. However, he admitted that although he sees his youngest brother daily, he only sees his sister every once in a while, even though she lives right outside of town, and he rarely sees his other brother.

Christian enjoys activities including playing his Wii gaming system and walking his dog, a pit bull terrier, whom he quickly described as a very nice dog. He also likes to watch television, and he enjoys fishing, riding bikes, and being out in nature.

Christian expanded on his life before dropping out in the 11th grade:

Umm, I was on drugs, alcohol. I never went to school; if I did, I skipped classes. Um, I was out stealing stuff, doing burglaries, and I was just out when I should have been in school, but I wasn’t. This impacted my school ’cause I never completed, and I feel inside that, um, I shorted myself on the education, ’cause there are some things that I struggle with in life, and if I would’a stayed in school, I probably would have done a little better.
When asked to think back to the first time that he made the decision to do something that he knew was going to get him into trouble, Christian replied that he was put on probation in the fourth grade for fighting at school. And after that, it was just a daily thing. At the time, his mother always worked and was never around to help out. He did everything on his own and was never home any more after the age of 12 or 13. He just quit coming home. He would stay out all night and stay up all night. He would stay at his friends’ houses or be out stealing.

When Christian talked about making the decision to come back to school, he stated that he felt interested in going back to school one time before, and he had signed up for it, but he never went back. He was not ready. “I was just still not ready for life yet. I wanted to party and play.” When asked why he is ready for life now, Christian responded,

Well, um . . . I’m a single dad, my kids, and um . . . I just need to complete my life in order for them to be able to complete theirs. They see I’m not doing nothing, they’re not going to do nothing, and that’s not what I want.

About a month after Christian lost his job, he thought to himself,

Well here I’m not working, I should be going to school. So I decided, I started thinking more and more and more about it . . . and got a little excited, a little nervous, but, um, it was something I needed to do.

Christian admitted that on the second day, it was harder to come back, “’cause I’m just scared of not completing, or how long it’s gonna take me, or feeling that I have not got the smarts to do it.” To clarify, Christian continued,

Well, um, I didn’t want to sit at home all day and not do nothing and get back into the lifestyle I’ve had before. So I figured going back to school would fulfill my day while I am not working. Need to keep my life occupied.

Christian did not discuss this decision to go back to school with anyone.

Christian’s children know their dad is going to school, but they do not know that he did not complete school or how bad he was. He does not want them to know those things
about their dad for a long time because he is just not ready for them to know. He worries that it might just lead them into wanting to be like he was. Christian shared that his mother is excited about him going back to school. “She’s happy, ’cause she, um, had me when she was 15 years old, so didn’t get her education either . . . and she’s excited for me to go on past the life that I have had.”

When Christian was asked how his friends would describe him, he was quick to respond: “I don’t hang out with friends really because I keep to myself—stay away from friends, sometimes friends can be bad news. But, um . . . I don’t really know . . . I’m lost.” He described himself as determined and stated that school is something he really wants to happen. He wants to get his GED, and he wants to go to college, so he is more excited about getting through the GED faster. “Um . . . something I want to do, and I am excited, and, um, I think it is gonna help me stick through it because of me being excited. If I wasn’t excited, I probably won’t be here.” The last time he started, when he went to the college and signed up, he wasn’t excited about it. “It just was a thought one day, and um . . . I just wasn’t ready.”

At this point in time, he has taken a reading and a math test.

I, um . . . blew them out of the water—they said way above average, but this language arts is just . . . just . . . feeling intimidated, and maybe like pretty soon I’m gonna have to find a job, because I need to survive, and, um, going to the job and being a single dad might help slow my act . . . um . . . not sure what word I am looking for . . . my motivation to go back because I would have to go to night classes and not spend much time with my kids all day, and um . . .

When Christian was asked if he has thought ahead to those challenges and how he would take care of his kids so that they do not keep him from finishing, he replied hesitantly:

Well . . . it all really depends on job-wise, I don’t know. I mean, if I get a job that works all day long, I’m not gonna be able to, unless I do it overnight, which, but, um, it depends on the job. After hours, my mom will help me watch the kids for a couple of hours to do it. It all depends job-wise.
Although he has been applying for jobs, Christian thinks that his reputation and appearance are keeping him from getting a job.

It’s . . . nobody wants to hire me. Well, um, I’ve a criminal record that’s not short listed—it’s a very long list. I’ve got tattoos on my face and all over my neck. I’ve had attitude in the past in town, and a lot of people know me, they know of me, yeah, um . . . it’s just hard for me because of my past.

He talked about his tattoos:

Well, um, it originally started when I was about fifth grade. I had started doing homemade tattoos and then. . . . And we did them, but eventually I end up having, I did so many that I had to cover up a whole bunch of stuff to make it look better.

Christian described the tattoos over his eyes. He closed his eyes and showed me that over one eye it reads “Sweet” and over the other eye it reads “Dreams.”

Um, that was something I’ve always wanted to do. I thought that sweet dreams would be something that when I close my eyes, I can just sleep beautifully, ya know? A message to myself.

Christian’s hands are also covered with tattoos. Some of them have been attempts to cover up previous tattoos, what he called fill-in tattoos. There are skulls, wizards, and a dragon that goes all the way up his arms. When asked if he is glad to have them, he replied,

I still care what people think of me a little bit—I do but I don’t. I mean, I didn’t for a long time when I was getting in trouble, but I do now that, you know, I’m settled down and everything—starting to care what people think probably. And the jobs as well, yes.

Christian was then asked how this change in caring about what people think relates to his return to school. He responded that he needed to get a better job, and in order to get a better job he had to complete school. “And the main reason is job-wise—I need the importance of having a better job.”
Similarly, there was a connection between the departure and return timing—what was in his control in the past and now.

Um, I was just laying there one day and decided, I’m going to go back to school. Everything’s in my control, everything I did then, and everything I’m doing now. It’s all . . . what I care, what I control in myself, I mean, there’s nobody that’s gonna control me.

Another way Christian’s character has changed was indicated by his further comments about control when he was in the 11th grade:

I felt I was in control of the stuff that I was doing, and lost in life, in reality. The stuff I was doing I was . . . yeah. . . . I felt I . . . I think I’m on the right . . . I was just controlling different things. Yeah, controlling different decisions, yes.

When Christian was in the 11th grade, he rarely went to school. About a quarter of the way through the 11th grade, he stopped going to school. He started a job doing tree service, so he decided not to go back. This decision changed his life.

Um . . . I think the impact on my decision was more preexisting than when I dropped out. Like, um, I knew I wasn’t gonna complete, and I was just slowly trying to push myself away, and away, and away. And, um, how it impacted me is, um, being in and out of jail my whole life, I’m not doing good. I mean, I am now, but I mean my life I haven’t done good. I’ve stolen from friends, my family, I haven’t got no education skills. I don’t really . . . I mean, math and reading I was good at, other than that, I don’t know . . . I don’t remember.

Christian readily described himself as a loner in high school. He would only hang out with one or two people and would avoid groups. He saw that being a loner makes it harder for him to reach his goals because it is harder for him to reach out for help. He quickly added he should not have to reach out for help: “I don’t like reaching out for help, and I know it’s something I’m gonna need . . . but um . . . I got lost.” However, he informed me that he is now found because he is here in school.
Vanessa Thompson—Learning for Her Children

Vanessa Thompson is 20 years old, female, Native American, and single. She was not working at the time of the study because of her pregnancy. She has one daughter who is 2 years old, and she is expecting another child, a boy, in November. Vanessa lives with her mom and her mom’s boyfriend. She described her family as “kinda hectic—kinda crazy.”

Vanessa expanded on this description:

Hmmm, probably just nobody is really stable a lot, except for me and my mom, so people rely on us—kinda too much. Like for money or like a place to stay, for rides, so it gets kinda stressful, especially if I have my daughter. Um, my friends . . . um, I don’t really hang out with my friends that much ’cause I’m pregnant.

Vanessa had a job at K-Mart and hoped to finish her GED before heading back to work in January. She felt prepared to take the official GED tests out at the college and was only concerned that the math test may be too difficult. In her free time, Vanessa enjoys four wheeling and hanging out with her cousins. She also relishes time spent with her 2-year-old daughter. “I like to spend more time with her, ’cause then like I can remember things I teach her, or the first time she does stuff.”

Vanessa used the term “didn’t work out” often. She explained that she was referring to family problems, including her mother losing custody of her when she was 8 or 9 years old, getting adopted by a great aunt and uncle and having to move to Tennessee, and coming back to Iowa at age 13. Her time with her aunt and uncle was “uncomfortable,” and she asked to move back. However, she continued to “bounce around” from home to home, from town to town, a lifestyle that had an impact on her education.

Vanessa has been working on her GED since June of 2010, taking time away from any educational pursuits to have her daughter. There have been some problems interfering
since then, but the conclusion of the problems sparked her returning to school, after she went back to live with her mom.

Well, like I started, and that’s when I took my first test and stuff, and then that’s when I kinda got mixed up in like things with my child’s father, so I just quit going to school—I kinda just quit like . . . I think I was too worried about him, and quit worrying about more important things. And that is when I lost my apartment, and then when I moved back with my mom, then I came back.

Vanessa added that the only person she talked with about coming back to school was her mom, who has continued to encourage her. Other significant people in her life had a variety of reactions. Her friends were surprised but proud of her. Vanessa described herself as someone who tends to be too caring, putting the needs of other people before her own. To be sure that this does not interfere with her schooling, she declared that the people who would cause most of those problems are no longer in her life. “Like I made the decision to not have them around me anymore, so I wouldn’t have that distraction.”

Vanessa continued to credit her mother for giving her the guidance she needs and said that at age 20 it is okay to still listen to her mom: “Probably the best person to listen to out of anybody.” She added,

Hmm, like she gives me advice, or not even advice, she like tells me what to do, and I still need my mom to do that. And I think for a while I thought, oh, like ever since I turned 18 then I don’t need to listen to anybody, or I think I knew everything, and that’s not the case all the time.

Vanessa stated that dealing with previous experiences has prepared her to return to school because she has to depend on herself before anybody else, because the people she depended on in the past always let her down. A specific situation that took place involved her daughter’s father:

Hmm . . . like with having my own place and stuff, at first it was like just me and my daughter living there, and then her dad came back and, you know, he would kinda be
like, oh you know, “I’ll pay for everything.” Or and when . . . when he would get his money or whatever, he would say he was going to buy us a house and stuff, so I kinda gave everything up, and then that didn’t happen. So now like I am back at square one, and I think I have to depend on me, before anyone else.

Vanessa summarized by saying that it was her kids, especially her daughter, that caused her to leave school and to return. She believed that she was in control when she dropped out because she chose not to do anything or to move forward. Now, she is in control, and it is different this time.

Robert Mendoza—Removing the Jacket of Ignorance

Robert Mendoza was a bit reluctant to be interviewed because of his immigration status. He calmly asked if I would be contacting his future employer or any agencies about what he tells me. Once he was reassured about the confidentiality of our interviews, he opened up about his attitude toward education, his previous experiences with returning to school, and in the final interview, he expressed that it is his dream to remove the “jacket of ignorance” once he feels that his educational goals are met.

He is a 38-year-old man from Mexico, who has a wide grin and sturdy build. He is recently married and has two children, ages 7 and 16. At the time of the interviews he was unemployed. Robert had recently relocated to this community after living in El Paso, Texas. He decided to move here because he found new opportunities for him and his wife to work for a truck company. He is in school because he wants to get a better job and wants to improve his English. He is working on ESL and GED at the same time. The new job will send him to Canada, and for that he has to speak and write English well. He has to be ready to understand terminology, and he will have to apply for a commercial driver’s license from Canada.
Robert talked proudly and with humor about raising a teenage daughter. He described it as being fun and kind of difficult because he has to understand her. His daughter has created a sense of competition between them because she is about to graduate from high school. She will go on to college, and Robert would also like to follow that path.

Definitely. I don’t know if I’m going to have the time for that, but I’m going to try. If I don’t try, I’m gonna be a loser. Oh. And I don’t want any of that, so I’m going to try. I know there is going to be time for that—I have to manage my time and then get the opportunity.

Robert shared information about his education in Mexico and the high cost of going to school there. He also talked openly about this try at education being his last chance:

I didn’t finish my high school because I was living in Mexico 3 years ago, so when I moved here I was trying to get my high school education. I had no opportunity to finish it, but now I have the opportunity, so I’m gonna start working on that. I’m working on that. Well, it’s just to be better. I know I have to have a degree diploma. Then, you know, that’s tough, that’s why; it’s been in my mind all the time. But for some reason I get stuck, then I quit. But now it’s the last opportunity, so . . . Mexico is so different; they have no good schools; it’s so expensive. And then, ah, I mean, I can finish my high school in one day if I have enough money to corrupt the government, but I don’t want to because I’m going to be cheating so . . .

Robert tends to get discouraged because his practice tests indicate that he has a lot of work ahead of him. He indicated that he has a supportive family, with his wife and daughter offering to help. His brother and sister told him, “Go for it and don’t quit early. Try hard.” They were all willing to be his cheerleaders.

It’s just that I want, I want this. I want a better opportunity in jobs. I don’t want to be a truck driver for all my life. I mean, I make good money, but I know there’s some jobs that require less time than driving a truck. Driving a truck is 24 hours a day, so I know there’s something out there that I can do.

**Angel Bear—Standing Up for Herself**

Angel Bear has an imposing stature. She is tall with a generous build and clear blue eyes. It is her warm handshake that reveals her shy demeanor. Angel is 40, White, and single,
and she is employed. Angel works part time making calls to people. She is looking for full-time work because she does not have any children at home where she lives with her boyfriend of 3 years. Angel shared that in her spare time she likes outdoor activities, like fishing and mushroom hunting.

Angel has four children, three girls and one boy. Two of them are already out of school and have graduated. As she moved into more details about each child, she described her oldest daughter as 20 years old and working on her nursing degree at the college. Her son is 20. She also has a 13-year-old and an 11-year-old. Her younger two children have been adopted out and live with another family.

Angel was about 16 when she left high school. She finished 10th grade and then did not go back. This is the first time she has tried to get her GED, and she just started back to school. She is cautious because she has been out of school for many years. “It’s really taken me a little while for it to really click into my head that, to get back into what I need to know about the subjects.”

Angel described herself as a high-strung person, “very committed into what I want done; I’m gonna get it done. And, it’s just that . . . I’m just pretty much just an active person.” She is determined to finish school, even though there are family challenges that might cause her to temporarily leave school if she needs to take care of her ill mother.

Really, right now, I’ve had a lot of issues with family. Um, my mom, she’s, she’s very ill, and, um, it’s just that she’s the only parent I have . . . it’s just that a . . . I would not quit school if anything happens to her; it’s just that I might have to take time out of school in order to get myself back together, to just, ah, do what I need to do. Well, I’d still stay pretty much in school, I will, and I’d, I’d learn that just finding that I’d care for her, and that so I could continue to, with my education, ’cause my mom did not graduate from school. . . . And, I don’t wanna be that person that went through life without an education.
When asked why she returned, her answer was quick. It was a conversation with a workforce counselor that helped Angel with her decision when she told her about the Adult Literacy Center (the Center).

It’s . . . it’s hard to really explain that it just came into my head one day that I wanted to return to school, and there wasn’t no reason there of why . . . it’s just I just wanted to go back. And just like I told my counselor, I told my counselor the same thing when I went back to school, and she was happy for me. She was.

Angel feels very in control of her life now.

Really, right now, since I am back in school, there’s really nothing out of control. I’m finally getting my life to where I want it to be, ’cause all of my out-of-control stuff is all in my past. I’ve put that behind me, because it’s not going to do me no good to really dwell on that, and so all I’m doing is looking at the future.

Angel also survived an abusive relationship that kept her from going back to school.

’Cause when I had all my hopes down with the abuse at that time, I could not really make a choice whether to go back or not because I had to get through the grieving because of the abuse, in which I have been seeing my counselor since 2005. That’s when my kids got taken away, and when my kids were home there was abuse in the home.

When I asked Angel if she is looking forward looking forward to getting her GED, she pumped her fist in the air and emphatically replied, “Yes!”

**Crystal Lopez—Finding Love and Learning**

Crystal was very eager to talk about her life experiences, and she entered the room enthusiastically. Crystal is 34 years old and is Hispanic. She is married with two children in the home, and she works at Walmart. She has been married for a month to Robert.

Crystal offered many details about her family. She is one of nine children and has four brothers and four sisters. She was raised in California and came to Iowa in 2005. She started coming to work on the GED in 2008, but she had problems and did not have a job. As a result, “I had to kind of go back and forth of trying to finish my GED.”
Crystal’s daughter has not been supportive of her decision to return to school. However, her daughter is her main reason for returning.

Well, because, you know, I wanted to give my daughter an example that you could still do something even though you have had rough patches, that you could still do something better for yourself. Not only for you, but you could do it for your kids, too. And now that, you know, I’ve found the person that I—I mean, I’ve been waiting for so long, it’s just kind of hard, you know.

Robert is a comfort for her, and she is thankful to finally have a supporter. “And because he is around my own age, I mean, he has been through situations I have too.” She had a big smile on her face when she talked about her new husband.

Yeah, because it’s like we have been talking ever since, and there’s days that we just stay awake and talk about stuff, and we have so many things in common. A lot of people it’s hard to see, you know, I have just been experiencing.

She discussed his support of her returning to school:

Well, I told him about it and he say, “Well go ahead, you know, if you want to finish your high school, now it’s GED, go ahead. I’m behind you 100%.” I mean, it’s good having someone that supports me in so many ways that, you know, you are willing to do it. Besides you have your kids, but you have somebody else that you know is not only willing to do it but he goes with you.

They help one another with schoolwork. Crystal helps Robert with his English; Robert helps Crystal work on her GED. She has completed two tests: reading and science.

She was very nervous when she tested. She is now working on math and having trouble. In addition to Robert, her sisters support her.

My sisters know about it. I have friends that I even encouraged them to go back to school. Not only because you know you be good all by yourself, but you know you could get a better job and you won’t have to settle for just any job that you could get.

When Crystal was asked about her personality and potential interference, she responded,

For me, it’s that I’m the type of person that helps other people before I help myself. And I feel good when I’m helping someone else do something, but at the same time somebody out there is helping me and another thing, so it’s kind of good having other
people from other situations that can help you, and they might not influence, but whatever they say kind of makes you feel like, “Okay, if this person is doing this then why can’t I?” You know, so pretty much the persons you are around with—they might be younger, they might be older than you, but out of all that a little bit goes a long ways. You know. Because it wouldn’t be like I wouldn’t be alone, so having other people around makes me feel like if they can do it, I can do it to.

**Summary**

Six very different stories came to be told about sad and unstable family lives, inability to fit in at school, and peer groups that encouraged disengagement from education and encouraged involvement in spending time either doing nothing or engaging in behavior that was criminal or problematic. Six people from different backgrounds and families had many characteristics in common, including single mothers who were absent or involved in lifestyles that removed them from their children; absent fathers; children who were determined not to follow their parents as role models, who all ended up walking the same path, giving up their own children to family members to raise and finding themselves in low-paying, unfulfilling jobs. The main difference is that Ruby, Christian, Angel, Vanessa, Robert, and Crystal made the decision to be something, to remove the coat of ignorance they wear because they do not have a high school diploma; they all made the decision to return to school.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the meaning that may be ascribed to the experience of low-skilled adults returning to school at a community college’s adult literacy educational center in a small town. As the literature review for this study indicated, there is limited research about why adult literacy students make the life-changing decision to return to school to earn their General Educational Development certificate (GED). One way to expand the available knowledge base is to fill the gap in the literature and provide a voice for the returning low-skilled adult literacy student.

Through interviews and document analysis, meaning was derived from the voices of the students. The focus during data analysis was the phenomenon of adult literacy students returning to school to earn a GED. Focusing on the phenomenon supported the process of making meaning of the combined experiences of the six students interviewed. In addition, employing horizontalization, the data collected from the interviews and document analysis had equal weight in the process of determining the findings of the study.

Ultimately, listening to these adult learners’ voices and making meaning of why they returned to their education provided needed insight into how to improve practice and policy. Through the description of their decision-making process and the people and life events that influenced their decision, the essence of their experience was derived to increase clarity among adult educators about what drives students to return to school, often while facing numerous life challenges.
This chapter addresses the findings of the study and is divided by themes. Each theme is supported with quotes from the participants and data collected from the documents they completed as part of the study. The chapter addresses the research questions as they relate to the themes and concludes with the theories that guided this study and how the theories relate to the findings.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do adult literacy students describe their decision-making process to transition back to school?
2. How have people and life events influenced adult literacy students in their decision to return to school?
3. What meaning do they ascribe to these influences?

In addition to data collected through interviews, experiences and influences were shared as the students filled out and discussed their Educational Milestones Lifeline, Convoys of Social Support, and Force-Field Analysis worksheets. Additional insight came from introductory essays they wrote indicating their desire to be part of the study, and letters to the person who influenced their education, which they wrote or read during the final interview.

The interviews and documents completed for this study revealed similarities in life experiences and reasons for returning to education among the students at the Adult Literacy Center (the Center). Four themes emerged that were supported by statements and documents from the six study participants: Ruby, Christian, Vanessa, Angel, Crystal, and Robert. Themes emerged that helped to make meaning of their lives and their educational decisions. The themes that evolved from this qualitative, phenomenological study were the following:
• Rising above abandonment
• Breaking a family pattern
• Proving themselves and mattering
• Creating a life plan

The final section of this chapter addresses findings related to Schlossberg’s transition theory, and similar to the Force-Field Analysis worksheet, data are presented in a Coping Resources Matrix, a visual that captures the areas in which the participants are supported and challenged as they cope with their transition back to school. It also provides a display of the balance of the assets and liabilities that support each student’s progression into the “taking charge” stage, which in their situation is a return to school. The rationale for developing a visual tool to document the coping resources is that educators need resources to provide temperature checks for students for whom coming back to school is a precarious endeavor.

**Rising Above Abandonment**

Most of the adults interviewed shared stories about the absence of one or both parents in their lives. In most of their lives, their fathers were unknown or uninvolved. They talked about being abandoned by their mothers as a result of a decision made by their parents to desert the family because of departure for a job, involvement with another person, incarceration, or making a choice to begin another family in another location. The abandonment resulted in feelings of anger, loss, sadness, lack of trust, and bitterness about relationships. Some of the participants shared a lack of interest in school that they attributed to not having parents in the home to provide guidance and encouragement; some had the experience of being removed from their home to be placed in foster care or with other relatives, often resulting in additional feelings of aimlessness and defiance.
As children, they sometimes chose to remove themselves from their home by leaving to live with friends or on the streets, actions not challenged or questioned by their weak, absent, or inattentive parents. Their determination to survive on their own without the supervision of a parent was rarely a positive move for the adults or their education. Often, their feelings of abandonment resulted in their belief that no one really cared what they did or that their parent or guardian was unable to control their actions.

As adults, the loss of significant people in their lives as children, often the same people who were catalysts for them to leave school and home, inspired the participants’ decisions to return to school as they sought to find a new path for their lives or chose to memorialize lost relatives by returning to education to make them proud. For some, the feeling that they were now without either parent, or without the grandparent who filled in as parent, helped them to decide to return to school to build a better life for a future they would have to live without their now-deceased relative, a life they decided needed to be improved.

Ironically, for several, abandoning their own children became part of the pattern they, too, would follow. Children may have been sent to live with relatives, sent to foster homes, removed from the home by legal action, or adopted out. Often, the children of the participants were sent to live with relatives, sometimes the mothers who had abandoned the participants as children.

Ruby

Ruby keeps her circle of close people small because of trust issues as a result of experiencing abandonment by both of her parents. She has had no contact with her father and had a turbulent relationship with her mother, who left the family, resulting in Ruby having to be raised by her grandmother. Having recently lost her mother and grandmother, she shies
away from having many friends and focuses her life on her four children. When asked why she does not want to get close to people, Ruby replied bluntly, “Because everybody leaves.”

Ruby attributed her departure from and return to education to her mother. Ruby lived with her grandmother for most of her childhood and had a difficult time trying to readjust to living with her mother when she was forced to return. Ruby left school in the eighth grade after becoming pregnant and deciding that she could not go back to school.

Well, um, I had a lot of resentment with my mother. I mean, she was around up until I was probably 7, and she stayed with my grandma off and on; it was one of those things that she drank a lot, she worked the same professions that I did, and, ya know, she just wasn’t home a lot when she did live there. And then one day she left and went out on a date, and we didn’t see her for 6 months. And then she called and said that she had moved away, so . . . And she had left us for those years with our grandmother by ourselves, and then just out of the blue she’s got this new fiancé, she wants to get married, she wants to move us down there, ya know, and then she just kinda like fizzled out once we got down there [laughs] I guess.

Ruby described her life with her mother as “a lot of chaos and turmoil and fighting.”

She explained,

We were very unhappy there; we didn’t want to move there to begin with. We didn’t want to leave my grandmother, and it was one of those things that we were not allowed to have the decision; we were just called in the middle of the night and told we were leaving the next morning.

After she left her grandmother’s house, Ruby did what she wanted without seeking approval from her mother.

It was one of those things where, “I can’t make you stay at home if you’re going to keep on running away, and you’re going to do whatever you want, and so I wash my hands of the situation, and if you decide to come home, you decide to come home, and if not, you know, you just do what you gotta do.”

Ruby’s mother was also a catalyst for her deciding to return to school to get her GED, even though the decision was made after Ruby’s mother died.
My mother’s passing made me want to go back to school because I know that I need to be more independent and be able to rely on myself and myself alone. My mother passed away, and then my grandma passed away, so I wanted to figure out school ’cause I didn’t have a father to rely on so . . . I know that I needed to step up and figure out a way to be able to take care of my son and my other two children. I would say when my mom died, about 3 years ago, is when I really, really started thinking about going back to school. I think that I felt, I felt abandoned.

Christian

Not having contact with his father and having a single mother who worked all the time put Christian in a situation of neglect and abandonment. He took care of himself and had very little parental guidance, even when he was in early elementary school. Christian talked shyly about his childhood and the trouble he got into in school. Living with a mother who was not around to help him, Christian made choices that got him into trouble when he was very young. He was put on probation in the fourth grade for fighting at school, “and after that, it was just a daily thing.” He did everything on his own at home, and at age 12 or 13, he quit coming home except to shower and change his clothes. He would get into frequent fights, steal, take drugs, drink, and sleep on a friend’s sofa without letting his mother know where he was in the middle of the night. However, his mother is powerfully connected to his educational decisions.

Well . . . um . . . she influenced me in a positive and a negative way, because in the negative way . . . is well my mom hasn’t been there for school. She had me when she was 15, and, um . . . I seen what it did to her life, so I don’t want to keep going ’cause she’s not got much going on for herself still. Ah, well if my home life was different, I would have went to school and paid attention. I mean, if I had a mom that was making me go to school back in the day, making me go to school, I would have been in school paying more attention than what I had . . . but um . . . I don’t know. . . . Well, um . . . I mean, my mom was mom and I loved her more than anybody in the world, but um . . . I just did what I wanted to do, and she didn’t stop me—I know she tried, but she couldn’t.
There was regret in Christian’s voice when he talked about his decisions related to school. “I feel inside that, um, I shorted myself on the education, ’cause there are some things that I struggle with in life, and if I would’a stayed in school, I probably would have done a little better.” Even though he wishes that his mother would have been more involved in his schooling and childhood, Christian’s return to school is connected to his mother because he wants her to be proud of him. He also wants to be a role model for his children as he makes a better life for the three of them.

Vanessa

Vanessa’s life has a similar pattern to what Ruby and Christian experienced regarding parental consistency in their lives. Her mom lost custody of her when Vanessa was 8 or 9 years old. She was adopted and moved to Tennessee with her great aunt and uncle, and then came back to Iowa when she was 13 because she was uncomfortable in their home and asked to move in with another relative. “Ever since then, I was just bouncing around from home to home, from like town to town.” During her freshman year in high school, Vanessa lived with an aunt.

I got into a lot of bad things and I would never really go to school. So then I kinda just quit going, and my living situations weren’t that great, so nobody was actually saying like, “Hey you need to go to school,” so I just didn’t go. And then I was living with my aunt at that time, and then I moved, geez, I moved to Middletown with my uncle then, and then I went to Middletown High School. That didn’t work out, so I moved away with my grandmother to Des Moines, and I went to West High for maybe like 2 months, and I didn’t get any credits from there, ’cause I didn’t stay long enough—like to finish a semester. So I think moving was probably, moving and not having motivation really messed up all my credits and stuff. And then, after West, I came back to, I went to, I went to Middletown High School, and then I got kicked out, so then I had to go to the Learning Academy, and then I got pregnant, so I just quit going to school.
Vanessa attributed her educational decisions to the frequent moves she had to make as a child and teenager. She missed the opportunity to develop friendships that lasted through grades in school and could not accumulate enough credits in any single place to move her forward toward graduation from high school. It became too difficult to keep working toward an elusive dream of graduating.

Angel

Angel has a similar story of abandonment. Angel was taken away from her mother when she was 6 years old, and she was in and out of different homes for about four or five years. There was never a father in the home. She lived with friends periodically, but that did not work out. Finally her aunt took her in, and that is where she stayed until her mother was released from prison, at which point Angel went back and lived with her. When she was about 14, Angel was sent to live in a group home. For the next year, she lived on her own until she went back again to live with her mother, who later kicked her out of the house. At 16, she moved back in with her mother but found herself kicked out of the house again after a short time.

I was pretty much a troubled child then, so . . . Well, I figured that my family really did not want me around, and, uh, my step dad, uh, was more into my little brother since he had, since he was the actual father of my younger brother. And, um, there was a lot of alcohol in the home, and that then . . . I was more street related, I been . . . I got raised up on the streets at the age of 14 years old.

Not living with her mother affected her interest in school.

It’s just . . . I was not happy . . . because I did not have the actual parent there to help me. I was under state hands, ’cause when I got returned back and, um, I had to report in all the time to make sure that I was doing what I was supposed to been doing, and that, otherwise they would just took me away from her again, so . . .
It was Angel’s aunt and grandmother who encouraged her and were there when she needed someone.

And I was always able to go see my grandmas and take my books over there and get help from my grandpa. And any time I brought something over and if I got something right and there was a test I would have to do, which I had to do assignments before a test, if I would get at least maybe a 90% on the assignment, I would land up eaten ’cause my grandmas always have cakes, cookies, candy around the house.

Angel admitted that she liked being spoiled and feeling that someone would reward her for her efforts.

At least there was someone there. And when they would encourage me and then if I would get something right, then I would end up getting something good out of it. I know I can feel good about myself. That I don’t have to feel like a person dead—that I’m nobody to anybody.

Summary

The participants in this study had abandonment in common. Of the six GED students interviewed, four of the students lived without significant and regular contact with their fathers while they were growing up. They also had strained relationships with mothers who would enter and exit their lives, often without explanation or notice. Their stories told of having the same feelings of loneliness, isolation, and detachment from their parent or parents when they had to move in with relatives or live with friends. Their lives had inconsistent, if not absent, parenting, and there was limited support for attending or doing well in school.

Another commonality among the four students was the presence of a polar catalyst in their lives, a significant person in their lives who was simultaneously a cause of stress and support, a model for behavior that led to the students dropping out of school and a reason why they later returned to school. In the lives of all four students, the mothers were sources of positive and negative influence. They abandoned their children physically and/or
emotionally, causing them to grow up without parental support and guidance when making educational decisions. However, later in their lives, the mothers provided parenting assistance for the students’ children and did not discourage their educational pursuits. Ruby, Vanessa, Christian, and Angel wanted their mothers to be proud of their accomplishments, and this need encouraged them to return to school to work toward their GEDs. The fathers of all four students were completely absent from their lives.

**Breaking a Family Pattern**

In addition to abandonment, family patterns have influenced the lives and educational decisions of the adults interviewed. One pattern that the participants saw in their families included poor career choices, sometimes working at jobs that were not respected by the students. Other examples included living with various partners who were involved with alcohol, crime, drugs, and were unemployed or abusive.

In making the decision to return to school, the adults often defied the educational levels of their parents, critically addressing the lack of education of their parents. Their decision to return to school exemplified their determination to be different from their parents, to be better in some way. This is evident, even though the students may have repeated some of the behavior patterns of their parents in other aspects of their lives, patterns they are critical of, want to put behind them, and do not want their own children to follow.

Participants also chose to go back to school as a tribute to the positive characteristics of their parents or surrogate parents. Even though they recognized that their parents had faults and limitations in their roles as caregivers, educational supports, and disciplinarians, they still wanted to make their parents proud and accomplish something that their own parents could not do by finishing their high school education. In some cases, parents who
were deceased still had influence over their children, and it is in spite of the tenuous child/parent relationship that their adult children felt they wanted to go back to school.

Some participants expressed determination to get a better job, to get their children back into the home or to earn the respect of their family members, or to be less dependent on other people who were not positive influences. They talked of putting others first, often to the detriment of their own lives and the lives of their children. Finishing the GED and earning the degree, having the potential to move on to college or job training, and being able to stay on their educational path would break the pattern and differentiate them from their parents.

The Convoy of Social Support, a document that each student filled out during the second interview, provided information related to the impact that significant people in their lives had on their education. During each interview, the participants filled out the form to show which people had been strongly influential in either a positive or negative way regarding their educational decisions and journeys.

Ruby

When Ruby was asked about being like her mother, her response was definite:

That, that’s a double-edged sword, because I look at my mother, who was a teen mother, who was a dancer at the one time, and I mean, she had four children that she left behind, and we’ve followed the same path as each other, and also . . . but then again, once before she died, she was a very good influence. She had really come around with her grandchildren, and really, ya know . . .

Ruby’s mother lived with her own mother for a while and tried to influence Ruby’s life.

When she lived there, there was a lot of arguing about how we should be raised, and that my mother should be more responsible, and then when we moved in with my mother—my mother was very lackadaisical about making us go to school. If she was home sad that day, she wouldn’t want us to go to school, she’d want us to stay home with her and comfort her, and be there with her, ya know and . . .
There are also similarities with how Ruby’s sister is raising her children. Ruby has taken on the role of nurturing, taking care of her, but not wanting to be like her.

And the way that I see her with her kids, the way that she kind of sometimes lets her kids run around . . . her 15-year-old daughter got pregnant, and she’s not really pushing for the kids to be in school, or trying to, ya know . . . it’s almost like watching my mother over again—my sister with her children, and it’s like history doomed to repeat itself, and that’s the negative about it, she’s doesn’t. I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to not have a GED; I don’t not want to have a college education.

Ruby’s Convoy of Social Support identified her mother as a polar catalyst in her life. She placed her mother in the first circle, closest to her, to show how strongly her mother has influenced her, and she assigned a negative and positive to her, indicating how her mother has been supportive as well as a detriment to her education. She gave the same designation to her sister, who has in many ways followed her mother’s example with raising children and settling for a low-paying career. Ruby wants more in her life than either her mother or sister have been able to achieve without an education.

Vanessa

Vanessa, who lives with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend, considers them the stable branch of the family on whom other relatives depend, although she clearly indicated that she wants more out of life than her mother has been able to achieve because of a lack of education, a pattern she would like to break. Vanessa identified her mother as a polar catalyst regarding Vanessa’s education, although she is now supportive of Vanessa returning to school, and she motivates her in what she calls “the right direction.” Ironically, Vanessa’s mother is now a confidante, guide, and support when it comes to helping her daughter to continue with school by taking care of Vanessa’s child. However, she is also direct in her expectations that Vanessa will make something of herself.
Vanessa would be proud of her mother if she returned to school, but she is doubtful that will happen. She stated that she would like to encourage her mother to go back to school, even though she has not attended classes in a long time, and might consider discussing the possibility with her after Vanessa finishes her GED.

When Vanessa first told her mother she was going back to school, her mother told her that she was proud of her.

She is actually the only one that sits down and has talks with me, like “you don’t need to do something” or wants me to be more than what she was, especially for my kids. Nobody else in my family ever really talks about it. Nobody really cares about stuff like that. Nobody in my family is really close any more.

Vanessa’s Convoy of Social Support indicated that her mother is the most influential person in her life, with her daughter in the next circle, her daughter’s father in the next circle, and her grandmother and aunt in the last. The document included a mix of positive and negative influences, with Vanessa’s ex-boyfriend a negative influence who steered Vanessa away from school and independence.

Christian

Breaking the family pattern of lack of education and limited parental influence weighs heavily on Christian as he strives to finish his GED and find a fulfilling job. Christian indicated in his Convoy of Social Support that his children are the most positive influence on his education, with his friends and the mother of his children the most negative. His mother is a polar catalyst, having influenced his dropping out by showing a lack of encouragement, and his return by supporting him with childcare and moral support when he needs help. He wants to be present in his children’s lives to guide them toward doing well in school and staying out of trouble, and his mother has joined him in this effort. In addition, he stated that he wants to
minimize the influence of his children’s mother in their lives, to prevent her from the negative influence he believes she can be in their lives. He is working hard to keep everything positive for his children.

**Angel**

The family pattern that is troubling to Angel is how she has had to give up custody of her children, just as her own mother had to do when Angel was growing up. Growing up away from her mother and home caused Angel to feel alone and vulnerable as she navigated group homes and homes of relatives and friends. Although she does not have her children at home, she is determined to stay involved in their lives and to be a positive force when it comes to their education.

Angel’s Convoy of Social Support was well populated and reflected the family pattern she hoped to avoid, particularly in the circle showing the highest level of influence, where she placed her boyfriend, friends, counselor, teachers, and her best friend. She also included her unsupportive teachers and classmates from high school as negative influences who all had strong influences on her decision to leave school. She did not feel protected by her mother when she was bullied in school, and there were no other adults who assisted her in trying to protect herself.

**Robert**

Of all the participants, Robert spoke most positively about life growing up in Mexico and did not indicate any family pattern he hoped to break in his new family. Robert filled out his Convoy of Social Support easily. He placed his wife, children, and teachers closest to him as having the most influence, and his siblings and father in the next circle. His uncle and
friends were placed in the last circle to signify that they are neither supportive nor will he allow them to be highly influential.

Robert shares his wife’s concerns about their daughter becoming pregnant as part of her rebellion and supports Crystal in her efforts to discourage behavior that takes her daughter away from school and into activities that can prevent her from finishing high school and going on for more education.

Crystal

Crystal has her own family pattern that she would like to prevent her daughter from repeating. Crystal dropped out of high school when she was pregnant with her daughter at 17. When she was asked how this affected her education, she described the instability of her life and why she has returned to education:

For the same reason that my parents split up and it was hard to be like in a stable place. You know. So I was ready to go back to school, so I came here. Here I have the opportunity to go back to school and kind of just try to finish it and, you know, I tell my daughter, “See where my situation is, that when I had the chance to go to high school I never even finished because, you know, I got pregnant,” and I tell her, “It’s better you finish your high school.” Right now it’s like I’m paying to go to school. You know, it’s hard because you have a job and the school and then kind of like your time—it’s time consuming either one, so either you work and then go to school, but then at the same time you could still do like a couple of hours, but it’s not the same when you have a full ride.

Crystal is concerned that her daughter will follow in her footsteps and not finish school because of peer pressure. She was visibly upset when she talked about the recent challenges she is having with getting her daughter to go to school, mostly because of negative peer influence.

Right now it is just like she is a teenager and I’m having some issues with her that she is being influenced by people, and her attendance is not good right now because of the people. And then she had friends that told her that she could get emancipated, which, I mean, why would she get emancipated? It’s not that I am beating her or
mistreating her. Her friend goes, “Well I tell it like it is.” So pretty much those are the rough patches I have been having with her.

Crystal is fearful that her own teenage daughter will continue the pattern. When asked to talk about her fear, she replied,

I am worried about that and also because of peer pressure and what her friends say. I told her that at least finish high school. “If you hit 18, that’s good. Because you finish high school and, you know, I mean, after that . . . I mean, I’m not saying go ahead and do it, but stay in school, go to college, you know. I mean something that I couldn’t do when I was your age.” You know. So I try to like tell her not to miss like her teenage years with the responsibility of having a child because when my son was born she was like 9 years old and . . . I told her imagine a kid at your age because she was already in that stage that she could get pregnant. You know. It’s kind of scary. So, I mean, like try to keep her away from stuff that would put her in that situation.

Crystal explained that part of her reason for returning to school was to be an example to her daughter:

Well, because, you know, I wanted to give my daughter an example that you could still do something even though you have had rough patches, that you could still do something better for yourself. Not only for you, but you could do it for your kids, too.

Crystal has frightening memories of her father and how he treated her mother and her siblings as a result of alcohol and unemployment. At a young age, she could face having to sleep outside because of her father. The family was also constantly moving.

And I didn’t have what you would say is a stable education because we were always moving. Because of him not being good financially, we had to move constantly and then to the point there was a time when he left us stranded in Mexico. I think I was like 15. He left us stranded. Me, my sisters had to work to be able to get money to come over here.

She tries not to let her memories defeat her.

Because I am not letting that really get to me. I’m trying to put like the good things that I have right now to kind of like block that part of me that I don’t really like to remember, so I just basically think more about what’s going on right now than what I’ve been through in the past.
Crystal’s Convoy of Social Support emphasized the relationships she described as significant in her life. She included her husband, children, siblings, and mentors in the closest circle, and her father in the last circle, signifying the minimal influence she allows him to have on her most recent effort to finish her high school education. Her siblings are both positive and negative influences on her education, but she proudly indicated the positive support she is getting from her new husband.

Summary

Family patterns played a significant role in the lives of most of the participants in this study. Ruby, Christian, Angel, and Vanessa have lived similar lives to the parents they consider responsible for many of their educational and life problems. They seemed destined to repeat the patterns of abandoning their own children to adoption, living with relatives, and sending their children to reside with an ex-spouse. Although they all voiced concern about the paths their parents chose to take, most repeated those paths in their own lives.

What holds promise for the students is their return to education and their strong determination to finish the GED, find a higher paying and more satisfying job, and build a home life unlike that which they experienced as children. Crystal and Robert are trying to prevent their daughter from following in the pattern of her mother by becoming pregnant and leaving high school. Similar to the other participants, education is seen as the bridge away from patterns they prefer to break.

Proving Themselves

In addition to proving to themselves and others that they can succeed in earning their high school diploma, pride and respect played important roles in decisions the participants made to return to school. The interviews included stories of uninterested or uncaring
teachers, bullying peers, uninspired schooling experiences, scattered school attendance at numerous schools for short periods of time that made it impossible to accumulate credits in high school, having children at young ages without supportive partners or spouses, working in low-end jobs, struggling with critical or abusive relatives or partners, and having distant or rebellious children.

Often, the students expressed that close relatives did not believe in their ability to achieve or think that returning to education was beneficial, and the negative people freely and frequently voiced their opinions. The participants talked about having been belittled by the negative comments from relatives, who often had very little education themselves. The students expressed a desire to earn the respect of their parents, grandparents, partners or spouses, ex-spouses, children, coworkers, extended family members, and people in their past who had been sources of abuse or bullying. Earning their GED gained new importance as these negative individuals offered their critical opinions. Similarly, the students often stated that they chose to keep the fact that they were in school from these people, looking forward to the time they could share it with them after they had achieved their goal.

All of the students revealed determination to prove themselves to significant people in their lives. Another aspect of this theme was proving that they could succeed for their own satisfaction. Often, their lack of confidence and believing that they would complete their GED this time was the biggest barrier to success. The participants expressed previous challenges with lack of confidence and low self-esteem. They listened to what negative influences told them and often agreed. Often, the participants talked about feeling alone, lost, like losers, and having a lack of self-respect. Returning to school in a place where they felt that it made a difference if they showed up or not was imperative.
The Force-Field Analysis document that each participant filled out during the interviews documented the influences that supported and undermined their success. For some, their own lack of self-confidence and inability to believe in themselves were negative forces impacting their education. They each talked about individuals, often more than one, who made ongoing negative remarks that potentially chipped away at their confidence in their ability to succeed.

Ruby

The need to prove to herself and others that she could be independent was a strong influence on Ruby’s decision to return to school in May 2011 for the first time since dropping out. Returning to her education was not a quick decision for Ruby, but one that took a few years to make. At the time of our interviews, she had passed two of the GED tests and was working hard on math, a subject she was finding to be difficult to master. The deaths of her mother and grandmother put her in a position where she felt she had no one to lean on, so she needed to figure out her future. When she lost those two very important people in her life, school was something that she wanted to do. “I know that I needed to step up and figure out a way to be able to take care of my son Jason and my other two children.”

Ruby had never discussed going back to school with her mother or grandmother before she lost them. After they died, she discussed her desire to go back to school with her daughter, who thought it was weird that she was going back to school. Ruby described her daughter’s reaction:

At first she didn’t want me to go back to school because she’s very protective and she wants mom at home with her all the time, and she knows that once I get done with school that it will lead me to going to work and she, I don’t think she understands that by the time I’m done with college, she’ll be graduating and going into college so . . . but she wants mom at home with her all the time.
Now, she is more accepting of the idea, but her health problems have become the focus of Ruby’s attention.

It was important to Ruby that her grandmother be proud of her returning to school because she was always there for her. Ruby chose to write her letter to her grandmother:

Dear Grandma,

I am writing this letter to say thank you for all you have inspired me to do and to be. You have always encouraged me to strive to be the best woman I could be and to face any battle in life head on. Your strength and love has been my driving force in life. You taught me that I had worth, and I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. There aren’t enough ways to show you how thankful I am, but without your guidance, I’m not for sure where I would be. Grandma, I know you are watching over me from heaven, and I believe that you are very proud of me for going back to school. I miss you, I love you, and I know you are with me.

Love, Your Ladybug Ruby

Ruby’s Force-Field Analysis clarified her internal and external influences regarding finishing her education. Her survival instinct, desire to be educated, and life plan support her education. In addition, her need and desire to be able to support her children, especially her disabled son, and wanting a better life for her family than she ever had drive her to succeed. Potentially working against her are her anxiety, fear of letting people get close to her, and lack of family. She also pointed out that not being able to drive was a limitation.

Ruby feels good when she walks into the Center. “Just going back to school and learning more things, and just knowing that I’m making a better impact in my life by being in school.” When asked to describe the environment of the Center, Ruby described the respect she has for her fellow classmates and the struggles they have had to get there:

It’s good. I mean, there’s lots of people here to help you. Um, the people that are here are all different people and here for different reasons, and they are all trying to strive towards the same goal that I am. They all wanna get their GED and either further on through college or to get a job. A lot of the girls are either pregnant or have young babies and, ya know, to see them going back to school while they have babies that are
little—that’s what amazes me, because my kids are older and more self-sufficient. I couldn’t imagine going home and having like twin babies, ya know, to try to take care of, plus other children, littler children on top of that, and do homework and do all of the things that you need to do at home.

The staff always makes Ruby feel welcome and invited.

You just know by the way they talk to you, the way that they are, ya know, welcoming, the way that they help you out no matter if you are frustrating them or not [laughs]. They’ll still stop and they’ll still take a deep breath, and they’ll keep trying and trying and trying with you. They just don’t give up. They push you to excel.

When asked how important this characteristic is to her success, she replied,

That is very important. If you have somebody . . . like over the summer we didn’t have a lot of teachers because it was summer break. When you sit at a desk and you try to learn these things, and there’s nobody really around, ya know. We had poor George here that is so busy between different classes—classes—that, ya know, to have him sit down for 10 minutes and try to help you, ya know, but when you didn’t have the option of having anybody here, it kinda almost felt like it was frustrating and overwhelming, and, ya know, it matters. If you couldn’t get it, there was no way to have someone help you get it.

**Christian**

Of all the study participants, Christian was the most concerned about changing how people perceived him because of his appearance and reputation in town. Christian had developed a negative reputation based on his prison record and concerns about his character that resulted from a history of getting into trouble. He believed that there would never be a job he could be proud of or an employer who would trust and hire him without the GED. He admitted that he did care what people thought of him, and the tattoos were something he could not easily change.

Um . . . I think the impact on my decision was more preexisting than when I dropped out. Like, um, I knew I wasn’t gonna complete, and I was just slowly was trying to push myself away, and away, and away. And, um, how it impacted me is, um, being in and out of jail my whole life, I’m not doing good. I mean, I am now, but I mean my life I haven’t done good. I’ve stolen from friends, my family, I haven’t got no
education skills. I don’t really . . . I mean, math and reading I was good at, other than that, I don’t know . . . I don’t remember.

It is also crucial for Christian to finish his education for his two sons. He wrote in his letter to them,

Dear Ethan and Sam,

You two boys have influenced me to go back to school because I feel that if you see dad working hard on school, it will give you a chance to work hard in school, and I want you to know that you are an important part of me going back to school to better my life, so that we can have a better life . . . alright, um . . .

Christian’s Force-Field Analysis reiterated his interview statements. He is supported by his desire to be smart and to work at a job he enjoys, his children, and his need for money. Fear of being unsuccessful and the need to find employment because of his role as a single dad were resisting forces that he was concerned could keep him from finishing his GED.

When Christian was asked how he feels at the Center, he answered, “Old!” He added,

I know I’m not the oldest one. I feel, um . . . I feel . . . comfortable more and more every day, and it makes me feel more ambitious to want to work, because, um, I’m not very good around new people, so I don’t talk too much, but um, it’s starting to be more comfortable, but um . . .

He discussed the help the Center gives him,

Well . . . just having a foot in the door of going to school, like, um, I know that I am doing it, and I come back every day to continue to do it, and, um, teachers that help me make it a lot easier, especially with the one-on-one help, ’cause I can read the book, but I still get the answers wrong and I don’t know what to do.

Christian particularly appreciates the one-on-one help he gets from the teachers. He also feels that it matters to the staff that he is there. “Yeah, I know that, um, as in a teacher’s view, they want to see everybody succeed, and I know that . . . I know that if they worried about themselves, they wouldn’t be here.”
Vanessa

Vanessa is motivated to succeed by feeling good about herself.

Hmm . . . well, I am a hard worker, and I think once I know I have to do something, I’ll do it. It’s just, I need a little motivation sometimes. Hmm . . . probably just like, like maybe like self-worth, like I wanna feel better about myself and stuff, so like I wouldn’t, I wanna be doing something productive. Like if I’m not going to school, then I would rather be working, and if I’m not working, then I would rather go to school. And at some point in time, I think it would be really awesome if I could do both—like manage it.

In the past, Vanessa has faced many challenges in life, and she learned to depend on herself.

’Cause I would always depend on a lot of other people that would just let you down all the time. Hmm . . . like with having my own place and stuff, at first it was like just me and my daughter living there, and then her dad came back and, you know, he would kinda be like, oh you know, “I’ll pay for everything.” Or and when . . . when he would get his money or whatever, he would say he was going to buy us a house and stuff, so I kinda gave everything up, and then that didn’t happen. So now like I am back at square one, and I think I have to depend on me, before anyone else.

Although young, Vanessa has had a life full of change and adjustment. She rarely stayed in one home long enough to develop roots and lacked confidence in her future. As a result, Vanessa appears confident and self-reliant, but she has urgent family commitments that present challenges when considering the balance of influences on her success. She also admitted to having been distracted by unhealthy personal relationships in the past.

Vanessa said that she is putting herself first, coming to that decision with help from her mother.

I think I quit doing that for a while, and like I think what really probably made me realize was there was a point in time were I was putting, I was probably even putting those other people before my daughter, and that wasn’t right, so I had to figure, I think I just had to get everything back on track.
Vanessa’s mother offers edgy encouragement to get Vanessa moving forward, a sign that she wants Vanessa to complete her education. When asked why moving back in with her mother led to her going back to school, Vanessa was very clear:

Hmm . . . probably ’cause of my mom, like she’s . . . she’s the type to where she just won’t let me sit there and not do anything, and that’s like what she did when she was younger, ya know? . . . So, I think she, she motivates me a lot, and she keeps me in the right direction.

When asked if she will be something when she has her diploma, Vanessa talked about how important her children are to her, and she related her answer to how she looks at her own mother.

Uh hmm . . . yeah, and plus I don’t wanta like, like, like the way I kinda looked at my mom was how could she tell me I need to go to school and stuff when she, she just quit. You know, kinda question them about it. And I don’t want my son or my daughter to be like, “Well you didn’t go to school,” like, so they think they don’t have to or something, or think I’m a loser cause I didn’t.

Angel

Angel was asked to think about what caused her to leave school when she left in the 10th grade and what caused her to return to see if there were any similarities. She responded,

Yeah . . . yes, I see that. The only reason why I left, it’s ’cause of bulliness in school. I was always being bullied in high school, and, um, as a child, I could not deal with that kind of stuff. When you try to tell the teachers, principals, and then really back then, they really didn’t care too much about the bulliness like they do now. And as of now, I see, I get along with the teachers, I get along with other students here, and I don’t have to worry.

Angel still feels the hurt over the bullying and the lack of response by the principal and teachers. She does not have problems with anyone in school now and knows there are people who would help her if any problems developed. Angel still carries the hurt of the bullying from years ago, and she would like to tell those who hurt her
that it was wrong for what you did, and, and with me in school, I never bothered nobody. I went from class to class. I walked the halls by myself. I never had friends in school, ’cause I was more of a loner instead of making friends back then. So, it’s just . . .

Although she never runs into any of the male or female bullies from high school, she would like them to know when she earns her GED.

Angel was frustrated by the fact that she could not control the way the kids treated her in high school. When asked if there was anything else that was out of her control at that time, she discussed an experience with one teacher that was terrible and one with another teacher that really made her want to be there. As a special education student, Angel struggled with her assignments.

There’s this one teacher . . . she . . . she was very mean; she figures that if you could come to school, you could do the work . . . and then, and that’s another reason, I only had one teacher I liked in school, in which it was my social studies teacher. ’Cause we made, we made one agreement that if I would come to school . . . for 2 weeks that she would take me out for lunch. So I had this card that she made out, and each day I went in to see her, she marked the dates on it, the days I was there, and which I passed that one. And see in here, a lot of the other teachers would not . . . do something like that in order to for me to stay in school.

As Angel’s Force-Field Analysis indicated, she is her own strongest support and resistor when it comes to finishing her GED. Although she wants to get a job, enjoy school, and meet new friends, she is concerned that her depression and anger issues may interfere. She is also worried about her ability to do some of the assignments and is afraid that her stubborn nature might interfere. Health issues are also a concern, as she worries that her own health or her mother’s illness may impact her education.

Angel explained that it has taken her 5 years to decide to go back to school because she had been in an abusive relationship. When she got out of the relationship, she decided that she wanted to “make myself better, and make better choices for myself, and, um, and this
is what my choice was.” When she told people close to her (including her mother, boyfriend, and best friend) what her plans were, they “thought that was the best thing that I ever did.”

She has not told any of her children because she wants to surprise them. Angel’s mother is aware that she has gone back to school, but her only reaction was surprise. She has not been positive or negative.

Angel did not discuss returning to school with anyone. She answered quickly when asked why she came back to school:

Well, the only reason why I came back, ’cause I knew if I wanted something out of life, to make something of myself, this was the only opportunity I had to at least get something right in my life. Like with a job, and if I decided that I wanted to go back to school and that, and get my LPN and that, and that’s what my plans are, are going back so . . .

She added,

Well, you can’t do nothing without a high school diploma. There’s a lot of jobs out here that you can’t get unless you have a high school diploma, and I . . . I just figured out the best interest for myself is schooling.

Angel is confident that it was a good decision to come back to school and feels different about learning this time.

Because I wanted more, and then what I would thought of learning, at least with the study I’m doing now is language arts and reading in which I never could hardly understand that, and now I’m beginning to understand the main ideas and the whole details of it. And I study at home also. And I just enjoy it now. I do.

Being at the Center and going to class is different for Angel.

I think why there’s teachers that are here that really cares to make sure the student gets the education what they need and that you don’t have to feel uncomfortable and you don’t have to feel bullied. I mean, you can at least sit at either your desk or at the table and study and that. And I just pretty much, that’s all I do when I come here. I study, I don’t hardly talk. I’m a quiet person. When I’m in class, I’m quiet. No one really knows I’m even there unless they speak to me. So, I figure that’s what I’m here for, to do my education. I’m not here to talk, and that way it might make a difference, but when it comes to school, talking can go later.
Angel feels that she has her priorities straight. She described that when she walks into school, “I got my head up, shoulders up, I feel proud of myself.” She feels that the teachers care if she is there or not.

It’s ’cause since I haven’t been here for a few days, I walk in the door, the smile on their faces, and they all say, “Hi, nice seeing you.” And so that’s how I know they really do care. It feels very important. It’s just, I never felt like this when I was in an actual school where I can be at ease and comfortable to who I’m talking to and what I’m studying. I never felt as comfortable as I do here.

Crystal

Crystal’s return to school is not accepted by all of the people in her life. Many significant relatives, friends, and coworkers ask her why she is doing something that really will not help her. Her son and her father pull her in different directions, however. Her son is excited about her being in school, but her father, cousins, and some coworkers publicly belittle her effort. Crystal wrote her letter to her children:

I would say the reason that I’m going back to school is because I want you guys to know that it is okay to have—like how would I say it?—to maybe like rough times. That if you fall for something, hey, you are able to get up, start again. There is nothing bad in going back to school. If it’s good to feel that you’re not able to do it, talk to anybody about it, how can you do it better? You know, I wouldn’t say follow in my footsteps, because they make their own way. But just if you are going to do something bad, think about it. Think about what is going to happen and decide whether it is good to do it or not. You know.

She would tell her daughter, who is struggling to stay in school,

Just see that I’m struggling. I don’t want her to struggle. I want her to be better herself. I have always told her that if she does what she can, it’s better than not doing anything at all. So, you know, I do want her to finish her education; if she wants to go to college, then I’m with her 100%. If she needs anything, you know, to come and ask me.
Crystal continued by expressing her determination:

Well, you see, I had a plan of finishing my GED this year, so next year, well, I wanted to start in fall, but that’s not going to happen. Start college. Do a little bit more. I’m not saying that I’m doing it because my other brothers didn’t do it, but I want to do it for myself, show myself that I could do it. You know, because I have heard, and I have been here for a while, that people older than me that have got their GED. And I go, “If they can do it, I can.”

Another potential challenge will be people telling her she should not be in school because it is not relevant.

Well, there are people who kind of tell me, well, you know, “Why are you doing that? It’s not like it is going to help you in your ordinary things.” I mean, yeah, there’s things that will help you. Say, maybe like in basic math will help you in everyday things. Not much like algebra or geometry. How you say it? Like how to find the, oh, I don’t know how you say it, but find like if you are measuring like cubic feet. It’s not like you are measuring what goes in a cup. So these people who are kind of saying those things.

However, Crystal is confident that she is the one in control.

I mean, they tell me, but it is up to me if I listen to them or not. Some of the people that tell you like, “Oh, you know you can do it,” they are probably in a worse situation than what you are. I mean, I don’t want to bring nobody down, you know, so I don’t know why people want to bring me down. You know, like to me I’ll be the other way. I’ll be like trying to influence you and say like, you know, “Hey, you might not think of this right now but in the long run you never know. You could get a better job. You could be bettering your life. You don’t have to be like—how you say it?—like, yeah, you don’t have to like—how you say it?—have a bad image of what it is to get your GED. It won’t benefit you maybe like right now at the moment, but if you are applying somewhere else, most of the places do. You have to have a GED for anything.” Okay. You know, so pretty much and that’s why I tell them, “Try to get your GED. You probably get a better job or you could even run your own business.”

Crystal included her health, support of her husband, children, and some family as supporting influences on her Force-Field Analysis. She indicated that her problems with math, her concern that her diabetes might cause her problems, and comments from other people were forces working against her success. Her father, a polar catalyst, was written in
very large print in the middle, indicating that Crystal sees him as both a positive and negative
force in her life regarding her education.

Crystal said that it is a good feeling to be at the Center:

Well, the staff is good. Pretty much ’cause some of them do speak both languages. You know, and one of them help you with one thing and one of them with something that they are more good at, but everybody here is like, I would say is, they do talk to you. They have good communication and everything. You know. I do like the staff. Even though you don’t be here for a long time with them, but still they help you with what they can.

Crystal feels that it makes a difference to the staff if she shows up or not.

It does because they are probably like me. If you help somebody, you have that good feeling that you have helped somebody. They may not take it the way you think they are saying it, but it does help. It does help because a lot of people that I have known that go back and forth how I have done, they go like, “Yeah, I want to go back because I am doing this and I can do this.” They talk good about everybody here. It is to have like support from your family, but then having other people around like care about what you are doing. That’s a good feeling, you know.

**Robert**

Robert did not finish high school because he was living in Mexico, where it was too expensive to pay for his education. People wanting a diploma may pay corrupt government officials to give them a diploma. Wanting a genuine education, he moved to Texas to get his high school diploma 3 years ago, but he did not finish. An employment opportunity brought him to Iowa, where his company told him he had to improve his English skills, so Robert returned to school.

An uncle, who does not have a degree, is critical of his effort.

He says it’s going to be a waste of time ’cause you’re not going to finish again. So I say, “Okay, what if I could; you can still try, you know.” If I say I’m going to do something and I’m going to try hard. And based on what my closest friends or people close to me, that is what I care the most.
He does not argue with his uncle and has not told him that he is back in school.

“Well, I feel like I don’t need to hear negative things, so I’m gonna keep it. I know he’s gonna know some day, but I’m getting ready for that day.” He is definitely going to invite his uncle to his graduation; however, he is most intent on proving himself to himself.

I’m just giving me time to prove me first. Then after that I’m gonna let everybody know, ’cause right now a few people who didn’t know me know that I’m at school and that I’m trying hard. This first circle is the ones that know that how hard I’m working and how bad I want this GED, but not other people know. Yeah. And I think everybody is going to want to celebrate. Even my uncle. I’m going to be more successful driving a truck than he is doing what he is doing right now.

Robert directed his letter to his uncle:

Well, just want to write that I want you to know that I am still with my idea of going to school and working so hard. You will see some answers that you have for me and I’m going to let you know that I’m going to finish. P.S. When I finish, I will let you know.

When Robert was asked to share his wisdom about returning to school, he directed his thoughts to all students struggling with their effort to return. He described the ignorance jacket he wears:

I found school like a place to leave my ignorance, and I don’t want to leave because I know it’s . . . because every time I get in school, the classrooms in this school, it’s like taking my ignorance jacket off, and then after I go out of the school maybe I pick up that jacket three blocks away from here, but I know that I am going to come the next day and I’m gonna take it off again.

When asked if earning the GED will help him to remove the ignorance jacket, he replied,

Well, maybe not because, you know, there is college, there is university, then I’ll maybe take that jacket off when I get where I want, definitely when I get to what I want to do. You know, getting a truck. Don’t know if that’s going to be possible, but at least I’m going to try.
Robert tried to finish his high school education in Texas, but it didn’t work for him there, partly because of time. When asked if he will do it this time, he replied that he will because he has to.

Well, the decision has been with me for a long time, but like I said, I didn’t have enough time; I didn’t manage my time. I don’t know. I mean, I had the time, but I didn’t take the time. Okay. So that’s why I say now is the last opportunity for me because I’m getting old and I have a balance. Okay.

Robert is clearly determined and said, “Well this idea of getting my GED finished is in my mind, and I’m not going to quit now because I have the time. I have all the time in the world. So I’m going to do it.” When asked about the timing of his return to school, he replied adamantly,

Why is the timing right? Because I’m getting old and, you know, when I get older it is going to be harder for me to keep things in my mind, my brain, so that’s why it is like my last chance. I give myself the last chance, so . . .

Robert felt positive about his teacher:

Yeah, this morning I was like, “You know, boy, I did the test yesterday and now they tell me that I am so low in my classes,” and she was like, “Ok, well don’t quit. I was like that.” And now since she said she was kind of doing a test and she didn’t pass. She said, “You know, I did a test yesterday and I didn’t pass, so I going to keep trying too.”

Robert continued to describe his teacher as patient and a good role model. She is always willing to go over classwork again if he does not understand. He had a huge smile as he talked about how he feels when he is in class.

’Cause I feel like I feel good. I don’t feel strange and like everybody is pointing at me. It is just that I feel good. I mean, it is good because every time I left or every time I go out of school, it is like I know that I have learned something new. If it is only a word that I have learned today, then it’s going to help. Yeah, it makes a difference ’cause if I’m not here because I’m going to grow. . . .

Well, you can see my smile on my face and they say, “Okay, you are doing good in school, keep going, keep going.” And sometimes when I go home and I was like, “Do you know what? I didn’t understanding anything about what I did today and
don’t say nothing about the class today,” and they are going to go on—“Can I help you? What do we need to check? What do we need to see?” Yeah, it makes a difference.

He added,

It is important because I am going to put it this way. I’m not going to get stuck in the same point. I’m gonna keep moving, moving, and moving. And that means that I am going to be better. I mean, probably not ever going to get to be President of the United States, but I going to be better than a lot of people. You know?

Robert also feels good about his classmates.

I have these other friends. I call them friends because we are in the same place. I mean, if I need help, they are going to be there for me. They are nice people, too. I mean, it is comfortable to be here. People who like to help, and I am one of those people who need the help, so I feel comfortable.

Summary

The participants in this study wanted to let others know that they had the determination and ability to finish school and earn their GED. For some, it meant proving to relatives they had lost that the faith they had in them was not misplaced. Others wanted to prove that they were worthy of praise and respect, especially when they had experienced ridicule, abuse, and lack of confidence from relatives, coworkers, and friends.

It was important to them, according to their written and spoken words, that they could prove themselves to others. However, it was equally and perhaps even more important to be able to convince themselves, to prove to themselves that they could accomplish earning their GED. For so long they had not believed that it would be possible to meet this goal that had eluded them because of life situations.

The participants have dealt with low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness, isolation, detachment, hopelessness, and fear about school. They have felt less important than others who they have seen graduate and go on to build their lives with better jobs. They expressed
in the interviews and in their documents that they wanted to feel good about themselves and
wanted to make others proud. In some cases, relatives who have been lost to them are the
ones they wish they could show that they have stayed with their education and have
succeeded.

**Creating a Life Plan**

Making unfortunate life decisions was common among the participants. They did not
develop clear plans of what they hoped to achieve short or long term. In family, social
relationships, employment, and education, they chose their next steps as needed, without
long-term consideration. As children, they often acted impulsively, not considering the
consequences of their actions on the rest of their lives or on the lives of their own children.
Involvement in criminal behavior, drugs, alcohol, living on their own or with friends,
choosing abusive relationships, covering their bodies with tattoos, and taking low-paying,
temporary jobs that were not enjoyable or fulfilling were some examples of the lack of
direction and purpose. They all talked with regret about some of the decisions they had made
in their lives, choices they had made, and paths they had taken, how their reputation was
cause for concern in their small town.

Earning the GED was part of a new level of life plan for each participant. Their new
plans included viable and sustainable employment, continuing their education, positive
family changes including marriage and getting their children back, avoiding people who were
negative influences, and living a life that did not involve illegal activity. For some, being able
to be independent meant getting a driver’s license for the first time or being able to take care
of children with health problems, being able to go to college with their children, or being able
to take care of the children they had. Finishing the GED was never a standalone goal. They
had goal sets that started with education and continued to additional levels to improve their lives.

**Ruby**

Ruby described herself as a survivor, and that has helped her frame a detailed life plan that includes education and marriage. Addressing her return to school, Ruby said,

> I think it was a great decision. It was a hard decision. I had a lot of worry and anxiety about being 35 and having four children, and trying to juggle kids, and sick kids, ya know, and trying to get back to school, and wanting to get into college full time. I’ll start the college about the same time my son will, so . . . He’ll be one semester behind me, so . . .

Ruby smiled when she described her goals to be getting through a college education program and starting a career so that she can care for her younger son, a high-functioning autistic who is going to live with her for the rest of his life. Ruby also is thinking about plans for a long-term relationship with her boyfriend. Ruby explained that her boyfriend, although much older than she is, has recently expressed similar family goals. Ruby’s goals are more long-term and permanent than they have ever been in the past.

> I want a husband and a family, and all the things that I never had. He’s, he’s just now, since my daughter’s been sick, he’s started talking about wanting to get married. But I want to get married, not because a relationship is in a bad point, ya know, where if we’re not on the same page, I don’t see the reason for staying together. . . . In the last 3 years since my mom died, it’s made me really sit back and put everything under a microscope and really look at how things are in my life, and what I’m willing to tolerate and what I’m not. I want this, and if I can’t have this with you, then it’s time for me to move on, because I’m not going to settle for anything less than what I want. I know. I know exactly what I want.

Ruby knows why going back to school is important to her.

Because I think it will better my life, it will help me later on in life in a lot of different areas. Just being more knowledgeable; the more knowledgeable you are, the more you can expand yourself, the more you can open up and understand more things.
After graduation, she would like to become a veterinary technician. A multifaceted life plan has developed as Ruby moves ahead with her education.

**Christian**

Christian has definite goals, but he admitted that he was not ready for life until this point. He wants to complete his life for the benefit of his children. “They see I’m not doing nothing, they’re not going to do nothing, and that’s not what I want.” He expressed fear that it will take too long for him to finish, because at some point he will need to find a job.

What caused me to leave school was the stuff that I was doing during the hours of being in school became my whole life, and I wasn’t worried about school; I worried about making money and doing things I shouldn’t be doing. Compared to now, where I want to complete the life that I should have done 20 years ago . . . and, um, I need to move on so my kids can have a better life for themselves. At about age 5, I was put in foster care, and, um, I, that was a big part of my life changed right there. I started school in an out-of-town little class for my kindergarten year, and then, um, fourth grade, I got put on probation, and then, um, started getting in trouble everything since then. And then when I got about 18, I was in and out of jail all the time, causing troubles. When I was 23, I had my first son and, um, 25 I had my second son, and 3 years ago and 1 month and 3 days, I got my kids to live with me. I’ve . . . and then a month ago I lost my job, and now I am here, trying to make sense of my life. From all the way till 3 years ago, I didn’t know what to do. I haven’t done nothing major in my life.

Although Christian admitted that his children are “major,” he continued to talk about bad decisions, lack of direction, and poor choices he has made:

When I had my kids, it didn’t end there. Um, I’ve been in a halfway house a few times, and the last time I been to a halfway house, it clicked up here in my head, and, um, my kids were about 3, no, about 4 and 2 when I decided that I needed to start being dad and being a better dad and really care. Part of that is coming here. My kids saved my life.

Christian wants to go on to training school or college.

Um . . . I’m wanting to go to school or college for something that, um, people in the world are going to need every day. I wanna get a job that has benefits, insurance, and all that stuff, and I want to make more than the average amount of money. I just don’t
want to work a dead-end job like I have been for the last 4 years, not going anywhere in life, and I want to have fun doing it as well.

**Vanessa**

Vanessa’s immediate goal is obvious as she prepares for her son, who will be born in the next few weeks. She really wants her own place, something she had and lost due to poor decisions and relationships.

I had my own apartment for like a year, and then I kinda just got caught up with too many problems with my baby’s father. Probably surrounding myself with the wrong people kinda got me in trouble. And then I want to get my own house, and then hopefully, if I can do that, then I want to go to school for like social science, I think maybe. I either want to be like a social worker or I want to go work in like a facility where juveniles have to stay, ’cause I’ve been in like a couple places myself, so I think I would understand like what they are going through.

Vanessa blamed her misdirection on putting other people first, even before her own needs and her daughter’s needs, and having to switch schools many times. She had to get everything back on track and accomplished that with her mother’s help. “Cause this time I actually want to keep moving forward and get things done instead of giving up.” She explained,

Because when I got taken away then, then that’s when I had to go to a foster home in Des Moines. And then probably from the time period from . . . when . . . because I probably . . . I went to Des Moines in a foster home like maybe when I was 10, and I only got to stay there for like maybe 6 to 8 months. So, I was in one school for that period of time, and then I went to Tennessee and went to a different school again. And then . . . then I got to, I think it was I got to complete the sixth grade and I moved back. And then I had to start back over at South Tama.

Vanessa took just a moment to think before she told me about her goals. “Hmmm . . . well, after I get my GED, I start working, I would like to save up to get my own place, ’cause I did have my own place before, but that kinda went downhill.”

Vanessa was more reserved when she talked about high school and dropping out:
Geez, I went to South Valley for maybe my freshman year, but that’s when I don’t know. I got into a lot of bad things and I would never really go to school. So then I kinda just quit going, and my living situations weren’t that great, so nobody was actually saying like, “Hey you need to go to school,” so I just didn’t go. And then I was living with my aunt at that time, and then I moved, geez, I moved to Middletown with my uncle then, and then I went to Middletown High School. That didn’t work out, so I moved away with my grandmother to Des Moines, and I went to West High for maybe like 2 months, and I didn’t get any credits from there, ’cause I didn’t stay long enough—like to finish a semester. So I think moving was probably, moving and not having motivation really messed up all my credits and stuff. And then, after West, I came back to, I went to, I went to Middletown High School, and then I got kicked out, so then I had to go to the Learning Academy, and then I got pregnant, so I just quit going to school.

Vanessa’s Force-Field Analysis indicated the importance of completing her GED to improve her feeling of self-worth. Her desire to get a better job to support her children was an additional driving force. She included her pregnancy and occasional feelings of being discouraged as resistors.

Angel

Angel’s goal is very clear. She wants to finish her GED so she can go back to college and get her LPN. She wants to be a nurse like her daughter. “Yeah, ’cause with me and my daughter, we enjoy helping other people out, and it’s just more of my lifestyle helping people, whether they need it or not.” There are no other major goals in her life, at least none as important as going on to college, and Angel explained this by stating, “I really never had much of goals, because, um, I was, as a child I was in and out of homes, so I really never had too much of goals.”

Angel understands that getting a GED will help her to see her plans come to reality. It took Angel about 5 years to decide to come back to school, and she made the decision completely on her own.
'Cause back in 2008, I was in an abusive relationship, and then I finally got out of that, and, uh, then I decided to, uh, how I could make myself better, and make better choices for myself, and, um, and this is what my choice was. Two of my kids did graduate, and I’m proud of them for doing that. And then I have one that’s up at college getting her LPN and then two still in school.

She would like her kids to know that she is really proud of them and loves them very much.

Crystal

The plans that Crystal had for her life have not fallen into place until recently when she met her husband, Robert. In addition to wanting a loving partner, Crystal always wanted to work in social service or child development and would like to have her own daycare, because she is always willing to help others. She wants to pursue child development and can use her Spanish skills if she goes into social services work.

Or even like social services, because like when I’m out in the street doing stuff, a lot of people like that speak Spanish go, “Oh, like can you help me?” You know, and I won’t say no. I won’t say no because there are some people who don’t understand what they are trying to say, and you, that you speak not the language exactly how they are, but they understand you more than somebody else that might speak a little bit of Spanish but not enough to have like a full conversation. So pretty much, you know, I have given random people my number and say, “Hey, you need something, just call me.” That’s what I do, I like to help people. And it is a good feeling knowing that I helped somebody. I won’t say that I have made a big difference but make just a little difference.

Crystal is determined to weave her own happiness about her relationship into a solid family environment and a career that allows her to help others. Her marriage is a foundation that has helped her to believe that she can have everything she wants in her life.

Robert

When Robert returned to school, he was hoping to complete the part of his life plan that would lead to a better career. He decided to move north from Texas because he found a new opportunity to work for a truck company, and he is working on his English language
skills while he studies for the GED tests. He is determined to keep going after he earns his GED.

Definitely. I don’t know if I’m going to have the time for that, but I’m going to try. If I don’t try, I’m gonna be a loser. And I don’t want any of that, so I’m going to try. I know there is going to be time for that—I have to manage my time and then get the opportunity. Well, the decision has been with me for a long time, but like I said, I didn’t have enough time, I didn’t manage my time. I don’t know. I mean, I had the time, but I didn’t take the time. Okay. So that’s why I say now is the last opportunity for me because I’m getting old and I have a balance.

Robert does not care how long it takes him; he plans to finish his GED.

Time is not going to stop me. Work is not going to stop me. The only thing that can stop me from doing that is that I get real, real sick. . . . I want a better opportunity in jobs. I don’t want to be a truck driver for all my life. I mean, I make good money, but I know there’s some jobs that require less time than driving a truck. Driving a truck is 24 hours a day, so I know there’s something out there that I can do. Oh yeah. Well this idea of getting my GED finished is in my mind, and I’m not going to quit now because I have the time. I have all the time in the world. So I’m going to do it.

Robert wants to be an accountant or the manager of a big store. He wants to run his own business, maybe buy a truck and then hire somebody to drive his truck. As Robert’s Force-Field Analysis indicated, his new job supports his goals and is a strong external support for his education, in addition to his desire to improve his skills and the support of his family. His lack of patience and criticism from his uncle are resistors to his achieving his educational goal.

**Grossman Coping Resources Matrix: Assets vs. Liabilities**

Schlossberg identified three components of the transition process as “approaching the change, taking stock, and taking charge” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 111). In “taking stock,” the level at which the participants in the study were at the time of the interviews, “4 S’s”—situation, self, support, and strategies—are the coping resources. Within each of these coping
resources are their individual assets and liabilities, as shown in the Grossman Coping Resources Matrix (Table 1).

Considering the life experiences of the participants in this study, the students did not return to school without potential barriers to success. Ruby is challenged by the health issues of her children, her own health issues, and anxiety. Christian has to come to terms with his past and the responsibility of single parenthood. Vanessa is about to become a single mother to two children and is without a job to support them. Robert has the need to learn English skills in addition to getting his GED and, along with Crystal, has a defiant daughter on the brink of making life-changing decisions that they will have to address. Finally, Angel has the issues of depression and abandonment weighing on her as she attempts to move forward to take charge of her education.

All of these students have faced challenges previously in their lives with various levels of success. They dealt with their family and emotional issues and are now hopeful and determined. However, the issues remain, looming in the background. The question is whether or not their assets are substantial enough to overcome their liabilities. They are all “taking stock” of where they are in their lives, but moving into “taking charge” will not be easy or certain. The presence or lack of sufficient support in each area to compensate for liabilities may determine their ability to cope and earn their GED.

As the matrix displays, the students have assets and liabilities in each of the coping areas identified by Schlossberg. How the students respond and what coping strategies they use help to develop a clear picture of the needs of the students and the direction an advisory program might go in providing support to meet their needs. This will be addressed further in the recommendations.
Table 1

*Grossman Coping Resources Matrix—Taking Stock: “4 S’s”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Liabilities</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Liabilities</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Liabilities</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Time—no job; life plan in place</td>
<td>Health of children and need to support son long term; loss of significant people</td>
<td>Determination; desire to take control of her life</td>
<td>Anxiety; inability to drive; fear of relationships</td>
<td>Boyfriend; boyfriend’s mother</td>
<td>Loss of mother and grandmother; isolation</td>
<td>CS/DA</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Time—no job; custody of children</td>
<td>Need for a job and money; Custody of children</td>
<td>Determination; desire to find an enjoyable job</td>
<td>Tattoos, reputation; criminal history; drugs and alcohol; fear of not succeeding</td>
<td>Mother; workforce development</td>
<td>Isolation; children’s mother</td>
<td>CS/IA</td>
<td>IA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Time—no job; living with mother; childcare</td>
<td>Need to return to work; desire to have own place; desire to feel worthy and important</td>
<td>Experience coping with change</td>
<td>Extended family issues; raising two children; discouragement</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Children’s father</td>
<td>CS/DA</td>
<td>IA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>Employed; living with boyfriend</td>
<td>Possible need to care for mother</td>
<td>Enjoyment of school, teachers, and classmates</td>
<td>Self-image; academic limitations; loss of children; anger, fear, depression, health issues</td>
<td>Boyfriend; counselor; best friend; friends</td>
<td>Few friends</td>
<td>CS/IPB/IA</td>
<td>IPB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>Employed; newly married</td>
<td>New marriage and family dynamics</td>
<td>Desire to find a better job; present good health</td>
<td>Challenging child; diabetes; putting needs of others first; math issues</td>
<td>Husband; son</td>
<td>Memories of father; daughter’s defiance; criticism of coworkers and relatives</td>
<td>CS/IPB/DA</td>
<td>IPB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Promise of job; lack of time pressure</td>
<td>Legal status</td>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>Age; language; impatience</td>
<td>Wife; teachers</td>
<td>Uncle</td>
<td>CS/DA</td>
<td>IA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

The participants answered numerous questions during the interviews related to their decision to return to school, including questions that addressed their sense of control, what was going on in their lives at the time, and how their experience of dropping out connected to their recent decision to return to school. As the participants filled out the Educational Milestones Lifeline, they marked their departure(s) and return(s) and provided a detailed description of their decisions. The decisions were based on the need for a family-sustaining job and the desire to fulfill the hopes of significant people in their lives, be better role models for children, defy life experiences, develop the ability to be independent, and achieve dreams they may have had for most of their adult lives.

The Educational Milestones Lifeline provided data related to life events that influenced educational decisions, and the Convoy of Social Support provided an opportunity for the participants to think about the people in their lives who have negatively and positively influenced their decision to return to school. For some, individuals were in a position to be polar catalysts, influencing their dropping out and returning to education. The discussions that took place during and following the completion of the Convoys of Social Support and the Force-Field Analysis worksheets included stories of influence related to parents, grandparents, partners and ex-partners, children, siblings, extended family members, coworkers, and friends. All of the students were back in school working on their GED.

Making the decision to return to school may have resulted from positive or negative life events or people in their lives.

The participants in the study indicated in their documents and interviews that goal setting had not been a major part of their lives in the past. The concept of completing their
GED and looking beyond to future employment, family, and life goals was now a possibility with their education underway. They could look ahead to being able to care for parents and children, to getting a new job or owning a business, getting a driver’s license, getting married, helping children to succeed in school, and going on to college. Seeing the GED as part of a series of steps toward success made it less daunting and possible.

In this chapter, various themes were presented that resulted from the analysis of the interviews and documents. The themes are as follows:

- Rising above abandonment
- Breaking a family pattern
- Proving themselves and mattering
- Creating a life plan

The six study participants made meaning of their decision to return to their education to complete their GED within the realm of these themes, and support was included to demonstrate how the themes related to the research questions that guided this study. In addition, how the data related to Schlossberg’s transition theory and the assets and liabilities of the students were presented in the Grossman Coping Resources Matrix (Table 1).

In previous chapters, I introduced the topic, presented literature related to the topic, set forth the methodology to be used in the study, introduced the participants, and summarized the findings drawn from the data analysis. In the next chapter, I will discuss my decisions about the approach of my study and the findings related to the lives of Ruby, Christian, Vanessa, Angel, Robert, and Crystal. I will draw conclusions about the findings and offer recommendations to potentially improve adult literacy student success. Finally, I
will offer my reflections on the experience of conducting the study and writing the
dissertation.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

Participants talked openly about their decisions and choices, control and lack of control, positive and negative influences. The meaning they ascribed to their life events and the people in their lives who influenced them indicated that there have been multiple barriers in each of their lives. The research questions for this study provided guidance as the interviews and documents were completed and analyzed. Data collected provided answers to each research question to make meaning of the return to education for each of the adults in the study. The three research questions were as follows:

1. How do adult literacy students describe their decision-making process to transition back to school?
2. How have people and life events influenced adult literacy students in their decision to return to school?
3. What meaning do they ascribe to these influences?

In addressing the first research question, the participants offered insight through interview responses and documents related to their decision to return to school. For most of the participants, this was not an impulsive decision, often taking many years for action, with some stepping out and stepping back into school. For most, it was family issues that ignited their departure and later taking action and returning to get their General Educational Development certificate (GED).

Ruby stated that she needed to “step up and figure out a way to be able to take care of my son and my other two children.” Having experienced the loss of two family members, she had no one to rely on but herself.
Um, when I left school, um . . . I was pregnant with my child, and now my children are all getting older, and they are all getting ready to leave school . . . so I’m at a point where I need to do something, ya know.

Even though she had a boyfriend whom she felt close to and hoped to marry, she was also planning on being able to take care of him as he ages, and education would help her to find a job that would allow her to earn a family-sustaining wage. Whether or not she got married, she could be independent, a high priority for Ruby.

Christian dealt with a similar situation in that his children helped him make the decision to return to school.

Well, um . . . I’m a single dad, my kids, and um . . . I just need to complete my life in order for them to be able to complete theirs. They see I’m not doing nothing, they’re not going to do nothing, and that’s not what I want.

He was nervous and excited, but having lost his job, he knew that he needed to fill his days with activity, and he did not want to go back to his old ways of negative and illegal behavior.

It was after he lost his job that he was able to examine his life and how he would move forward. The job loss gave him the time and reason to go back to school, with the need to be a role model to his young children a catalyst.

Vanessa made the decision to return to school after a difficult relationship ended with her baby’s father. She lost her home and independence, and had to move back in with her mother. As she waited for her second child to be born, she was prodded by her mother to be a better role model and to make something of herself rather than being unproductive. Vanessa considered her children to be what was driving her to succeed, and she sounded more and more determined with each interview.

Angel had limited experience with setting goals for herself, and with a tumultuous childhood, she experienced many disappointments and losses. However, her daughter’s
success in education encouraged her to complete her GED so she could also go on to college. She made the decision over a long period of time, as education brought painful memories to mind. However, keeping her newly created plan for her life as a guide, she decided that she had to complete her GED as the first step.

Finding a solid, dependable relationship offered Crystal a foundation upon which to build her life. She wanted more for herself and her family, but it was her rebellious daughter who was the driving force. Crystal felt that she owed it to her daughter to finish her education.

Well, because, you know, I wanted to give my daughter an example that you could still do something even though you have had rough patches, that you could still do something better for yourself. Not only for you, but you could do it for your kids, too. And now that, you know, I’ve found the person that I—I mean, I’ve been waiting for so long, it’s just kind of hard, you know.

Similarly, Robert made his decision to return to school based on a positive change in his life. After being hired by a new employer, he felt that it was the best time to not only learn English, as required by his new job, but to complete his GED, something he tried before. Having the time to complete the credential helped to reduce the pressure of completion by a specific date. He was also affected by his concern that growing older would not make the effort easier and that this was his last opportunity to finish his GED. He kept the goals of owning a business and going on to college in his mind as he moved ahead with his plans.

**The Influence of People and Life Events**

People and life events influenced how the participants made meaning of their return to education. People with positive and negative influence on their lives were catalysts for the process, sometimes being positive and negative simultaneously. Similarly, life events may
have been positive, such as finding a new job or developing a healthy relationship, or
negative, such as losing loved ones or climbing out of a painful relationship. The common
thread is that all the participants made the decision to return to school as a result of people
and events, feeling empowered by the positive and driven by the negative to make something
of their lives through education. They each looked to the future, putting earlier decisions and
experiences in the past to be able to prepare for the future.

In addition to losing loved ones, which encouraged Ruby to improve her income
opportunities and become more self-reliant, the needs of a child and the encouragement of a
partner influenced Ruby. She felt a need to finish her education because her son’s health
issues require her to take care of him long term. “My younger of my oldest sons is going to
live with me for the rest of his life because he is autistic.” She also saw her boyfriend as a
positive, contributing influence on her education.

Um, my boyfriend is approximately 19.5 years older than I am. . . . And he’s getting
to where he has had some stomach problems over the last year, and, you know, not
necessarily is he going to be able to work, because he is closer to retirement age than
I am. . . . And I worry about things like that, and I would want to have something to
work with, some kind of profession to maybe help take care of things that he couldn’t
when he retires. He wants me to be more knowledgeable, he wants me to be educated.
He, if he would pass away, he just wouldn’t want to leave me standing, ya know, with
no way to take care of myself. And, you know, he wants what’s best for me, he really
does. He wants to make sure that, you know, for my own health and happiness, and
that, you know, my self-esteem, that I get my GED and go on with college.

Christian’s reputation and choices about how he spent his time in the past influenced
his decision to return to school when he lost his job. He was determined to put his past
actions behind him and to seek a job he enjoyed and one that made a difference to society.

His negative relationship with the mother of his children also influenced him to provide a
positive role model and to make a better living to support his family. Christian told his young sons in his letter,

Alright, um, if you don’t finish school, you can get side tracked in life and end up doing things that will cause problems in your life, and it’s better for you to go to school, and keep your life busy than being busy on the streets doing nothing that will lead you to bad things, and um, my life has changed because I didn’t go to school, I didn’t pay attention in school, and um, now I’m 31 years old going back to school, and I don’t feel as smart as I should.

Vanessa made the decision to return to school in the past and then had to take a break.

Well, like I started, and that’s when I took my first test and stuff, and then that’s when I kinda got mixed up in like things with my child’s father, so I just quit going to school—I kinda just quit like . . . I think I was too worried about him, and quit worrying about more important things. And that is when I lost my apartment, and then when I moved back with my mom, then I came back.

She gave credit to her mother for encouraging her and speaking honestly to her about her future.

Hmm . . . probably ’cause of my mom, like she’s . . . she’s the type to where she just won’t let me sit there and not do anything, and that’s like what she did when she was younger, ya know? So she will always say stuff to me like, “Oh, you’re going to have two kids and you are just going to sit here all day, like . . .” And plus, that’s not a good feeling to like just be kinda nothing and then have two kids. So, I think she, she motivates me a lot, and she keeps me in the right direction.

For Angel, the decision to return to school was influenced by the end of an abusive relationship she managed to remove herself from a few years ago. Now in a healthy relationship with a boyfriend who was encouraging and positively influencing her, Angel was finding new success in school.

Because I wanted more, and then what I would thought of learning, at least with the study I’m doing now is language arts and reading in which I never could hardly understand that, and now I’m beginning to understand the main ideas and the whole details of it. And I study at home also. And I just enjoy it now. I do.
Crystal sought stability in her life as a result of her childhood and the unstable relationship her parents had when she was growing up. She saw education as a way to find stability and to improve her future. In addition to that influence on her decision, she had recently been driven by her daughter’s defiance and troubling choices in friends and activities. Crystal saw finishing her education as a chance to show her daughter a good example.

For the same reason that my parents split up and it was hard to be like in a stable place. You know. So I was ready to go back to school, so I came here. Here I have the opportunity to go back to school and kind of just try to finish it, and, you know, I tell my daughter, “See where my situation is, that when I had the chance to go to high school I never even finished because, you know, I got pregnant,” and I tell her, “It’s better you finish your high school.”

Robert regretted that he did not take the time to finish his education when he lived in Texas. He admitted that he did not use his time well and missed an opportunity to complete his education. However, with a new job as encouragement, he knew that the timing was right this time.

Well, the decision has been with me for a long time, but like I said, I didn’t have enough time; I didn’t manage my time. . . . I mean, I had the time, but I didn’t take the time. Okay. So that’s why I say now is the last opportunity for me because I’m getting old and I have a balance. Okay.

**Making Meaning of Influences**

During the interviews and document completion, there was little hesitation on the part of the participants as they thought through the influences on their decisions. Their insight into the positive and negative influences in their lives indicated that they had thought about their past actions and decisions, and understood how experiences and people influenced them. Although they indicated understanding of these areas of their lives, how they chose to
cope with them and avoid having them be barriers to their success was not as easy to verbalize.

In discussing her relationship with her boyfriend, Ruby mirrored her attitude toward education and other life decisions as she made meaning of her future. She expressed a strong desire to get married to her boyfriend, with whom she had a strong bond. However, she described him as only recently interested in moving in that direction. As she dealt with the loss of her mother and grandmother, she examined her life and how much she was willing to allow others to influence her decisions. Regarding her desire to marry her boyfriend, she said, “I want this, and if I can’t have this with you, then it’s time for me to move on, because I’m not going to settle for anything less than what I want.”

Christian made meaning of his past by connecting his education to his future:

My goal in life is to stop the dead end. I haven’t been going anywhere, and I want to achieve something—get further in life than I have. I need to start, ’cause I haven’t started really. I need to make a start, and that’s my goals, to complete life finally. Yes, and I wanna get it, and I want to go into the college. So I am more excited of getting through the GED faster and taking classes in college. Um . . . something I want to do, and I am excited, and, um, I think it is gonna help me stick through it because of me being excited. If I wasn’t excited, I probably won’t be here.

Vanessa made meaning of her feelings about her mother and her lack of education:

I don’t wanta like, like, like the way I kinda looked at my mom was how could she tell me I need to go to school and stuff when she, she just quit. You know, kinda question them about it. And I don’t want my son or my daughter to be like, “Well you didn’t go to school,” like, so they think they don’t have to or something, or think I’m a loser cause I didn’t.

Self-worth meant a lot to Vanessa, and her education would lead to a better self-image.

Hmm . . . probably just like, like maybe like self-worth, like I wanna feel better about myself and stuff, so like I wouldn’t, I wanna be doing something productive. Like if I’m not going to school, then I would rather be working, and if I’m not working, then I would rather go to school. And at some point in time, I think it would be really awesome if I could do both—like manage it.
Crystal determined that the reason that she was going back to school was because she wanted to show her children that it is always possible to reach one’s goals. She wanted them to know that it is okay to have rough times.

That if you fall for something, hey, you are able to get up, start again. There is nothing bad in going back to school. If it’s good to feel that you’re not able to do it, talk to anybody about it, how can you do it better? You know, I wouldn’t say follow in my footsteps, because they make their own way. But just if you are going to do something bad, think about it. Think about what is going to happen and decide whether it is good to do it or not. You know.

Robert created a metaphor for completing his education when he described his ignorance jacket:

It is important because I am going to put it this way. I’m not going to get stuck in the same point. I’m gonna keep moving, moving, and moving. And that means that I am going to be better. I mean, probably not ever going to get to be President of the United States, but I going to be better than a lot of people. You know? I found school like a place to leave my ignorance, and I don’t want to leave because I know it’s—I mean, maybe when I was younger I didn’t think about learning, because every time I get in school, the classrooms in this school, it’s like taking my ignorance jacket off, and then after I go out of the school maybe I pick up that jacket three blocks away from here, but I know that I am going to come the next day and I’m gonna take it off again.

**Discussion Related to Theories and Findings**

In developing the plan for this study, I conducted a literature review to identify relevant theories that connect to the return to education for adult literacy students seeking to complete their GED. The theories described in Chapter 2 include transition theory; theories related to self-esteem, validation, and mattering; social support theory; and goal setting. In this section, each theory is addressed and connected to the findings and themes.
Transition Theory

Transition theory helped to provide a theoretical framework for this study. Research conducted by Schlossberg (1994), Aslanian (1989), and Beder and Valentine (1987) concluded that trigger events were the catalysts for major changes in the lives of adults and potentially could lead to an adult deciding to return to education. Aslanian (1989) supported the concept that a trigger event in family, health, religion, or citizenship could stimulate the time to learn and that these events could be either mundane or major in the lives of the students. “Transitions are the reasons for learning. Triggers set the time for learning. Both are essential” (Aslanian, 1989, p. 7). In this study, there is evidence that triggers, either positive or negative, propel an adult to make decisions about his or her education. As Aslanian proposed, “An identifiable event triggers an adult’s decision to learn at a particular time. The need, the opportunity, even the desire to learn, are necessary but not sufficient” (p. 7). This quote has particular relevance to the findings of this study.

The study participants all experienced trigger events in their lives prior to the return to education. Ruby lost significant people in her family; Christian lost his job. Vanessa lost her apartment and ultimately her independence as she faced the birth of her second child. Angel, Crystal, and Robert experienced positive changes in their lives that positioned them to be able to go back to school with a strong support system, Angel with her boyfriend supporting her, and Crystal and Robert as a newly married couple who could problem solve together and deal with family concerns as a team. All three were experiencing fulfilling relationships for the first time; all had a newfound sense of security in those relationships, feeling supported and loved. These trigger events, either positive or negative, made the timing right to return to school.
**Self-Esteem, Validation, and Mattering**

Schlossberg (1994) defined marginality as “not fitting in,” and mattering as “our belief, right or wrong that we matter to someone else” (p. 5). Students returning to school with limited confidence, anxiety, family problems, and negative experiences in school in the past may not be comfortable reaching out to other students or staff. An example is how Angel described herself as a student:

> I just pretty much, that’s all I do when I come here. I study. I don’t hardly talk. I’m a quiet person. When I’m in class, I’m quiet. No one really knows I’m even there unless they speak to me.

It would have been easy for Angel to not be noticed and to feel that her presence at the Adult Literacy Center (the Center) did not matter unless there were intentional efforts by others to welcome her and make her feel that she could succeed. With so many students coming in and out all day, reaching out to those who need to feel important the most may be challenging to a limited staff.

Schlossberg’s (1994) description of mattering included feeling noticed by others, feeling cared about, feeling that others will be proud of one’s achievements and understand any failures, and feeling needed. Ruby felt welcome and that it mattered to the Center staff if she attended class and succeeded:

> You just know by the way they talk to you, the way that they are, ya know, welcoming, the way that they help you out no matter if you are frustrating them or not [laughs]. They’ll still stop and they’ll still take a deep breath, and they’ll keep trying and trying and trying with you. They just don’t give up. They push you to excel.

The connection between actualizing an educational goal and self-esteem, as indicated by the interviews and documents of this study, is also supported by Beder and Valentine’s (1987) concept of launching “a desire to restructure and take control of one’s life” (p. 16). As
cited in Wikelund et al. (1992), Beder and Valentine determined that literacy education is more than a vehicle to improve or acquire skills, and they referred to the process as a “symbolic activity’ in which learners may expunge their internalized (and socially reinforced) feelings of inadequacy, and it is a ‘vestibule activity’ necessary to enable participants (logistically and psychologically) to make changes in their lives” (p. 8).

Changes in other areas of their lives could be made possible if the six study participants are able to complete their GEDs and go on to achieve other life goals. However, the opposite scenario is also possible. If they do not succeed with earning their GEDs, then launching is aborted, and their ability to move beyond their personal issues becomes less likely. Adding to the pessimistic forecast is the work of Kasworm (2008), who described adult students as

unsure of themselves and their futures. . . . They often seek college entry through a life crisis. . . . These adults display emotional chaos as they develop a student identity, contemplate future success in collegiate classroom, and psychologically manage their turbulent life circumstances. In addition, they may have unresolved life issues that draw on their energy and time, as well as potentially negative past experiences of learning. (p. 28)

This description, although focused on adults entering college, is fitting for adults seeking to earn a GED. Their lives and emotions are in chaos, and their issues follow them into every endeavor, including returning to school. All six participants brought unresolved issues with them into their classes, and their liabilities may prevail.

During the interviews, participants expressed that they felt that they mattered at the Center as evidenced by the staff and their welcoming attitudes, sincere expressions of being pleased to see students, concern when students do not attend, and willingness to support students in a patient and persistent manner. The majority of the participants mentioned their
teachers while completing the Convoy of Social Support. Christian provided an example. He particularly appreciated the one-on-one help he got from the teachers. He also felt that it mattered to the staff that he was there. “Yeah, I know that, um, as in a teacher’s view, they want to see everybody succeed, and I know that . . . I know that if they worried about themselves, they wouldn’t be here.”

Christian’s opinion of the teachers was supported by Robert’s experience. Robert felt positive about his teacher:

Yeah, this morning I was like, “You know, boy, I did the test yesterday and now they tell me that I am so low in my classes,” and she was like, “Ok, well don’t quit. I was like that.” And now since she said she was kind of doing a test and she didn’t pass. She said, “You know, I did a test yesterday and I didn’t pass, so I going to keep trying too.”

Robert continued to describe his teacher as patient and a good role model. She was always willing to go over classwork again if he did not understand. He had a huge smile as he talked about how he felt when he was in class. He talked about his instructor with great respect because of her patience and encouragement. It helped to bring him back to class each day and to cope with low scores on assessments. She was quick to tell him about times that she had not succeeded at first, and Robert was inspired by her support.

Social Support

Based on Levitt’s (1991) research, the Convoy of Social Support documents supported the contention that everyone needs at least one close relationship for personal well-being. In Levitt’s research, there were a limited number of significant people across an adult’s life span who could reside in the inner circle, indicating a high level of influence. Some of the people who contributed to the students’ well-being may also have caused stress or may continue to cause stress in their lives, such as the parents of Angel, Ruby, Vanessa,
Christian, and Crystal. Previous partners and children were also stress inducers in the lives of the participants. In addition, the Convoy of Social Support documents indicated that there were polar catalysts for the majority of the participants, so even if these people were positive influences at the present time, there was history of these individuals causing stress and problems for the students. Examples of this type of influence include the mothers of Ruby, Christian, Angel, and Vanessa.

Social support was a key element in the decision to return to school for all study participants. The presence of a support system helped them to decide that the timing was right to return to school. Crystal, Robert, and Angel had a positive personal relationship that was encouraging and could assist them with problem solving. Vanessa had encouragement and childcare from her mother, Ruby had love and support from her boyfriend and his mother, and Christian had his mother’s pride in him and her willingness to help with the care of his children.

The Convoys of Social Support were informative, in that the participants had people within their inner circle who were at least partly positive in providing support to them. The majority of participants also commented that they had distanced themselves from people who were not supportive or encouraging to remove the distraction as they worked to complete their GED.

**Goal Setting**

Although the participants easily identified their future goals during the interviews, it was unclear if they had expressed them to their teachers or other professionals in the past. Once their goals were verbalized, they were constant in future conversations, as if putting their dreams into words made them concrete. A National Center for the Study of Adult
Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) report that cited Beder’s research supported goal formation and identification for adult students (Coming et al., 1999). Knowing that going back to school can be challenging, “adult students are weighing the benefit of reaching their life goals against the cost of participating in the education that will help them achieve those goals” (Coming et al., 1999, p. 61).

The Force-Field Analysis worksheet helped each participant identify supports and detractors that could influence his or her educational goals. In addition to the worksheet, data about setting goals were collected through the interviews. Although some of the participants, such as Angel, admitted that setting goals was a new experience, they had all looked beyond completing the GED to the future that may include new jobs, college, owning a business, improved feelings about themselves, improved relationships, and brighter futures. As Christian stated,

My goal in life is to stop the dead end. I haven’t been going anywhere, and I want to achieve something—get further in life than I have. I need to start, ’cause I haven’t started really. I need to make a start, and that’s my goals, to complete life finally.

Post-Study Follow-up

I invaded the participants’ lives, and they welcomed my entrance into their histories, experiences, and feelings. Their disclosure amazed me, and I came to understand each participant’s pain. Ruby, Christian, Angel, Crystal, Robert, and Vanessa all shared stories of imposed change and loss of family, country, or self. They told painful stories of abandonment by their mothers, not knowing their fathers, mistreatment by step-parents, detours during middle and high school years down roads that led to incarceration, drugs, and homelessness. For most of them, their lives became a mirror of the paths taken by their own parents, parents they criticized and were disappointed in while they were growing up.
The participants’ stories were also fraught with low-paying and unsatisfying jobs or unemployment, and not having the diploma or skills that would enable them to earn a decent wage to sustain their families or find a job that was appealing to them. Children were conceived and born to young, ill-prepared parents who, although not meaning to lead the same lives as their own parents, ended up having their own children adopted out, sent to foster families, or raised by grandparents.

The participants told of loving and nurturing grandmothers who came to their rescue and raised them, teachers who either protected and encouraged them or turned away from the bullying that resulted in their decision to drop out of school. There were friends who took them in and gave them needed temporary shelter, and other friends who encouraged them to get involved in activities they came to regret. There were adults who, against all odds, believed in them, including teachers, parents of their friends, clergy, social service workers, and counselors. For most, including Robert, who came from Mexico and had the most traditional upbringing, there were adults who belittled their decision to return to school and often ridiculed them in front of others about their decision, even though these adults were uneducated and unemployed themselves or in low-paying jobs.

The participants also told about their desire to be role models for their children. In almost every story, their children knew nothing or very little of their parents’ dream to get their high school diploma, and they often kept the secret, not even telling their children that they were back in school. Yet, each participant talked of the pride their children and parents would feel when they graduated. All had goals they sought to meet after graduation, including further education, job training, new jobs, inspiring their children, fulfilling the hopes of deceased relatives they still hoped to please, feeling good about themselves, proving
their doubting relatives wrong, and having the life for themselves and their families they always hoped to have.

On a sunny late-January day, I called the Center to find out how the participants in my study had progressed in their efforts to earn their GED and get on with their life goals. I had not seen them since October, so it had been almost 4 months. I was optimistic that all the enthusiasm and determination I had heard in their voices and had seen in their written documents would still be evident and that I would hear six success stories. Unfortunately, that was not what took place.

Susan, the cheerful administrative assistant, greeted me on the phone and told me how busy they had been registering new students; she then put me on hold to retrieve the student records I needed. I could picture the halls bustling with students, anxious to get a cup of coffee, greet friends, and get to class. I missed seeing the students and wanted to believe that the follow-up information Susan would soon deliver to me would be encouraging as I learned how each of the students in the study had progressed.

Ruby

Ruby’s absence from school was surprising. She had not been back to class since late fall, shortly after the final interview. During the interviews, her goals were clear and her focus was definite. Ruby had passed two tests last spring: writing and reading. However, she had not taken any GED tests for several months when we met. There were multiple issues that could have interfered with her education, including her relationship with her boyfriend, the health of her children, her own health, her anxiety, her need to work, or her inability to get to class because she could not drive.
As Ruby struggled to deal with her children’s health issues during the time period when the study was conducted, she seemed to be alone in her efforts. How could Ruby have been empowered during that time to face whatever challenges were ahead? How could the Center have assisted her with transportation, anxiety, and coping with life challenges? How could liabilities have been allayed before they became permanent barriers to success?

**Vanessa**

Vanessa gave birth to a healthy baby boy in November and sent me a picture of the infant with a brief email. Prior to leaving for the birth, she had successfully passed her social studies and reading tests out at the main campus. However, she had not been to school since the first of the year. Her goal to complete all her tests before she had to go back to work at the end of January had not been achieved, and her expanded family had obviously become a new trigger to keep her from class. The confidence and resolute attitude Vanessa had during the interviews was not enough to help her cope with the responsibility of another child and continue her schoolwork.

It was possible that Vanessa’s former boyfriend was back in her life after their child was born or that finding employment was urgent enough that school had to be delayed. However, there was no information as to why she had not returned to school. How could individual follow-up, knowing that someone was calling to see what support she needed to come back, have helped? How could staff have assisted Vanessa to prepare for balancing her family and schoolwork before the baby was born, so she had supports in place?

**Angel**

Angel has been seen at the Center since the first of the year, but her father died soon after the holidays, a father she told me during the first interview she did not know. She had
not been back since. With her fragile temperament and limited experience with setting goals, Angel had encountered a barrier, and it prevented her from progressing. Her lack of success in school in the past could have overshadowed her fragile confidence, as she struggled with limited skills. Someone could have upset her or made her feel threatened, or her mother’s health could have interfered, as she had proposed during the interviews.

Whatever problem(s) kept Angel from continuing her education, what questions could have been asked to help her think through problem solving and strategies for dealing with interfering emotional and family issues? What help could have been provided to her regarding her emotional issues that might have helped her cope with relationships and personal issues?

**Crystal and Robert**

Crystal and Robert experienced a family crisis, and as a result, they were granted legal custody of Crystal’s nieces and nephews. Some of the children had problems serious enough for them to require constant care. That meant that when Crystal was at work, Robert had to stay with the children. Neither Crystal nor Robert had been to class since the first of the year, and their priorities had drastically changed as they took on the new role of parents to additional children. Ironically, Crystal fulfilled her goal to help others, but it became a barrier to her achieving her own educational goals, and Robert, as a new husband, chose to support his wife and her family.

Crystal and Robert had been firm in their goals, as they appreciated their newly established foundation of a strong, supportive relationship. However, their marriage was new, and their relationship was evolving. Although they had plans in place to deal with their defiant daughter, new family issues surfaced that were unexpected. If coping skills had been
addressed as part of their education, could they have moved ahead with completing their GEDs, even with their family issues? What social services could the Center staff have helped them access so that they did not have to curtail their studies? How will the Center continue to track, support, and encourage Crystal and Robert so their departure from education is temporary?

**Christian**

Christian was the last student Susan informed me about. She told me that he was working hard and was about to take his final two tests out at the college. He had passed three tests and only had to take the math test, a subject he was having a lot of trouble with in his classes. However, Christian was about to finish and, hopefully, move on to finding a job he enjoys and that helps the world. One out of six study participants was close to earning a GED.

Christian had barriers and liabilities that were as daunting as anything that the other five participants faced. As he stated, he was excited about getting his GED and believed that the excitement would keep him focused so that he could succeed. Perhaps everything finally came together for Christian, including his drive, his needs, and his opportunity. What support or assets did Christian manage to access that eluded the others? What worked for him that could be replicated with other students to help them deal with life disruptions that interfere with their education and reaching their goals?

**Summary**

Life did get in the way for each of the study participants. The students who participated in this study did not lack motivation, as I suspected they would when I first started the interviews. They had dreams of completing their GED and moving on to new
goals that they hoped to achieve, and the determination in their voices matched their written words. However, their previous life experiences continued to haunt them. Family needs, lack of coping skills and resources, isolation, and lack of self-confidence all worked against them and interfered with their attendance and commitment. Only Christian remained in class, coming close to achieving his goals, excited and determined.

Making meaning of the interviews and documents executed for this study provided a dual opportunity to consider the broad design and format of adult literacy programs as well as the individual outcomes for each of the students. The disappointing statistics about the small percentage of the adult population without high school degrees that these programs are reaching supported the purpose of the study, to understand the meaning low-skilled adults ascribe to the experience of returning to school at a community college’s adult literacy educational center in a small town.

My hope was to learn how adult literacy programs could improve the retention of students and how they could adjust to better serve their target population to experience better results—more GED completions. The Center in this study provided a welcoming, caring environment with a focus on moving students through study to testing and GED completion. Teachers were appreciated and available, and the Center offered a flexible schedule and convenient location to meet the needs of the students.

For Ruby, Angel, Vanessa, Crystal, and Robert, no door has closed on their future educational efforts. They can return to the Center and pick up where they left off, studying, taking classes, and working toward test completion. As Hadfield (2003) stated in her research, adults who step out of the educational process should not be perceived as dropouts. Hadfield contended that students will return if “we do our job correctly” (p. 19). This could
very likely be true for the five students in this study who stepped back out of the educational process.

**Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

Listening to the voices of the study participants provided insight into how policy, practice, and future research can improve the support offered by adult literacy education. Making meaning of the students’ decision-making processes, understanding the life experiences and people who influenced them, and assessing their assets and liabilities can inform decisions that can impact and improve programs and increase retention and persistence.

There is an urgent need for a body of research on this topic to be accessed by student services advisors, adult literacy coordinators and teachers, workforce staff, policymakers, and administrators in order to determine how programs can better serve adult literacy students. Understanding why students do not stay long enough to complete their credential can be illuminated by making meaning of why these students return to school, as was addressed in this study.

**Policy**

Policies that guide adult literacy programs are often mandated by state or federal grants and departments, and are limited to how funds are budgeted and spent. Assessments and teacher quality may also be affected by public policy, but local community college adult literacy programs have the autonomy to design their local programs and adopt policies based on research that can support the implementation of research-based strategies to support student needs and boost retention.
A policy area that needs to be addressed is how adult literacy students and programs are perceived on campus. Adult literacy programs are often physically isolated from the main campus, without access to needed supports. Students may never come in contact with counselors or advisors. There may be sporadic attempts to provide social services information, but with limited instructional staff and even more limited support staff, that might not be accomplished. In addition, grant management requires accountability and meeting benchmarks for funding purposes. In financially strapped programs, this may translate to using staff energy and program resources to focus specifically on academic success, without attention to other student needs. As a result, students with serious challenges, in addition to or other than academic challenges, may feel frustrated and unprepared to cope with their problems and may ultimately drop out.

The research of Schlossberg (1994), Rendón (2002), and Chaves (2006) supports the development of policy to recognize the presence of the adults on campus and demonstrate that they matter. Rendón’s (2002) research offers strategies for faculty to foster academic validation, including showing genuine concern, being approachable, treating students equally, working with students individually as needed, and providing meaningful feedback. Similarly, Kasworm’s (2008) research encourages development of a policy that supports program efforts to offer advising and career counseling to adult students and to build the environment to address adult needs. However, these skills need to be taught to faculty and staff, and establishing a policy that expects staff to develop these skills can be beneficial.

Customer service policy related to adult literacy is often limited on campuses due to the detachment of the adult literacy program site and the nontraditional schedule. Hadfield (2003) described customer service as the most important strategy for encouraging adult
retention. Some of Hadfield’s recommendations included listening to the needs of the adult students, helping the students feel they are part of the community through flexible student support office hours, ease of entry and registration, lighted buildings during evening class times, institutional support of adult-learner organizations, childcare, free and available parking, family-friendly social activities, and “no long lines for anything” (p. 21). These are all valuable policy recommendations that should be considered by adult literacy and college staff as they strive to improve retention.

In making meaning of the return of the six adult literacy students to their GED classes, a third policy area needs attention. Students who do not attend class and are absent for a period of time need to have intentional and intensive follow-up to determine reasons for absence and areas in which support from the program may be beneficial. Limited staff and time may make the implementation of a follow-up policy challenging to implement, but when students step out of the program, it needs to be considered a temporary departure, assuming the students are just waiting to return when the needed supports are in place. Implementation of this policy would assist students to feel comfortable returning and enable staff to recognize that adult students may need to step out and back in as personal needs arise. The return protocol should be student focused and as easy as possible to encourage a feeling that they are welcome back.

An additional policy area that needs change relates to how adult literacy is funded in Iowa. Local programs are stretching their federal allocations and local funding more each year to meet the needs of the student population, which includes an increasing number of recently displaced workers without basic literacy skills, English language learners, learning disabled and lower literacy students each year. The long waiting lists for adult education that
plague other states do not exist at this time in Iowa. However, decreased federal funding, the lack of targeted state funds for adult literacy, and tightening local program budgets threaten the capacity of the adult literacy programs to meet student needs. It is imperative that the state legislature recognizes the need for funding to support adult literacy to secure an educated workforce for our future.

With the movement to online GED instruction and testing, there are additional policy concerns. As the findings indicated, personal connections with students that offer the opportunity to assess and address coping issues are crucial to student success. With online relationships, the limited connections that now exist between adult literacy students and staff will be lost, and there will be even less time to determine what supports are needed for a student to succeed. There will also be less opportunity to reassure students that they matter and that their participation is important.

**Practice**

Practice in adult literacy programs can support the identification and recognition of the students’ assets and liabilities so follow-up can be facilitated if a student is absent from the program for a period of time. The Grossman Coping Resources Matrix can assist program staff in this practice by providing a template to use to identify and evaluate the coping resources for an individual or group of students and ultimately assess their needs for support to address liabilities that could get in the way of their success.

Building on the “4 S’s” and the conceptual framework of assets and liabilities as presented by Schlossberg, the Grossman Coping Resources Matrix can be referenced and information shared among instructional, administrative, and student services staff. In addition, the matrix can be regularly updated as life influences change for a student, to
support changes in advising and counseling. The matrix, when used with a small group of students, could identify common needs such as counseling, parenting skills, social services information, and medical information, and programs could plan to schedule events or have support staff available to assist the students identified as having those needs.

Another recommendation related to practice is to build on program efforts to encourage and support student motivation and goal setting. Beder and Valentine (1987) and Coming et al. (1999) identified motivation as a key force in guiding adults toward education, a deeper level of motivation connected to the life situation of the student. Beder and Valentine (1987) concluded that “students attend in order to actualize their motivations” (p. 14) and that instruction should address individual needs based on knowledge about what is motivating the students to return to education. Their research supports the practice of identifying the reasons why students return to their education as the first step in the process of identifying and building upon the motivating factors in the lives of the students. The research also supports the practice of including goal setting as more than a box to check on the initial intake form; it should be an ongoing process that requires regular dialogue between student and staff, either in individual or small-group settings, to establish, modify, and check progress toward reaching goals.

Hadfield (2003) suggested additional practices that improve educational programs for adults, including having caring and trained teachers; encouraging learning opportunities that immediately apply learning concepts; listening to the complaints, questions, and suggestions of the students; having actions match words; supporting ongoing measurement of customer satisfaction; and having all staff, from the top administrators to the front line, demonstrate
these principles. These recommendations for practice should be considered for implementation.

Prior to the study, I observed and interviewed adult literacy staff to assess the depth and amount of information they collected about the lives of the students during the enrollment process. The information was limited to what was collected during a very brief entry conversation on a form that the student filled out to be entered into the data system. Although helpful for the program, this process was impersonal and the information was not necessarily enlightening or useful.

I would recommend that programs implement the forms used for this study including the Educational Milestones Lifeline, Convoy of Social Support, and the Force-Field Analysis worksheet. The forms and the accompanying dialogue that could take place between the students and a caring staff member could offer the students an opportunity to talk about potential barriers to their educational success and problem solve with a skilled staff member. Directly assessing potential challenges and what a student needs to succeed opens the door for the student to be prepared should the challenge escalate.

All of the students in this study had dreams that most people can achieve. However, they had enormous barriers to having their dreams come true. Along with learning about the lives of the students in adult literacy programs in an effort to provide intensive, individualized support for each student, dream fulfillment needs to be a topic that is discussed and validated. Students need to be regularly reminded of their dreams, and when potential barriers arise, they need to be encouraged to keep their dreams in their mind and to divide their big goals into smaller, more achievable steps.
An example of how this might work for a student came to light when I asked the students in this study if they would be attending their graduation after they earned their GED. Here is a conversation I had with Christian at the conclusion of our final interview:

_Helene:_ Okay, um, are you going to go through graduation?

_Christian:_ What do you mean about that?

_Helene:_ Well, once you get your GED, there’s a graduation ceremony.

_Christian:_ There is?

_Helene:_ Uh hum.

_Christian:_ I never knew that.

_Helene:_ Very nice. I think they wear caps and gowns.

_Christian:_ Yeah?

_Helene:_ They get the diploma. Family, friends are there. It’s a pretty special day.

_Christian:_ Well, yeah, if I get that choice, I’ll probably . . .

_Helene:_ When you get that choice, yeah? Will your kids be here with you?

_Christian:_ Um, yeah, for something like that, yeah.

_Helene:_ Good. How will you feel on that day?

_Christian:_ Uh, probably succeeded.

None of the students were aware that a ceremony would be held at the college in the spring and that they could be included. Graduation is part of the dream fulfillment for students, as they mark their success and move onto their next dream, so it should be presented as part of the goal setting at the beginning of a student’s program at the center.

A final recommendation for adult literacy programs and staff relates to student skill development. Students returning to their education as adults may have limited social skills
that they need to interact with others, build a network, address personal problems, and believe in themselves. Adult literacy program staff can support students by providing opportunities to build a social network among students, being intentional about identifying potential barriers to success and personal liabilities, and guiding students to use their assets to counteract what could potentially deter them. The students’ strengths, the people who influence them, their educational lifeline, and their ability to set and achieve goals related to their education can be actualized through these efforts. Examples of strategies that could assist students include the following:

- Parenting workshops and speakers
- Psychological support group to address abuse and trauma
- Coping skills workshops
- Social events to build friendships and network
- Wall of Fame to celebrate each testing success
- Focus on graduation so students see themselves as capable of experiencing a ceremony
- Achievement awards and recognition
- Student services presence
- Support groups
- Important phone numbers such as social services, workforce, abuse hotline available for students
- Ideas and hints posted in bathroom stalls and in classrooms

**Future Research**

After completing my study and analysis of the research, it is clear that there is more that can be done to increase the ability of researchers to understand how adult literacy
students make meaning of their return to education. The relevant literature needs to be increased to provide adult literacy instructors, administrators, student services staff, and social services staff the opportunity to understand the lives and experiences of the students and how to explore these areas to build on their assets and reduce the limitations of their liabilities. The “don’t ask” attitude will not support the nonacademic needs of the students that will probably deter them from succeeding.

A future research effort might follow the six students described in this study to see how they progress toward their goals, how they manage their liabilities, how they problem solve, how having the opportunity to discuss their lives and influences with a researcher affected their progress toward completing their GED, and what helped them to succeed, if they did complete their program. In particular, comparing the coping resources that helped Christian to overcome his issues with those of the other students would provide insight into how one student moves forward while others do not.

Additional areas of study I would recommend include research into teacher attitude and preparation. What is the educator’s point of view related to adult literacy students? What do teachers know about these students and what can they learn about them to increase persistence and retention? Future research might also benefit the literature by studying the motivation and support of ESL students who plan to take the Spanish version of the GED.

Finally, it would be beneficial for a pilot program to implement the use of the documents I created and study the impact of some of the recommendations I included in this chapter. It would strongly impact student success if teachers kept a Grossman Coping Resources Matrix for their students and offered support sessions or classes for those with
parenting, family, or problem-solving needs. It is only half the task to learn about the students. The other half is to provide support in the areas needed for success.

**Reflections**

I first encountered transition theory many years ago when I was newly divorced and returning to school for my first graduate degree. During a class about adult learning, I came across Schlossberg’s theory and felt a strong connection to her work. I was returning to school because I needed an outlet to help me to feel strong and competent, and education always provided comfort and confidence. Several years later, after a death in my family, I again returned to school for a second graduate degree and felt the same sense of renewal. Reading about the theory continued to be intriguing, but it wasn’t until a doctoral level class reminded me about transition theory that I started to contemplate the significance of the theory for myself at this point in my life and how it might relate to the adult literacy students in the programs I coordinated at the state level. With each class, I became more and more convinced about the importance of the theory and the potential implications for policy and practice. With a strong passion for adult literacy and a determination to conduct research that would result in program improvement, I decided to choose a topic for my dissertation related to transition theory and adult literacy students.

There were numerous directions I could have taken with my research, but considering the experience, I am satisfied that I took the correct path. Even though I have respect for quantitative research, I was drawn to the people, perspectives, and phenomena of the qualitative epistemology. I knew during my first quantitative research class that I did not belong. If I had to choose between a number and a word, I would always choose a word. A voice means more to me than a table, and a question is more compelling than a formula. The
fieldwork process allowed me to hear about the life experiences of students who had rich stories to tell. In turn, I respectfully gathered the essence of their combined experiences, including how they made meaning from their life events and their convoys of support. From their experiences, I was able to make meaning of their return to their education and share their perspectives in my study.

Sokolowski (2000) summarized the phenomenological attitude by saying, “We look at what we normally look through” (p. 50). Having led the state of Iowa’s adult literacy programs for 5 years, I was removed and distant from the students as I worked on policy, procedures, and supporting the local programs and did not focus on seeing the reality of the student condition. Studying the reasons why students return to get their GED was a fitting topic and something that has intrigued me for a long time. Although I had read the annual report from GED Testing Service, which summarizes what students check off as reasons why they return, my guess was that these students were not motivated enough in high school to complete their education and that they continued to be preoccupied with other life directions after dropping out.

The following quote from Moustakas (1994) grew in veracity as I progressed through the study: “The method of reflection that occurs throughout the phenomenological approach provides a logical, systemic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p. 47). He further applied principles, processes, and methods to human science research by summarizing the “core facets” (p. 58) to include focusing on the appearance of things just as they are given, addressing wholeness by finding a unified vision or the essence of the phenomenon, seeking meaning from appearances while arriving at the essence through intuition and reflection, using descriptions
to “keep a phenomenon alive” (p. 59), recognizing the personal interest of the researcher and his or her ultimate connection to the phenomenon with consideration of memory and history, and seeing the integration of the subject and object as “what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am” (p. 59). These defining quotes about phenomenology verify the process and content of my study.

When I first came to the Adult Literacy Center to talk to the staff about my study, I was excited and optimistic. I talked with all of the instructors to let them know what my goals were for the study and how I planned to conduct my research. I returned several times to visit with students to explain my study and ask for volunteers. I do not know why I thought they would immediately trust me and be willing to sign up, because that did not happen. I talked to several different classes, and in some classes everyone just filled out the informed consent and expressed willingness and interest in being part of the study, whereas in other classes, they looked at each other and all seemed suspicious.

The director of the Center told me that some of the students were hesitant, did not know me, and did not feel comfortable signing up, but that after I left and she was able to answer some questions following my brief presentation to the students, they were willing and anxious to be part of the study. I had 12 students complete the initial forms, with only 8 qualified to be participants. Those I chose not to include were less than 18 years of age, similar to others who had signed up, or nonproficient in English.

During the last week of September 2011, I collected the informed consent forms, and on October 4, 2011, I conducted my first three interviews, having looked through all of the informed consent forms trying to find a diverse pool of participants. I selected three participants to begin the study. One student was a young Native American woman who was
expecting her second child. Her challenges appeared to be family oriented, so I thought she would be an interesting participant. Another student was covered in tattoos. He had a bright smile and was a single dad, so I thought he would provide richness to the study. The third student was in her 30s, a single mom, but very determined. In our brief conversation during my presentation to her GED class, she asked several questions. She was outspoken and eloquent, and I felt that she would bring the older student’s perspective to the study. The other three participants were added a week later. They were encouraged to tell their stories, met me, and felt comfortable sharing their lives with me.

It was a heart-wrenching experience to hear the struggles of the students I interviewed. I found myself feeling less and less excited about heading to the Center to conduct interviews. My heart was heavy, and I knew that the interviews would be troubling. I held onto the optimism that these students were doing something to change their lives. They were actively participating in fulfilling their dreams. There was nothing else I could hope for than their success.

It became clear to me during my study that what kept the students from returning was that life just got in the way. The motivation was there, but their jobs, families, self-images, past experiences, or lack of support and inability to set realistic goals created insurmountable barriers to succeed in school. I believe that all of the students wanted to finish their education and were committed to this goal. However, they had other goals that had to take precedence, including taking care of family, finding a job, and doing what they felt had to be done first. I may not necessarily agree with their priorities, but making meaning of why they returned to school helped me to understand why they left, hopefully for a short time until life no longer interfered.
I understand how life can get in the way of achieving goals, but for me, education came second only to family and job needs. I have always been fortunate to be able to continue my education after trigger events in my life. After a difficult divorce, I returned to earn my master’s degree; after the death of my husband, I went back to school and completed an education specialist degree. Years later, as I faced the final decade or two of my career before retirement, I found myself thinking of any regrets I might have, and the only one I had that I could change was to earn my doctoral degree. I appreciate the persistence of my major professors, who reassured me and encouraged me to pursue my goal. Perhaps if the six participants in my study had the same level of encouragement, they, too, would be completing their goals to earn their GED. Perhaps if some of the suggestions for practice had been implemented when the students first enrolled, they may have had the coping skills to continue their education.

I have returned to school as a result of various transitions, both happy and sad, and my returns were triggered by events I could not control. The motivation to return has always been with me, as it is with the six students I interviewed, but fortunately, life did not get in the way for me, preventing me from returning to school. I had the resources, supports, education, and experience to continue to move forward. It is my greatest hope that Ruby, Christian, Vanessa, Angel, Crystal, and Robert will someday look back on the time when they finished their GEDs and be proud. I will be.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT AND LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

**Title of Study:** Second chances: Meaning made from adult literacy students returning to school

**Investigators:** Helene J. Grossman

Dear GED Student,

Congratulations on working toward your GED!

I am a graduate student at Iowa State University, and I also work with adult literacy programs around the state. I am conducting a research study about GED students. You are being asked to participate in this study because you made the decision to return to your education. I am very interested in how you made the decision, the events that took place in your life, and the people who may have influenced you. It is my hope that what I learn from my study will help teachers and administrators to better meet the needs of the GED students.

The lower part of this letter asks you for information. If you are willing to participate, please mark the box next to “Yes” and sign your name. Please fill in the answers to the questions asking for birthdate, gender, race, marital status, number of children in the home, and annual income and put this form in the envelope provided. Please provide your phone number and email as well. If you do not wish to participate, please put the blank consent form and letter in the provided envelope and return it to me. You should not participate if you are not interested in being involved in this study.

To help me select participants from those who are interested, you will be writing a short piece about why you decided to return to school, which I will read. I am looking for a cross-section of participants from the GED level of classes with consideration given to gender, age, background, ethnicity, family experience and time in the program, so it is possible that even if you volunteer to be a part of the study, you may not be selected.

I will be working with 6-8 GED students at the Education and Training Center. If you agree to participate and are chosen, you will be asked to engage in 2-3 one hour interviews. The interviews will be conducted over a 2-4 week period. All interviews will be taped and transcribed. There will also be some writing that I will ask you to complete either before or during our interviews for us to talk about.

If you agree to be considered to be a participant, I will inform you within 1-2 weeks if you have been selected. At that time, we will set a time for our first interview. At our first interview, I will provide you with a copy of your signed form for you to keep.

If you decide to participate in this study, there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by providing needed insight for adult literacy staff about how to improve practice and policy. You should also know that you
will not have any costs from participating in this study, and you will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: I will use pseudonym identifiers for all interviewees. Any personally identifiable information will not be shared or included in the dissertation. Comments from the interviews will be kept on a password protected external hard drive that is located at my residence. Only I have access to the hard drive. The drive cannot be accessed by Iowa State University campus computers. Once the study is completed, I will not share any identifying data that was collected. If the results are published, identity will remain confidential. All data collected will be reported in the aggregate.

The results from my study will be reported in a dissertation, may be presented in educational settings or professional conferences or may be referred to in articles about adult literacy students returning to their education. If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact Dr. Frankie Santos Laanan at 515-294-7292 or email at laanan@mail.iastate.edu. You may also contact me, Helene Grossman at 515-321-4561 or helenejg11@gmail.com if you have questions.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Please check one box below (√):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes, I have read this information and agree to participate in this study, with the knowledge that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. I am not interested in participating in this study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature: ______________________________ Date: ___________________________
If you checked YES, please answer the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Name:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Email Address:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
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<td>Gender:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children in The Home:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status:</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4257

Date: 9/12/2011
To: Helene Grossman
4203 154th St
Urbandale, IA 50323

CC: Dr. Frankie Santos Laanan
N225A Lagomarcino

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Second Chances: Meaning Made from Adult Literacy Students Returning to School

IRB Num: 11-368

Approval Date: 9/12/2011
Continuing Review Date: 9/11/2012

Submission Type: New
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

Your study has been approved according to the dates shown above. To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 50), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office for Responsible Research website http://www.compliance.iastate.edu/irb/forms/ or available by calling (515) 294-4566.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
APPENDIX C

LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM IOWA VALLEY

July 15, 2011

Dr. Frankie Santos Laanan
Iowa State University
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
1550 Beardshear Hall
Ames, IA 50011-2021

Dear Dr. Laanan:

I am writing to you on behalf of Iowa Valley Community College District in support of Helene Grossman's research project on adult literacy programs and the students they serve. Iowa Valley Continuing Education provides services to over one thousand adult literacy students annually. Like many other community colleges we struggle to keep students motivated and engaged, therefore reflecting a large number of participants coming through our doors showing very little gains. If this trend continues, poverty rates will continue to increase due to the availability of a workforce unable to compete in the job market. This is detrimental to the student and has a significant impact on the local economy. Iowa Valley is committed to taking the necessary steps to enhance our recruitment and retention strategies for this population.

Desiring to gain a better understanding about this population and what motivates them to return to education, Iowa Valley would like Helene Grossman to conduct a research study at the education and training center. The education and training center is the primary hub for adult literacy programs within our college district. Our center serves a very diverse population and will provide an opportunity for Helene to interview participants with varied backgrounds and skill levels. This study will help us provide valuable knowledge on effective recruitment, retention and transition strategies. I look forward to receiving the final report and reviewing the data that can be extremely helpful in strengthening our adult literacy services. Please contact me at 800-284-4823 X. 5640 if you have any questions.

Respectfully,

Jacqueline R. Goodman
Vice Chancellor of Continuing Education and Training
Iowa Valley Community College District
APPENDIX D

EDUCATIONAL MILESTONES LIFELINE
APPENDIX E

CONVOY OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

This map is based on Kahn and Antonucci’s *Convoy of Social Support* as discussed in Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006).
APPENDIX F

FORCE-FIELD ANALYSIS
APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Questions for Adult Literacy Students
Helene J. Grossman

First Interview: Introduction and 4 S’s

1. Tell me about yourself.
   a. Family
   b. Friends
   c. Employment
   d. Home
   e. Hobbies
   f. Goals

2. Talk about your previous high school and GED experience and what made you decide to leave.

3. How long did it take to make the decision to return to school?

4. With whom did you discuss this decision?

5. How did people close to you feel about this decision?

6. What personality or character traits do you have that will help you to succeed in school?

7. What personality or character traits do you have that may challenge your school success?

8. What do you see as your major challenges to succeeding?

9. How will you address these challenges?

10. What other challenges have you faced in life that have prepared you to return to school?

11. Think about when you left your education and now. Compare the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What caused you to leave</th>
<th>What caused you to return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why did you leave at that time</td>
<td>Why did you return at the time you did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was in your control</td>
<td>What was in your control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What wasn’t in your control</td>
<td>What wasn’t in your control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long did the change in your life take</td>
<td>How long did the change in your life take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the impact of the decision</td>
<td>What was the impact of the decision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second Interview:
A. Lifeline

1. Talk about the highlights you placed on the lifeline and describe how each one impacted your educational decisions.

2. Describe your life between the time you dropped out of high school and when you decided to return to your education.

3. What other options besides school did you consider and why did you decide on school?

4. What educational options did you consider and what helped you decide to go for the GED?

5. Think about the last year or two before coming back to school. What major incidents have occurred in your life that may have affected your decision to return to school?

6. What other thoughts have you had about your return to education since we last talked?

B. Convoy of Social Support

1. Who are the people in your life who influenced this decision either by encouraging you or discouraging you?

2. Imagine that I am ---. What would you want to say to me?

3. Concentrating on the people in your life- talk about each circle and the people you placed there.

4. How would your life and educational decisions have been different if …

5. Talk about where your teachers are in your Convoy.

6. Consider the outer circle. Who from this circle do you wish could have been closer to you and your decision-making?

7. Who in the inner circle challenged you the most and how?

8. How did key relationships change when you left school? Returned?

Third Interview
A. Force-Field Analysis

1. Using this worksheet, talk about the forces in your life that have encouraged you to return to school.
2. How strong were these forces?
3. How did you feel about them?
4. Describe the negative forces that discouraged or sabotaged you.
5. How strong were these forces?
6. How did you feel about them?
7. Were you a positive or negative force?
8. At this time, which forces are winning and why?
9. Think of the following four coping strategies: direct action, information seeking, inhibition of acting, and internal psychological behavior. How do these relate to your decision to return to school?

**B. Letter**

1. To whom did you write your letter?
2. How did you make the decision about who you would write to?
3. What made you choose this person?
4. How would this person feel if he or she received your letter?
5. What is the message you hoped to send?
6. Will you mail the letter? Why or why not?
7. What else would you have liked to say but did not write?
8. If you were to give this person something, what would it be?

**C. Conclusion**

1. Was coming back to school the best decision you could have made? Why?
2. How do you feel about being back at school?
3. What makes you feel good about being here?
4. What makes you feel uncomfortable?
5. How much do you feel that you matter here?
6. What makes you feel that way?
7. What are three goals you have related to coming back to school?
8. Imagine that you have reached your goals, how will you feel about yourself?
9. Think about your life after you get your GED. Describe a day in your life three years from now.
10. What remains to be said about your return to school?