How Mexican immigrant adults in a new destination community experience educational aspiration: a phenomenological inquiry

Jennifer Susan Wilson
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How Mexican immigrant adults in a new destination community experience educational aspiration: A phenomenological inquiry

by

Jennifer Susan Wilson

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:
Katherine Richardson Bruna, Major Professor
    Lyn Brodersen
    Sharon Drake
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    Constance Beecher

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Ames, Iowa
2016

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DEDICATION

To my loving grandparents:

James and Marian Edge
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Today, like no other, is a milestone for not only me, but also for so many who have touched my life. I first want to thank my best friend and the love of my life, Tim. It is because of you, I no longer allow others to define who I am. Thank you for pushing, pulling, demanding, and sometimes begging me to go beyond and insisting that I learn how to believe in myself. Your love is like no other. You are the keeper of my heart; you are my soulmate, the light in the darkness, and the passion that feeds my desire. Thank you for listening, letting me yell, scream, cry, and laugh with you, to you, and at you! You never doubted me, even when I doubted myself, always believing in my capabilities. A wise man once told me, “You can do anything you put your mind to.” He was wrong. We can do anything we put our mind to. I love you.

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To my mom, you are my best friend, my cheerleader, and my role model. Thank you for all the times you kept after me to push forward, for the hours of talks over glasses of wine, and the daycare moments so Tim and I could get away. We have been through a lot, but have seen the benefits of persistence. You have taught me to not give-up on my dreams, to not take no for an answer, and that sometimes things work out for the best—mottos to live by in today’s world. I love you with all my heart!

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for wiping my tears, making me laugh, buying me beer, and giving me those pep talks. You are amazing and gifted people!

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OUR COUNTRY IS IN THE MIDST OF A MIDDLE-SKILLS GAP WHERE THERE ARE MORE JOBS REQUIRING EDUCATION BEYOND A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA, AND LESS REQUIRING A FOUR-YEAR-DEGREE. WITH THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS, OUR NATION IS LOOKING AT THE LARGEST GROWING POPULATION, MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS, TO GAIN REQUIRED CREDENTIALS TO FILL THOSE MIDDLE-SKILL JOBS. THESE FUTURE WORKERS WILL COME TO COMMUNITY AND VOCATIONAL COLLEGES AS THE PRIMARY INSTITUTIONS FROM WHICH TO RECEIVE TRAINING; THEREFORE, NEW PROGRAMS AND POLICIES MUST BE DEVELOPED TO MEET THE DEMANDS OF THE MIDDLE SKILLS VOCATIONS (ZHANG, GUISON-DOWDY, PATTERSON, & SONG, 2011), PARTICULARLY FOR THIS NEW AUDIENCE. IN THIS PROJECT, I Sought TO STEP BEHIND THE PROVERBIAL DESK OF MY JOB AS THE DIRECTOR OF ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY, GO BEYOND THE NUMERICAL DATA OF WORKFORCE NEEDS AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, AND DISCOVER, BY LISTENING TO THEIR OWN WORDS, HOW THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF SOME OF MY ADULT MEXICAN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS HAVE AFFECTED THEIR EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS. I ASPIRED TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PORTRAITURE-BASED APPROACH TO CONVEY A DEEPER HUMANISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT PURSING FURTHER EDUCATION MEANT TO EACH PARTICIPANT AND THEIR FAMILIES. FROM MY SIX INTERVIEWS, I CHOSE TO TELL FOUR STORIES THAT GIVE VOICE TO THE RANGE OF ASPIRATIONS MY PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED. CENTRAL TO THESE STORIES WERE THEMES OF LEARNING AS FINDING FREEDOM, LEARNING AS COMMUNAL, LEARNING AS FAMILY MOBILITY, AND LEARNING AS PERSEVERANCE. UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANT ADULTS THROUGH THEIR LIFE EVENTS NAMED BY THESE THEMES MOVES US BEYOND THE DISCOURSE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THAT CHARACTERIZES THE SKILLS-GAP LITERATURE, AND PUTS A HUMAN FACE ON THE MEANING INVESTED BY THESE ADULTS IN FURTHERING THEIR EDUCATION. THIS IS
important for educators to know when, back behind the desk, we purport to be developing programs to meet “their” needs. The demographic changes in our nation require a view of continuing adult education that takes into account the current context of transnational globalization and hybridity that, in today’s New Destination communities, is our future in the making.
ACT I

INTRODUCTION: OPENING NIGHT

Learning means something different to everyone. Whether learning happens in a classroom, at home, or on the streets, we usually learn with, from, and because of others. The people in our lives shape our experiences. They influence and guide our curiosity. When we simply measure a person’s knowledge using a standardized test, or a data point, we miss-out on understanding the life experiences that led to their educational growth and learning.

“My students are people”

The day I interviewed for my position as the Director of Adult Education and Literacy, I recall deliberating over which suit to wear, black or blue, wanting to make a good impression. As I prepped for my interview that snowy afternoon, I laughed a bit to myself as I put on my makeup in the tall wood-framed mirror in my bathroom. A conversation with my neighbors kept ringing in my head. I recall them asking why my family would want to move to a town where only Mexicans lived. Why would we want to go to Marshalltown, or what they referred to as “Little Mexico”? Putting the final touches on my long blonde hair in the car mirror after I parked, I adjusted my purse on my arm and walked confidently into the glass doors of the Education and Training Center. That was eight years ago. Today, as I drive past the local Mexican bakery in Marshalltown, my new home, smelling the scent of bread baking, a response to my neighbor’s question still rings out in my head: “They are people, wanting a better life just like you and I.”
Eight years later, I find myself pondering my clothing choice once again. Today, I am to meet with the business and industry leaders of the community. I hope to establish a more realistic picture of the students whom I serve, the laborers of the local employers, and the members of families who make up our community. Again, I want to make a good impression. I choose to dress in a pantsuit, black slacks and a neon blue jacket, recognized by my husband as my power suit. He tells me that people turn and take notice when I enter a room and today has to be one of those days. He looks at me and jokingly says, “Go get’em la jefe.” His joke reminds me of the teasing from my adult Mexican students. When they call me “boss,” I can feel my cheeks redden and the hair on my neck rise from embarrassment.

I sit staring at my computer screen. On it, I see the images I want to share with this afternoon’s audience. Charged by the Chancellor to discuss the data we have about the adults employed at the local meatpacking plant who are also attending English as a Second Language classes, I feel the magnitude of the situation. It is imperative that the numerical data speaks to the benefits of their education financially funded by their employer.

As I begin putting together the slides for my presentation, various stories run through my mind as I seek out the best to share. I refuse only to talk numbers because they only tell half the story. Should I discuss the Mexican immigrant mother of three who has a third grade education and, because of her ESL classes, was able to attend her eldest child’s school conference for the first time without the aid of an interpreter? Or should I share the story of the husband and father of two who is attending class three nights a week hoping to move up to management? Rarely getting to see his elementary-
aged children before they are in bed, I routinely notice him pacing the floor in the back of the classroom just to stay awake. This is not my first time with this group, so I know they want data, and they will get it, but not before they hear the stories behind the numbers.

Today is also “Testing Tuesday.” This means high school equivalency assessments are happening in the room next to my office. Signs posted in the hallway remind students to be quiet out of respect for those testing, but each week it seems someone lingers in the hallway talking on their phone, or loudly socializing with their classmates. Hearing a woman crying in the hall, I quickly move from my desk to disperse the disturbance. I notice a Mexican woman in her late thirties who I recognize as an equivalency diploma student. She is standing with her teacher outside of the testing lab. She is dressed in dark jeans, brown boots, and a colorful sweater. Rapidly talking in Spanish while wiping her tears with her shirtsleeve, she hears the pounding of my high heels on the hallway floor. Apologizing for being loud she tells me, while her voice crackles, “I did it. I passed. I never thought I was smart enough to get my diploma. Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Smiling and admittedly feeling like a proud parent in that moment, I feel a flood of tears well up in my eyes. I throw my arms around her neck, telling her repeatedly how proud I am of her.

Numbers, it is all about numbers. My afternoon presentation consumes my thoughts. I only wish the business leaders could have witnessed that joy of accomplishment. Late to my webinar with the Department of Education because of my celebratory moment, I enter the call to hear the conversation topic, and find myself rolling my eyes, grunting, and quietly saying under my breath, “Not again.” The consultant on the other end of the phone asks for us directors to share proven classroom
strategies that reduce the time for language learners to be proficient in English. With the growing middle skills gap the push from the federal and state workforce and education departments is to decrease the time it takes to get people credentialed and into the workforce. What policy makers do not understand is that adult literacy educators are not the ones who are holding up the process of workforce skill attainment. We see the need to transition our students to credit, non-credit, or employment sooner too so they can obtain workforce credentials. As the state department consultant sees it, our students’ seem to have strong language skills so why aren’t programs progressing students faster? What those who do not work directly with Mexican immigrants fail to understand is, for many, their speaking of the English language continues to grow simply because they live in America. Nevertheless, while living in Mexico, most had poor quality education unless they were from a wealthy family. Sometimes, students talk about having to quit school by the sixth grade to help their family in the fields. Others went to school through ninth grade. Even those individuals struggle with obtaining their high school equivalency diploma “fast”. They are basic skills deficient in reading, writing, and math in their native language, as well as, in the English. To achieve their diploma in either language could realistically take years. Either way, many students have to start at the basic elementary levels while also providing for their family, leaving them the jobs where they do not need basics skills, including speaking the English language. In Marshalltown, that is the meatpacking plant.

I sense the flush from my anger moving from my neck, to my checks, and now I can feel it in the red glow of my ears. Quickly, I jump into the conversation. I begin to explain that, as practitioners, we must meet people where they are in their learning,
which is sometimes difficult with the various barriers many come with into our programs.  

Trying to make my case, I talk about the day-to-day responsibilities my students have beyond their educational role. Most, of those employed, work at the local meatpacking plant and have long days and unscheduled overtime that exhausts them or makes them unable to make class times. Some are parents struggling with family obligations like scheduling doctor appointments around their work hours, finding flexible daycare, and having reliable transportation. Regardless, education takes time and is difficult, especially with a family. If it were easy—everyone would be doing it!

Countering my argument, the stern voice on the other end of the phone tells me that a slow educational process is no longer an option. It is now about meaningful referrals and career and college preparation, referring to the implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Scolding, he demands that programs must find ways to streamline the learning process by structuring instructional practices and policies to align with job placement. Sensing the tone in his voice, I know there will not be further discussion on this matter. The conversation quickly changes to data. Programs’ educational benchmarks are showing that adult literacy students are not making the required academic gains on their assessments to meet the federal guidelines. More numbers. Complete frustration sets in. I hang up.

My mind quickly shifts back to the presentation. Hoping I have better luck with the business leaders than I had with the Department of Education, I put final touches on the educational data of the ninety-six meatpacking plant employees I have to speak about today. Deciding to take a risk, I make a slide that addresses policy and practice changes. I must get them thinking. The center of so many of my conversations starts with the need
for more skilled workers in the Marshalltown business community. The local business leaders must understand that they, too, play a role in helping adult literacy programs develop accelerated methods of learning to meet their workforce needs. I quickly develop a visual slide that represents what an integrated machine operator and English language job-training program would look like. Where there would be English language instruction specific to the job in the classroom while learning the skilled trade. Where each immigrant would pair up with a Spanish speaking mentor on the job site who will continue to teach them, using both English and Spanish, about the trade. To top it off, I decide to highlight some of the stories I have heard from students who want to work within the machining industry. I am going to think of today’s information as if it were a seed. This seed will be the learning that I plant by humanizing Mexican immigrants’ educational aspiration.

Artistic Director

Anyone who knows me knows I have very little artistic ability. Awkwardly, I have flaunted my creative deficiencies in a variety of ways ranging from my high school band teacher telling me to march without playing because I could not carry a tune, to my college pottery professor laughing at my inability to have a pot come out of the kiln intact, even with his help. This project, however, allowed me to explore a new and unique form of art—the art of a playwright using a phenomenological perspective to craft portraiture.

In order to understand the relationship between my “Opening Night” stories and those of the participants, I will share what Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1997) describes as the role a portraitist has on their research. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), the founder of
portraiture methodology, believes the researcher should paint him or herself into the picture of the study by allowing the reader to hear the voice of the researcher through affirmation of their prior knowledge of the studied essence. By introducing myself to the reader, I lay a foundational understanding to my background so the reader can realize how my own experiences affected how I interpreted the stories. Within phenomenological inquiries, the desire is to make meaning of the world in which we live (van Manen, 1990). To do this Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) defines the role of a researcher with respect to the research in the following way:

She is seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry, but also in navigating the relationships with the subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in tracing the emergent themes, and in creating the narrative. At each one of these stages, the self of the portraitist emerges as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-taking, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice that speaks and offers insights. Indeed, the voice of the portraitist often helps us identify her place in the inquiry. (p. 13)

My challenge in this project was to comply with the knowledge generating expectations of traditional dissertations, but to do so in a non-traditional manner. My approach to designing the inquiry was typical; I identified a phenomenon of interest, finalized guiding questions, and designed and implemented the research (see Appendices B and C for the list of interview questions I used and my Informed Consent document). It is in the presentation of the work that I take the liberty afforded by portraiture to adopt a non-traditional approach. Inspired by my desire to focus on educational stories within a human development and not an economic development frame, I use a playwright design. I associated theatrical terms to the traditional portions of a qualitative study. For example, I address myself as the Artistic Director who has produced the chapters or “Acts” within this play. This gives the reader the understanding that the learning, which
took place, came from my interpretation of the discoveries. This creative, storytelling framing speaks to my goal of transporting the reader, as would a theatrical production, into a world of experience other than one’s own. A world that feels trustworthy from the emotional experience it invokes, anchored in the details of human life (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2013). My hope is that the overall emotional value of this storytelling framing is catalytic (Creswell, 2014) that calls for new ways of thinking and being in relationship to the Mexican immigrant adult population adult educators say they aim to serve.

The purpose of my research was to learn how adult Mexican immigrants experience educational aspiration. I wanted to learn about specific life events that have influenced their educational aspiration so I could develop a humanistic understanding to those who return to postsecondary institutions for educational opportunities. I wanted to use an influential method to portray their stories that invoked a deeper-thinking experience for the reader. As a result, my discoveries provide a better picture of the social and cultural considerations community and vocational college leaders must keep in mind when constructing and instituting effective policies and practices for this population.

Act II, The Backdrop, is an introductory scene. It provides literature rationale to the importance of my research by setting the stage through quantitative discovery. This is where I provide numerical data to familiarize the reader with certain facts related to the adult Mexican immigrant population, their challenges, and my interest in the population. These facts are the ones I wanted earlier to drown out in my story during the phone call with the Department of Education Consultant. Providing numerical information,
however, does allow the reader insight into a way of making meaning by alerting them to the kinds of issues community college administrators, in particular adult literacy educators, face when planning educational offerings for this population. It would be naïve of me to lead the reader to believe the insignificance of these data sets. Rather, I contend that researchers should blend quantitative information with qualitative understanding to produce a broader and deeper picture of the lives affected by the development of our academic programs and policies. Since the quantitative information abounds, this project provides a counterweight. The four main areas I set as the foundation within this Act are the changing demographics of the United States, current education policy called the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; the role community colleges have in addressing the middle-skills workforce gap, and a town’s experience, Marshalltown, to the influx of Mexican immigrants.

In Act III, *The Playwright*, I provide the methodological aspects to the play. As the producer, I lay the foundational work the reader must be familiar with to understand the methodology that went into writing this dissertation. By using screenplay symbolism, *Lights…Camera…Action*, I set the stage for the reader by describing the overall characteristics of the research. The methods section includes demographics of the participants, *Cast*, the environment of the playwright, *Set*, and the information gathering structure, *Script*. Lastly, within the *Exposition*, I further my explanation of portraiture methodology, as well as, describe the process I used throughout my interviews and analysis. This provides the reader a clear understanding of the “aesthetic whole” of portraiture that makes up a valid and trustworthy piece of a social science methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 244). By using portraiture methodology, I
wanted to capture and interpret the messages of the stories my participants told me and vividly describe their experiences. The genre of “the portrait” urged me to write in a reflective and descriptive manner that would allow the reader an opportunity to develop a setting in his/her own mind. This allows the reader “to place people and action in time and space…as a resource for understanding” with content “rich in clues for interpreting the experience of the actors in the setting” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41). My hope was to present enough “descriptive evidence in the text” that the reader, if not satisfied with my interpretation, would be able to offer an alternative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 91). In Act III, I also offer even more information about myself under the, The Playwright, so the reader understands my relationship to this project, what I bring to the portraiture work, and the research methods I used to conduct and craft the portraits.

After providing the reader the Backdrop and Playwright, I present a Soliloquy in Act IV where the reader discovers my learning. Within this Act, each participant has their own “scene” to represent the themes derived from my meaning making of their life experiences as it relates to educational aspiration. As mentioned, I purposefully chose these four examples of educational aspiration because they represented the spectrum of experiences I learned. I made each of the four stories into Scenes because each person powerfully conveyed their own, different experiences. Together, the four are descriptive and vivid representations that link their educational aspiration to their culture.

The stories connected me to the purpose of phenomenology, which is intentionality. This means “we”, as players in life, must find ways to relate to others and fully become “one with the world” to which we live (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). To
understand the world we live in, we must learn about the similarities and differences of people who make up that world. We must be cognizant of how experiences influence a person’s understanding of the world. In this way, these scenes aim to provide portraits of the “structure of feeling” of each person’s aspiration to provide the reader an “experience near” understanding (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; van Manen, 1990). van Manen (1990) suggested that “human science” should be used as a method to aid us in learning about life, in particular life experiences. He suggested what researchers must listen for is the quality of the meaning, the theme, while also having the ability to portray that learning by describing it as if writing “an artistic endeavor” (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). This sets researchers apart from portraitists and the learning into a meaning making experience. To be a portraitist is to “listen for a story” rather than simply listening to a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

At the beginning of each scene, I set the context for the reader’s understanding. I provide a brief prefacing statement that identifies how I came to understand the essence of that participant’s life phenomena, as an experience of educational aspiration. By beginning the scenes this way, I am reminding the reader of my own meaning making at play within the portraiture. This reflects the social constructivist paradigm of research that I expand upon in Act III. Following the prefacing comments, come the portraits I have crafted from the interview. The portrait reflects careful deliberation about what events from the interviewee’s life I should bring to the foreground and which to let recede. This was a difficult process for me. Initially, I wanted to reflect upon and retell each aspect within their story. What I learned, however, was by leaving a chronological footprint it reduced the validity of the portraiture process. Instead, the ideal behind
portraiture writing is to compose a “unified integration of parts of the whole” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This meant that my goal of using portraiture writing as a method forced me to juggle the discoveries until a theme emerged. Then, reflected in the “essence” of my research questions, meaning making occurred. As a portraitist, my job was to determine which elements made up that learning. Then, I needed to describe those in such a way that sparked empathy and emotion from the reader, answering how adult Mexican immigrants experience educational aspiration. To do this, I found my connection to the participants and their stories was important to ignite my own emotional response allowing me to express, through script, a visual representation of my learning and feeling. Although difficult, this process required me to decide which stories I connected with emotionally and those I needed to disregard.

In crafting the telling of the interviewee’s educational aspiration as a scene, I produced a thorough and cohesive piecing together of important life elements. This reassured the accuracy of my storytelling, while not reducing a complex lived reality to a simplistic or “facilely consistent” story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246). If the reader feels confident in the way I have selected each story to be a “scene” about a particular way of understanding educational aspiration, then I will have succeeded at storytelling. I seek to establish that confidence through my description of life events framed within the context of my discovery through my interview encounter. In this way, I place myself within scene that I am constructing.

Finally, in Act V, Denouement, I attempt to provide some partial closure. This is the part of a play before the curtain falls when there is resolution to the conflict that has constituted the plot around the action that has taken place. I first provide a deeper
explanation to my interpretation of each participant’s educational aspiration. Then, I attempt closure by using *Curtain Call* to connect my discoveries to social science and educational literature noted throughout this dissertation. In general, I want to showcase the challenges community and vocational education systems are faced with in respect to educating adult Mexican immigrant students, a population that has been marginalized through public exclusion (Rocco, 2014). Past research, involving Mexican immigrants have addressed strategies to increase effective and efficient support service practices for immigrant populations, but have not taken a storytelling approach to link educational aspiration to these strategies. It is through my research that I demonstrate this linkage, if any, to those and potential policy and practices. Providing this linkage is important because it stands to impact the barriers practitioners face when serving our nation’s largest diverse population. In turn, I will expect to communicate my dissertation’s insight to a broad audience of stakeholders. For this reason, I include at the end examples of how I will pursue public communication of my scholarship (see Appendices D, E, and F for the Memorandum to the Department of Education, Overview for Adult Literacy Educators, and Summary for Participants). It is my intention, through this project, to add a deeper understanding of the humanistic side of the issues community college administrators must consider when developing educational programs and policies that will meet the needs of Mexican immigrants and employers.
ACT II

THE BACKDROP

During the twentieth century, the U.S. was the leader in secondary and postsecondary completion. Its world ranking has since dropped to 14th in high school and 22nd in postsecondary attainment for adults 25-34 years old (http://www.bloomberg.org/program/education/education-policy/). In 2009, President Obama introduced an education reform measure challenging educational institutions, at all levels, to increase academic standards in hopes of making the U.S., once again, the leader in credential attainment and global competition (Gewertz, 2011).

Obama’s challenge comes at a time whereby the year 2020 our nation will have an increased need for a skilled workforce due to the growth of middle and advanced skilled jobs. Middle-skill jobs are professions that “require education beyond high school, but not a four-year degree” (National Skills Coalition, 2014). Many of those jobs fall into the manufacturing and skilled trades like plumbing, welding, and machine operator production. Others consist of entry-level jobs in customer service, healthcare, and service organizations.

Obama's challenge also comes at a time when obtaining a high school diploma or its equivalency is no longer enough of a credential to make a self-sustaining wage in the current labor market (Sullivan, 2007). In a 2002 study, labor market economists suggested that a strong employee is someone who has basic skills in reading, writing and math and is someone who has attained a job-training credential or postsecondary degree (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2002). Although this data is now outdated, it is still
significant because it demonstrates that research completed more than a decade ago had already established the need for workers to have credentials beyond a high school diploma, especially when considering a person’s likelihood of earning a self-sustaining wage. At the time of Carnevale and Desrocher’s (2002) research, the pair suggested that individuals who obtained a postsecondary degree would earn more in wages throughout their lifetime than those who have a high school diploma, its equivalency, or no degree. What is even more significant about this research was the identified need for individuals to be proficient in basic math, reading, and writing skills. The team specifically pointed out this discovery, noting that those who are not proficient in these basic skills are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to experience advanced employment opportunities.

When considering the above factors, it seems our nation is at a crossroads. Individuals must acquire workforce credentials in order to attain a living wage job. This reality is further strengthened considering the 2014 National Skills Coalition report, which indicated that 65% of jobs, by the year 2020, would require some form of credential beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; 2013; Griego, 2015). At the national level, the U.S. job market grew in fields where a college credential, not necessarily a bachelor’s degree, was required, with nearly 46% of all new jobs being in the fields of management, technology, professional services, and sales (Kirsh, Braum, Yamamoto, and Sum, 2007). Unfortunately, the U.S. is struggling to produce enough credentialed workers who also have the demonstrated basic skills to fill the increasing number (49%) of available middle-skills jobs (National Skills Coalition, 2014). The shift from low-skill wage-labor jobs to middle-skill living-wage jobs has consequently caused
businesses to be outsourced to countries overseas where the workforce have basic skills, are language proficient, and are willing to work for a lower wage (Carnevale, Strohl, & Smith, 2009). The lack of basic reading, math, and writing proficiencies, coupled with the deficiency of workforce credentials, has put economic development of the U.S. at risk, nationally and globally (Sullivan, 2007, p. 402).

According to the policy report, *America’s Perfect Storm*, a significant issue effecting our workforce preparation is our nation’s changing demographics and the educational barriers that come along with this change (Kirsch et al., 2007). Over fifty years ago, a large number of Mexicans began migrating to the U.S., which is referred to as the New Latino Diaspora (Wortham, Murillo, Jr. & Hamann, 2002). More specifically, there have been two large Mexican migratory waves after the government-sanctioned importation of workers in the Bracero Era of World War II. This first happened in the 1970’s with the later taking place between the years of 1980 and 2000. These relocations caused the Mexican population in the U.S. to increase from 1 million to a recorded 33.7 million people in 2012 (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). In fact, 92% of the U.S. population growth, at the time of the last census, was due to minorities migrating from Mexico (Olivas, 2013). According to Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez (2013), 35% of Hispanics living in America were actually born in Mexico. Due to the tremendous “Mexicanization” of the U.S., research suggests by the year 2042 our nation will be in the midst of a “minority-majority flip”, where minorities, most who have originated from Mexico, will outnumber Anglos (Olivas, 2013). In fact, since the 2000 migration surge, the majority of population growth was due to the rising birth rate of the U.S. Mexican population. This fact was solidified when looking at the 2010 U.S. Census
data, which showed Hispanics, individuals who were primarily from Mexico, Cuba or Puerto Rico, were found to be having more children, two children per minute, as compared to Anglos whose births equaled the number of reported deaths.

During these migrations periods, the Mexican bordering states of California, Arizona, and Texas saw the largest influx of immigrants. Most recently, however, there have been an increasing number of Mexicans moving inland. These individuals are settling in states where traditionally their presence was incalculable (Wortham et al., 2002). Rarely have scholars considered rural states like Iowa, South Dakota, or Nebraska as being significant when discussing demographic changes. Yet, these Midwestern states are experiencing an influx of Mexican immigrants who are in search of the American Dream (Allegro & Wood, 2013).

One of those states seeing an influx of Mexican immigrants is my own state of Iowa. It is through my work as an Adult Education and Literacy Director that I am able to meet many of these newcomers. When discussing their rationale for moving to Iowa, their reasons usually surround a desire to have better educational opportunities for themselves and their children. They express how important it is for them to have stable employment in order to gain a higher quality of life for their family, as well as, wanting to live in a community where the crime rate is low. Iowa offers all of these characteristics.

Since 2000, Iowa has experienced a 110.5% increase of Latino immigrants with 78.1% being of Mexican decent (State Data Center of Iowa, 2014, 2015). Recent data shows that Mexican born immigrants now outnumber other foreign-born Latinos nearly nine to one in the state (State Data Center of Iowa, 2014). This rapid growth of Mexican
immigrants is called “microplurality”, a term used to describe pockets of diverse ethnic
groups who speak a different language, yet move into and live within a community (Grey
& Devlin, 2013). It is suspected that Marshalltown, which is the largest community
within Marshall County, will continue to experience this type of population growth. In
fact, it is estimated that the county’s Latino population will be 46.3% by the year 2040
(Grey, 2013).

A significant concern is that many Mexican immigrants moving into Iowa lack
important educational milestones, but are still able to acquire enough English language
skills to work in low-wage low-skilled jobs. In Marshalltown, this means working at the
local meatpacking plant (Fry & Taylor, 2010; Richardson Bruna, 2008; 2009). The pork
processing plant is what makes Marshalltown a popular migratory community. As the
Adult Education and Literacy educator, it is my job to provide English language
acquisition, Citizenship, and high school equivalency classes to individuals who lack
these skills. The challenge of my work has been to develop programs that build on
whatever educational background my students bring to further their educational and
employment aspirations. Currently, the way the classes are structured is evolving.

Federal policy makers have recently recognized “the need for effective education
and workforce policies to meet the demand for skilled labor [and] the pattern of skill
demand [where] many jobs [are] permanently gone and others [are] rising in their
specifically, policy reform has relied heavily upon federal, state, and local policymakers
acknowledging and accepting the immigrant population, in particular Mexican
immigrants, as our nation’s future workforce. Kirsch et al. (2007) suggested that, “the
United States is in the midst of a perfect storm” having had “changes in our economy…driven by both technological innovation and globalization, resulting in a profound restructuring in the U.S. workplace” (p.6). Hence, the demographic shift, along with the need for a skilled workforce, paints a compelling picture as to the reliance the U.S. has on developing education practices for Mexican immigrants to assist them in gaining the required credentials in order to fill middle-skill job market demands.

Education Policy: Preparing Tomorrow’s Workforce

In July 2014, the federal government, with a bipartisan vote, passed the Workforce Innovative Opportunity Act (WIOA). This Act deepens collaborative efforts between workforce programs and academic institutions, especially community colleges. The goal of the overhauled policy is to decrease the middle-skills gap by providing workforce training and employability competencies along with basic skills to reinforce the qualifications needed for today’s labor market (Edelman, et al., 2014). Specifically, WIOA integrates three main platforms: employer partnerships, career pathway initiatives, and integrated education and training programs, by increasing partnerships within state and local government, business and industry, and educational institutions.

According to the policy agenda report, Ensuring all Iowans have the skills to drive economic growth and security (Grossman, 2013), businesses now require further education beyond a high school diploma or its equivalency to acquire a middle-skilled job. In this way, the middle skills gap has pushed legislators at the federal level to look beyond the walls of current business practices and take into account alternative methods of collaboration through redesigning the federal workforce policy.
Policy changes at the federal level come with procedure and program changes that directly affect each state’s workforce. No longer will entities such as individual state Departments of Education or Workforce Development be separate when making program and policy decisions. Instead, the 2014 policy requires various stakeholders, such as community based organizations, business and industry, workforce entities, and community colleges to come together and form a united front in an effort to prepare an educated and credentialed workforce.

**Employer Sector Partnerships**

A first initiative within WIOA is the development of Employer Sector Partnerships. The intention of Employer Sector Partnerships is to develop partnerships to assist educational institutions in developing training credentialed programs using industry stakeholder input. The formation of these partnerships is to improve state, regional and national economic development, as well as, develop programs around local industry job demands to meet the needs of a global labor market (http://www.insightcced.org/past-archives/what-is-a-sector-initiative/). The intended result of Employer Sector Partnerships is to increase the number of employees prepared and equipped with the workplace basic skills and credentials based on what business and industry are seeking.

The development of an Employer Sector Partnership may come with a new credentialed training program required within an industry or review a reoccurring workforce need based on an ongoing staffing demand. Either way, the players provide input based on various roles they play. For example, the development of an Employer Sector Partnership for healthcare could involve individuals from the local or regional nursing homes, hospitals, medical centers, educators from the various community college
departments (e.g., nursing department, adult literacy, continuing education), state or local public health department, workforce referral agencies, community based organizations, vocational rehabilitation personnel, veterans administration representatives, and so on. Some may provide information on wage differentials or on the number of potential job openings within that sector, whereas others may give input into a restructuring of curriculum so workers are prepared to enter the workforce upon completion of the academic program.

**Career Pathway Initiatives**

A second initiative within WIOA is the development of Career Pathway Initiatives. The development of Career Pathway Initiatives stem from Employer Partnerships or industry specific stakeholder groups. Career pathways “align basic education occupational training, and higher education in a way that promotes smooth transitions across programs and institutions” while allowing individuals to continue working and gaining the employability skills necessary to increase earnings (Edelman, et al., 2014). These Career Pathways Initiatives are important because they respond to the needs of today’s non-traditional students while also meeting the demands of local or regional workforce. Career pathways allow non-traditional students access to higher education through job training programs where they gain the competencies needed for employment in the middle skills job market.

These initiatives also provide support to students using “Pathway Navigators”. Pathway Navigators are individuals who work one-on-one with students who have significant barriers and are at-risk in terms of credential completion. They assist students with reducing barriers such as transportation issues and daycare costs, or help students
with poor academic preparedness through referrals to local adult literacy programs for basic skills instruction. Each student develops an individualized education plan with their Pathway Navigator that best fits their lifestyle, while meeting their educational aspiration.

An example of a Healthcare Career Pathway program may be as follows: students who are interested in a healthcare career, but have been out of high school for a significant number of years may need to refresh their math skills prior to enrolling into a healthcare course. Many times these students are adults who are unemployed, underemployed, or have recently been laid off that find themselves unable to have enough financial and/or supportive resources to enroll in educational training opportunities. These individuals receive assistance from a Pathway Navigator in developing a plan that would assist them in enrolling in training with the end goal of self-sufficiency. Specifically, the plan may entail daycare assistance, transportation reimbursement, required high school equivalency attainment, or tuition assistance. Additionally, Pathway Navigators then become the student’s cheerleader, of sort, encouraging them throughout his/her educational coursework and providing other services, if necessary, such as tutoring, clothing allowance, and soft skills training.

**Integrated Education Training**

Integration of education and training programs is the third initiative within the WIOA federal policy. The idea behind integrated educational training programs is to accelerate job training by concurrently providing enhanced literacy skills at the same time as occupational skills training (Edelman, et al., 2014). The intent of these programs is to decrease the time it takes for individuals to gain basic competencies needed for job
training. The design of these programs is specifically for individuals who do not have a high-school diploma or lack English proficiency. Stakeholders such as community colleges, workforce development agencies, and community-based organizations are required to work together to develop a holistic approach to serving students.

A good example of an integrated education-training program would be a program designed to serve an immigrant needing their high-school equivalency diploma who is also unemployed. In this scenario, the immigrant could potentially attend high school equivalency classes at their local community college adult education and literacy program, while at the same time enrolling in a Certified Nurses Aid course for job training. The partnership between the adult education and literacy program and job training course would allow the immigrant the opportunity for diploma attainment, while gaining a workforce skill. Ideally, upon completion of the workforce-training program, the immigrant would have obtained their high school equivalency diploma, as well as, gained a skill, allowing them to become employable. Additionally, these workforce-training programs should be credentials that are “stackable”, meaning one credential leads into another for employment advancement (i.e. Advance Certified Nurse Aid, Licensed Practical Nurse). Moreover, students would receive workforce services throughout this time by the local workforce development agency, which may include assistance on topics such as financial literacy, resume writing, or application instruction.

What is most important to gain from the WIOA policy change is that educational, job preparation, and supportive services are to occur simultaneously as the person prepares to enter the world of work and become self-sufficient. To summarize, the writing of the policy is in such a way that it provides students the opportunity to attain
their high school equivalency diploma, become more proficient in the English language, or increase their math, language, reading, and writing skills while at the same time gain a workforce credential. Then individuals can continue for additional certificates, move into credit coursework, or “stop-off,” if necessary, and gain employment utilizing the credentials they have already attained. If a student chooses to continue on to get further credentials, the mapping of a career pathway will assist them in determining what additional qualifications they can choose from to enhance their employment options and meet their career goals.

The Role of the Community College

According to former United States Education Director Arne Duncan, a large number of Hispanic immigrants fail to obtain a college credential (Abdul-Alim, 2010) because they do not have the academic skills required to attain a postsecondary degree. Of those who do persist, however, community colleges are most likely the initial stopping point because of their low cost and open admission policies (Szelényi & Chang, 2016; Zhang, et al., 2011; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Rationale for community college popularity for minority populations stems from their advocacy for all students regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status (Fry & Taylor, 2013). Historically, the bedrock of society’s higher educational institutions is community colleges.

Like many states around the nation, Iowa’s Community Colleges administer math, reading, and writing refresher classes, middle-skills training, high-school equivalency education and English as a Second Language instruction for adult learners. These programs are instrumental in establishing the basic skills future workers are required to
have when seeking employment in a middle skills job market. To establish a strong foundation for skill development, the Office of Vocation and Adult Education, along with the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the American Council on Education announced the formation of Adult Literacy College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) or the common core standards for adult basic education students. Since their release in 2013, more than 40 states have adopted these standards, which focus on specific competencies adult learners must be proficient in to be considered college or career ready (Iowa Department of Education, 2015; Pulley, 2011).

As Pimentel (2013) writes:

_Promoting College and Career Ready Standards in Adult Basic Education—is to forge a stronger link among adult education, postsecondary education, and the world of work…It presents a starting point for raising awareness and understanding of the critical skills and knowledge expected for success in college, technical training programs, and employment in the 21st century._ (p. 1)

Working daily with immigrants from Mexico, I have found that for many they struggle with attaining a high-school equivalency diploma even in Spanish because of their limited reading, writing, and math skills in both their native language, as well as, their learned language of English (Zehr, 2006). The most significant reason for the lack of educational credential attainment, however, is their limited English proficiency. In a 2005 study from the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), results revealed that less than 50% of all adults in the U.S. had moderate to high literacy skills. For Hispanics, however, this rate was much different. The NALS data showed that 82% of those considered Hispanic had low literacy skills as compared to 42% of their Anglo counterparts. The study also showed the number of people who were not literate in the English language increased drastically from an incalculable number in the 1990’s to 5%
or 11 million just ten years later. Although this study is over a decade old, there has been a scant amount of comparable research done on literacy achievement since. This makes the data significant because it coincides with the diversification that occurred with the increasing number of Mexican immigrants who have migrated to the U.S. in the 2000’s. This makes the educational gap between Anglo and Hispanics/Latinos a concern to our nation’s economic future. This educational gap is in Iowa as well.

It is important for me to focus on Iowa’s future because that is where I live and work. I hear the concerns from local business and industry regarding their struggle to find enough skilled employees to fill local jobs. In Iowa, there has been a demonstrated skilled shortage. In fact, by 2020 predictions show that 85% of Iowa’s jobs will require more than a high school diploma or its equivalency and 54% of the job openings will require some form of job credential beyond high school, but will not necessitate a bachelor’s degree.

In Iowa, the number of Latinos—defined to include people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race—that have attained a high school diploma is on the rise. Most recent data still shows that approximately 40% do not have a high school diploma or its equivalency and only 12.9% have completed a bachelor’s degree (State Data Center of Iowa, 2015). This statistic is concerning because without a secondary diploma the ability to obtain additional job credentials and move beyond low paying low-skilled job is becoming more and more difficult.

Additionally, by 2025 approximately 67% of Iowa’s workforce will have already been employed, but still lack the skills required to advance to a middle-skills job
(Grossman, 2013). To solidify the importance job-training credential attainment has on Iowa’s current residents and the state’s economy, data shows that 57% of the future professions will be in the middle-skills labor force (National Skills Coalition, 2012). So, what current programs increase literacy for immigrants and focus on job training?

Washington State has been a forerunner in implementing integrated education and training programs. The community colleges in that state have designed and administered effective unconventional programs aimed at increasing economic development and college credential attainment (Washington State Board of Career and Technical Colleges, 2016). These programs show promise by simply decreasing the time it takes for Mexican immigrant learners to gain a credential and become career ready. For example, Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program provides Mexican immigrants educational opportunities to earn a certificate, diploma or college credit while working on their high school equivalency diploma or advancing their English language skills (Washington State Board of Career and Technical Colleges, 2016; Bloomer, n.d.). The design of these programs is on the premise that students need to advance in a career pathway so they are able to become self-sufficient and attain skilled employment in less time.

This alternative programming structure is quite different from a conventional college course. Teaching in an I-BEST program happens dually by a content instructor and a basic skills instructor in order to increase supplemental support instruction on homework, tests, or classroom projects (Washington State Board of Career and Technical Colleges, 2016). Throughout the class, instructors teach technical instruction within the program content area while, at the same time, students receive literacy and workforce
skills, enhancing a holistic approach to learning by preparing low-skilled adults and immigrants for the world of work. This model hinges on instructors and administrators working collaboratively to develop multiple entrances and exit points along the pathway so students continue to improve their basic skills. Through some of the programs, students are also able to experience apprenticeships, job shadowing, or on-the-job-training opportunities.

Celebration of success for the I-BEST program, conveyed through program data, tells a compelling story about the effects this pedagogy model can have on individuals like Mexican immigrants. On average, 3000 students each year benefit from one of Washington State’s I-BEST Career Pathway programs with I-BEST students being fifteen times more likely than their counterparts to earn a workforce credential (Washington’s State Board for Community and Technical College, 2012). What is more astounding is the effect these programs have on the State’s economy. Approximately two-thirds of Washington State’s job market will require some form of workforce or college credential, very similar to Iowa’s numbers (National Skills Coalition, 2014). I-BEST completers were working twice the average number of hours each week and earning $2,310 more each year as compared to individuals who did not have a training credential (Washington State Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, 2013).

Washington State, like Iowa, has seen an increase in the number of immigrant migrant workers residing in the state. Washington is unique, however, in that lawmakers and education leaders have joined together and focused efforts toward job training
programs for that population; whereas, other states, including Iowa, have concentrated primarily on establishing financial assistance for these individuals.

Iowa lawmakers have taken instrumental first steps to prioritize and ensure adult education and literacy and middle-skills training tuition assistance programs are fiscally supported. The intent of these two programs is to provide an avenue to strengthen educational access and opportunity. The data regarding the gap in Iowa’s middle-skills workforce was extremely helpful in convincing policymakers to establish funding for non-credit job-training programs where there is an industry need due to a workforce shortage. Some jobs that meet this criterion are Certified Nurses Aids, Emergency Medical Technicians, Phlebotomy Technicians, and Pharmacy Technicians. These community college non-credit job-training programs do not qualify for governmental financial aid, leaving students to pay for training without the ability of financial assistance.

The legislature helped remove this financial barrier for students by establishing two financial resource programs, GAP Tuition (GAP) and Pathways for Academic Career and Employment (PACE). These resources came on the heels of the state’s rebound from the national recession where the need for training and retraining of working aged adults has become crucial to meet the middle-skills gap (Grossman, 2013). Both programs provide financial resources designed to assist students in reducing barriers such as transportation, daycare, or tuition and fee costs. Qualifying adults are individuals who are underemployed, unemployed, or lack basic skills. Not surprising these are the characteristics reflected in the Mexican immigrants I work with every day (Iowa Workforce Development, 2001; TopsPro Enterprise version 2.0).
In 2015-16, Iowa Valley Community College District’s data showed that 55% of those served within the adult literacy program were unemployed, but of those employed, 93% retained employment throughout the time they were in school (TopPro Enterprise version 2.0). Iowa Valley Community College District’s program serves almost an equal number of men and women each year with the majority being between the ages of 24-54 years. In that same year, 73% of the language learners had a third-grade reading level. This data demonstrates that Marshalltown has a large number of working-aged adults who do not have the educational skill level needed to move into a credentialed job-training program. As demonstrated through last year’s data, the requirement of having a high school equivalency diploma may prevent many Mexican immigrants from being able to take advantage of the GAP and PACE financial resources.

The Marshalltown Experience

Mark Grey, an anthropologist and researcher from the University of Northern Iowa has followed the Mexican immigrant population since the onset of their diaspora to Iowa. Over the years, his ethnographic work in Marshalltown has been instrumental in demonstrating the significant relationship between culture and community (Grey, 2000; Grey, 2001; Grey & Baker, 2002; Grey & Woodrick, 2002). Grey and Woodrick (2002) looked at the transnationalism of those who moved from Mexico to Marshalltown, finding that most came from a small village in Central Mexico. The pair discovered a core group of Marshalltown community leaders who were actively looking for ways to welcome the newcomers into the community. These social activists developed “adult educational programs, multicultural activities, social ministry outreach, and advocacy initiatives to create a greater understanding and awareness” of the Mexican culture.
(Woodrick, 2006, p.287). This group of “Marshalltownians” ended up driving a “social and cultural transition” in response to this growing transnational population (Grey & Woodrick, 2005, p. 134).

Throughout time, a large societal bond developed between the leaders and the Mexican immigrants until there became a mutual respect for each other’s cultural practices. For example, a ministerial leader within the Elim Lutheran Church embraced the Mexican traditions by welcoming them to worship and helping plan communal social celebrations for the entire community to enjoy (Woodrick, 2006; Grey & Woodrick, 2002). Encouraged by this community network, Mark Grey accompanied a group of leaders to the “unofficial sister city” of Villachuato, Mexico. This was where many of Marshalltown’s Mexican immigrants had migrated from just years prior. While visiting Villachuato, the group met extended family members, saw the school, frequented the church, and were able to socially experience the cultural environment and impoverishment conditions, which their new neighbors had left behind (Daniel, 2006; Grey, 2002). In fact, one member of the group was a visionary from Iowa Valley Community College District’s leadership team, who later became instrumental in establishing the educational center where many immigrants attend English and high school equivalency classes still today. It was through this experience where leaders began to understand the reasons behind some of the cultural behaviors of their new neighbors, one of those being the sending of money home.

Researcher Katherine Richardson Bruna, from Iowa State University, led a similar program where she provided two different immersion experiences for a group of Iowa’s educators (Richardson Bruna, 2015). This group of educators, who also traveled to
Villachuato, Mexico, learned about the population’s experience with education so pedagogical practices could be adapted to fit the needs of the students whom they were serving. What they got instead was a deeper understanding of the economic dependency this village had on those who migrated to the U.S. Specifically, noting that Mexican immigrants were just people trying to care for their families not unlike Americans. Most importantly, however, these educational leaders were able to identify a humanistic understanding to the transcultural migration, which was taking place between Mexico and the U.S. These leaders were able to learn and understand the reasons behind Mexican immigrants’ behaviors, like their rationale as to why they send money home.

One significant cultural component to Mexican migration is their financial sharing with family who still live in Mexico. Marshalltown began to experience money-transferring agencies like Western Union popping up in strategic locations within the community. The choice locations were in neighborhoods where a large number of Mexicans lived and worked. According to Fomby (2005), there are three main theories, altruism, reciprocity, and remittance, which explain the rationale behind money sharing between family member(s) who migrated and those still residing in Mexico. He explains that Mexican immigrant children have a sense of duty to their elders. They understand the sacrifices family members who are still living in Mexico have made, so they can move to a better and more economically stable environment. In essence, this tradeoff promotes a cultural custom of financial sharing (Fomby, 2005). The realization of those sacrifices causes those who have migrated to have feelings of guilt. They feel the responsibility of being fortunate enough to emigrate to a more financially stable community, realizing the costs to those they left behind. They remember the poor
working conditions for little money, and the increasingly dangerous environment. Fomby (2005) suggests that, in some cases, remittance happens through an exchange of services, like caring for a home or an elderly parent. This agreement lasts throughout the time the migrant is away from their homeland, with the understanding that someday they will return. In return, money is sent home as payment having the understanding that they have a lifetime of fiscal duty to those still living and caring for things back home (Fomby, 2005).

Most of Marshalltown’s Mexican immigrants came to the town because of the available jobs at the meatpacking plant. Employers, such as this, lure populations to the U.S. with the promise of a job (Grey, 2002). Historically, these employers fail to provide assistance with the provisions that come with a low-skilled, low-educated, and low-language workforce. This includes the “indirect costs” to the community that becomes the home to the new migrant workforce (Wortham et al., 2002). Fundamentally, the first issue to address is the need to communicate. Many times the children, and their parents, have had little exposure to the English language prior to arriving in Marshalltown (Wortham et al., 2002). That, coupled with the poor educational opportunities while they lived in Mexico, poses difficult challenges for adult literacy programs.

A qualitative study done on the difficulties of learning a language at an older age reflects the struggles of immigrants who traditionally come from a poor educational background, and lack the basic foundational skills necessary to learn a new language (Grimshire, 2012). Some, in fact, come with significant barriers such as learning disabilities, which have gone undiagnosed. Part of my position as the Director of Adult Education and Literacy, is to provide instructional practices regardless of these
educational and physical barriers, that invoke language learning at a faster rate to decrease the time it takes for Mexican immigrants to “fit into American culture”. According to Grimshire (2012), who conducted a self-study, barriers such as age, educational background, and culture all affect the likelihood and ease of learning a new language.

Although considered “model minorities with respect to work and civic life”, a common stereotype of Mexican immigrants is that they are not dedicated to education (Wortham, Mortimer & Allard, 2009, p. 1). My experience has been that their choice to attend school has been out of the desire to achieve, which for many means getting a better job (Martinez, 2008). At times, however, the cost of living becomes a significant barrier and they find themselves having to choose between education and work. Martinez (2008) found that for Mexican immigrants the financial drawbacks to living in the U.S. sometimes include having to work two jobs to make ends meet. This, of course, is better than the environment in Mexico, where even having a skilled degree did not always result in a job within that field (Martinez, 2008). If financial resources are scarce the population has been known to have their working-aged children find a job to help pay for necessities. Although seen as going against American norms, this expectation is not negative within the Mexican culture because education is readily available, at any age, in the U.S. This is unlike Mexico, were even as a child the cost of education is too expensive (Martinez, 2008).

An example of this is what Richardson Bruna (2008) discovered within her research at the local high school. A female Mexican high school student, struggling to stay awake in class, was juggling school responsibilities, while also working third-shift at
the meatpacking plant. Her story is not uncommon. After been injured from playing on the high school soccer team, her family was unable to pay the doctor bill. Thus, she needed to get a job to help pay-off those expenses.

At times, these social costs fall on the laps of local public service organizations, which cause a sense of anger and frustration within the Anglo population. This, in part, has led to the feeling of exclusion and indifference for Mexican immigrants (Wortham et al., 2002; Rocco, 2014). Further adding to their marginalization, a qualitative study by Wortham, Mortimer, and Allard (2009) found that Mexican immigrants easily become the victims of exploitation. Within their study, participants shared that due to the housing shortage they felt they had no other options than to pay the going rate of what a landlord asked. In some cases landlords increased rent to include a per person cost.

Unfortunately, Mexican immigrants fall victim to this type of discrimination because typically they do not report mistreatment because they do not have the literacy skills to understand when they are being manipulated (Wortham et al., 2009). In addition, some are fearful of deportation if they cause attention to themselves. Although this study did not occur in Marshalltown, I have heard similar complaints from Mexican newcomers just arriving to the community. Disclosure of these issues, many times, happens within adult literacy classes because they see instructors as knowledgeable and safe individuals from who they can ask advice.

Marginalization is a societal issue that plagues the Mexican immigrant population throughout the nation. Frequently, they are considered unqualified to do anything other than cheap labor jobs (Hoteck and Baker, 2004). Hoteck and Baker (2004), however, found this not to be the case. The research team, also from the University of Northern
Iowa, used a mixed-method research approach to determine the aptitude of career and technical skills of Marshalltown’s Mexican immigrant population. Their findings concluded that 58.3% of Marshalltown’s Mexican men already had skills within a technical trade industry. Their skillsets were diverse and found to be within the construction, manufacturing, industrial, and communication industries. These men expressed wanting to have additional “job training” in these areas, but felt the opportunities were not available to them (Hoteck & Baker, 2004, p.136). The qualitative and the quantitative data found in the study determined that language proficiency, available training programs, and family financial obligations were all barriers hindering the men from seeking additional educational opportunities to further their skills.

This continued cyclical battle over educational attainment and workforce needs spills over and must result in community colleges re-thinking their programs and policies. The continued desire to accelerate English only language programs, like what was asked by the Department of Education Consultant, are still academically time consuming, unless paired with further skill building. Moreover, language skills are not the only educational barrier many Mexican immigrants possess. In a quantitative analysis by Rendall and Parker (2014), the pair discovered that less than seven percent of Mexican migrants in 1991-1992 between the ages of 18-54 had completed any secondary education from Mexico. This is U.S. equivalent to ninth grade or above. The latter years, 2008-2009, their study still showed that less than 25% had finished secondary school.

This brings the changing demographics, education, training, and labor to a crossroads. Data has shown that our nation’s economic viability relies on Mexican
immigrants to gain the necessary middle or advanced job skills to fill workforce gaps. Forgotten, however, is the time it took previous migrant populations to be considered English language proficient (Grey & Woodrick, 2005). This makes the collaboration between Adult Education and Literacy, GAP and PACE funding, and the provision of the WIOA federal policy vital. This environment can allow educators to design policy and practices that help community college adult literacy programs to bridge the educational gap for these adults (Garvey and Grobe, 2011; Grossman, 2013; Boesel et al., 1998).

Past research involving Mexican immigrants’ living in Marshalltown has been helpful from a historical perspective. The learning that has transpired during the “moving in” of the Mexican immigrants and the cultural transformation of the community, allows for a deepened perspective of where the town has been and where it is today (Grey, 2000; Grey, 2001; Grey & Baker, 2002; Grey & Woodrick, 2002; Richardson Bruna, 2008, 2009, 2015). The understanding of programs currently designed to integrate basic skills and workforce training is critical, but does not answer my research question. Previous studies have not answered how adult Mexican immigrants experience educational aspiration, exemplified through their life stories. As an academic practitioner, I am responsible for providing educational opportunities for these learners; therefore, the information does not entirely help me better understand how to meet my student’s educational needs.

Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2011) validate the need for community college educators to do more when responding to the growing Mexican immigrant population, in terms of education and training. They speak specifically that community colleges must respond to their academic success and completion.
advocates recognize the growing demographics and acknowledge the employment barriers, which hinder societal and economic factors within this country. Yet, there is a significant gap in the research. No one has attempted to learn from Mexican immigrants about their educational experiences and aspirations using a portraiture format. In fact, researchers have recognized this gap, calling attention for scholars to learn how current and past life experiences influenced Mexican immigrants’ educational aspiration (Marinez, 2008; Szelènyi & Chang, 2016). Furthermore, additional research must add an “understanding of the experiences” of immigrant students in community colleges (Teranishi, Suàrez-Orozco and Suàrez-Orozco, 2011, p. 164).

Martinez (2008) denotes that Mexican immigrants “bring with them an array of differing needs and educational aspirations, prior academic achievement, and qualifications” (p. 33). Additionally, Szelènyi and Chang (2016) explicitly recognized that there is a dearth of research behind “educational achievement and aspirations” for Mexican immigrants. They suggest that through learning about the topic, community colleges administrators would become informed on a more holistic approach to “institutional decision making and policy formation” (Szelènyi & Chang, 2016, p.70-71). Thus, it seems remiss for community college administrators to generate academic programs and policies without taking into account the educational aspirations of the population most affected by those strategies. I propose, by learning about their educational aspirations, community colleges can align programs and policies to the needs of the Mexican immigrant population, while generating the skills needed to fill regional workforce gaps.
According to Crotty (1998/2013), epistemology is “a way of looking at the world and making sense of it… [and] how we know what we know” (p. 8). The epistemological foundation of this project is through a social constructivist framework. This framework grounds my work in the understanding that meaning making happens through social interaction using culture and relationship development. Meaning is not “out there” detached from human sense making, but “is socially constructed within a specific community” (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 35). Social constructivism, as a theory of learning, has mentioned the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, both twentieth century psychologists recognized for their workings with cognitive learning development. While there are similarities between their workings, taking into account learning from someone with more knowledge and the environmental factor, some researchers contest that Piaget’s developmental work does not resonate a strong connection to society (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). If considered a “social” constructivist (Lourenco, 2012; Bodner, 1986; McLeod, 2014) I suggest that Piaget’s connection to environment, through an adult figure is simply not enough. It is his lack of connection to culture that is concerning.

When researching Piaget, I found that his work to be grounded in “scientific logic” having an individualistic structure (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). The basis of his intellectual development theory is to understand how we know what we know as described through the development of “schemas” or our patterns of thought and behavior.
(Bodner, 1986). Since acquired schemas are through experiences, learning is, in this way, a reflection of a social construction or interaction with the world. The idea behind Piaget’s theory is that learning results from positive and negative consequences (Bodner, 1986). In this way, his thinking, influenced by Skinnerian behaviorist psychology, looks at learning through a consequential approach. What concerned me about Piaget’s consideration of being a “social” constructivist is twofold. First, his notion, that learning happens regardless of an environmental influence because it is “intrinsic” by nature, invalidates my belief that the world in which we live has influence over our learning (Lourenco, 2012; Matusov & Hayes, 2000). Secondly, Piaget did not consider there to be a significant relationship between culture and learning. For example, Piaget and Vygotsky both researched preschool children’s learning styles. For Piaget, he only considered looking at children living within an “industrial society”; whereas, Vygotsky brought in the cultural aspect and looked at learning outcomes within “traditional”, “remote villages” and “industrial” societies” (Matusov & Hayes, 2000, p. 236).

Vygotsky, however, believed that meaning takes place due to the influence of “extrinsic” interactions from others within the environment, taking into account the significance culture had on learning. This significant difference is what makes Piaget much less of a social constructivist. While useful in theorizing learning as a cognitive behaviorist, from my perspective Piaget’s ideas fail to take into account the importance of culture and community on a person’s cognitive development. To understand how all the elements of the environment shape learning, including the cultural context of the individual and the individual’s role in community, there needs to be a more robust approach to social constructivism.
Vygotsky’s ideas about learning bring more texture to social constructivism. In his work, we find a focus on the importance of social interaction that includes culture and community in the environment, and the significance of language (McLeod, 2014). A cornerstone of Vygotsky’s theory is that learners rely on those who have more experience. Thus, the role of the “expert other” is instrumental in the teaching process, allowing interaction to happen and for knowledge building to occur.

In reflecting on the change in thinking implied by this shift from Piaget to Vygotsky, I find that it tracks against a moment in my own life when I discovered that my understanding of learning was under its own social construction. Raised within a European household where my parents very much echoed a “learn from your mistakes” discourse, I remember as a child my grandfather asking me what I learned after watching me fall off my bike while driving without any hands on the handlebars. Knowingly, he saw me wobbling on the cement road only to allow me to experience what it would feel like to fall, get hurt, and reflect upon my learning. Additionally, validation of this discourse was throughout my undergraduate work in psychology. It was then that I first became familiar with Jean Piaget’s theory of intellectual development. His theory became the framework for knowing about the abstract child featured in the textbooks I used, safely seated within college classroom walls. Conversely, Piaget’s theory quickly became debunked once I started working with real children beyond the classroom walls upon graduation.

The influence of culture and community on an individual became apparent to me at my first job out of college. I was a counselor at a female juvenile home and found that something else drove these girls toward violence, lying, deception, and sometimes,
attempted murder. There, I quickly discovered that contrary to Piaget, the influence of a “positive peer culture” instilled significant behavioral results. I learned, when talking with the girls, the impact their communities and schools had on the choices they had made. The girls explained that it was not about doing “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad;”; it was simply about survival. According to them, negative behavior was a way of life because of where they lived, what they looked like, to whom they were born, and what they had to do in order to exist. I found myself questioning Piaget’s theory. It was obvious to me that these girls were responding to the influence of the environment of their community and culture. Their community, with consideration of their culture, was their teacher, which showed the inequalities of society that influenced their social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development and decisions. The relationships they developed stem from social injustices that shaped their choices by revealing the evil of the sacrifice they had to endure for survival. It was during this time when Vygotsky’s theory appeared to be more adequate to me in terms of how humans learn.

The importance of making the distinction between the approaches to social constructivism exemplified by Piaget, on the one hand, and Vygotsky, on the other, is that it serves as a metaphor for how the community and vocational education system must address writing programmatic policies and procedures to best serve the Mexican immigrant population. Educators must understand that each individual comes with his/her own story of learning resulting from their past educational experiences. Part of that picture is a reflection upon their culture, environment, and history and to draw generalizations based on either of these aspects, independently, must not occur. In recent work at my institution a planned “Family Latino Night” event occurred, which reflects an
example of viewing each student’s situation holistically. This event welcomed Latino students and their family members to learn about college opportunities. The well-attended event represented the cultural aspect and significance of family support within the Latino culture when considering life-changing decisions, like education (Rendòn, 2014). Most importantly, staff members were able to talk independently with the students and their families to learn about individual educational experiences. As academic leaders, we must balance the information for families while still recruit to the needs of the student. It has been my experience that the family’s decision to support their child’s schooling increases persistence and completion (Rendòn, 2014). This seems to be true for a student of any age. By educators understanding the importance of culture within the Mexican population, academic programs can develop a holistic approach to focus on student needs and family values at the same time.

The use of a Vygotskian social constructivist framework within a phenomenological study makes sense. As Chiari & Nuzzo (1996) explain, individuals may experience the same phenomena, but deduct different meaning based on their interpretation of those experiences. The culture and community of the environment influence those individual interpretations. Observing individual interpretations can take place through a person’s expression of their experiences and their explanation of their behaviors and reactions (Moustakas, 1994). While the overarching phenomenon of interest is the experience Mexican adults have of their educational aspirations, the importance, for this project, is that each portrait scene reflects that phenomenon in a socially constructed particularity (Claes, 2003; Stenhouse, 1979). This is unique to the
development of the individual and is reflective of the environmental context that is their life and, thus, their basis for all learning.

An epistemology of social constructivism lends itself to qualitative research methodology. In qualitative research, acknowledging the researcher as an instrument involved in the meaning making is essential. This methodology allows natural learning to occur from the perspective of the participant using empathy to make meaning of everyday life events (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Qualitative inquiry must be a “natural” activity done within a familiar setting by looking at each individual “holistically” and learning about his or her past experiences (Creswell, 2013). The researcher decides on the topic, designs the inquiry, gathers the data, organizes, and interprets it. At every step of the way, these are points where the researcher’s own hand is shaping the outcome even as she/he seeks to discover it. By only looking at individual experiences using a quantitative approach, researchers “lose sight of the human side of social life” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.8). Hence, qualitative research allows for a broad approach to learning about a social experience using a “constructivist” viewpoint (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This method fits nicely with social constructivism. It uses participant and researcher lenses to provide a setting for meaning making opportunities.

As a social constructivist I wanted to understand the experiences of the “world in which they [I] live and work...relying as much as possible on the participants’ views” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). It was important for me to talk with my students within their natural educational setting. This allowed me to “understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8) interacting freely in an environment where trust had already been established. My leadership as the Adult Education and
Literacy Director secured a level of trust with the participants because they had experienced my interaction and relationship development with them and other Mexican immigrant students. This relationship building had naturally occurred through daily contact and participation of cultural events including funerals, weddings, baby showers, and Mexican holiday celebrations. By my participants recognizing my foundational understanding of their culture, I was able to deepen our conversations and expand my learning.

One of the main qualitative research approaches is interview. In general, the technique of interviewing is to gather and reflect on a “lived-experience” (van Manen, 1990, p.63). The more specific goal of phenomenology is to use an interview technique that allows the researcher to seek information and discover a “human experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 62). My interest was in answering a phenomenological question about the experience of educational aspiration, which, in turn, allowed me to use Irving Seidman’s (2013) three-step phenomenological interview process for this study (see Appendix A for IRB approval). That process, in its ideal, consists of the following:

1. A first interview should focus on the participants’ life history where he/she reflects upon the topic and provide past evidence to set the stage as to how his/her life experiences are relevant to the studied phenomena. This allows relationship development between the researcher and the participant.

2. A second interview should gather specific detailed information regarding life experiences related to the here and now. During this interview, the researcher should listen for detailed information that addresses the phenomena.
3. A last interview is to reflect upon how the participants made “meaning” of the lived experience. The desire is for the researcher to gain an understanding of the emotional attachment to the phenomena.

According to Flood (2010), there are two different interview approaches to data collection when doing phenomenological research, structured and unstructured. Within Seidman’s three-part sequence, I chose more of an unstructured approach. I used what Moustakas (1994) described as an “informal, interactive process”. I began with social conversation, talking about family, the upcoming holidays, and learning achievements. This allowed my participants to relax and have more control in guiding the process. For example, I asked participants about their educational progress and struggles within class, and current learning topics. Then I asked, as Maxwell (2013) explains, “a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon” (p. 114). Seidman’s three categories guided my questions. For example, questions falling under the first category aimed to discover educational experience, while living in Mexico and since moving to the United States. Those in the second category sought understanding about critical incidents surrounding his/her educational experience. I asked participants to speak about their family’s educational expectations by telling the story of when they left Mexico and why they were unable to finish school in their homeland. Further, I asked them to tell me stories surrounding their decision to return to education now living in America. In the third interview category, my questions surrounded future education plans, what they wanted their children to say about their learning, and what his/her educational experience, overall, meant to them. I wanted my questions to guide the participants to share the experiences they associated with their
educational aspiration (Astalin, 2013). They needed not be “perfect” or “correct” questions, but they had to be “not bad.” According to Jane Agee (2009), “good questions do not necessarily produce good research, but poorly conceived or constructed questions will likely create problems that affect all subsequent stages of a study” (p. 431). This challenged me to construct research questions that would invite reflection upon distinct experiences, but also lead to moments of insight allowing me to provide deeper interpretations of each person’s understandings of the world in which they live (Magrini, 2012).

Despite Seidman’s guiding structure, my inquiries were open-ended and allowed participants to interpret the meaning of the questions and respond freely. I used Creswell’s (2014) suggestion “to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” to steer my responding questions (p.8). According to Seidman, when executing a phenomenological study, this is critical. One must keep the focus on the participants’ view of the phenomena. For researchers, this means we must listen for the language of each participant amidst the sociological language that we introduce in stating the question. Dilley (2004) writes that our questions are to solicit information, but then yield ourselves to whatever answers come, understanding the relationship between the question, the answer, the asker, and the answerer, as part of all we aim to know from the interview encounter:

Meaning is not “just the fact,” but rather the understanding one has that are specific to the individual (what was said) yet transcendent of the specific (what is the relation between what was said, how it was said, what the listener was attending to ask or hear, what the speaker was attempting to convey or say). (p.128)
Making phenomenological meaning in this way from the interviews posed a challenge given the cultural and language difference between my participants and me. Seidman (2013) himself points out that misinterpretation of the experiences and meanings made of experiences may occur if the researcher and participants are from different cultures, if the researcher is unaware of cultural norms, or if there is a language difference (p.106-107). To address this challenge, Seidman (2013), as well as, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggest that the researcher, at the onset of the study, acknowledge culture and language differences.

These scholars note that the presence of differences within a phenomenological portrait is actually a sign of a good portraittist. In good portraiture writing, the researcher places himself or herself within the study through an explanation or depiction of their own cultural competency and language proficiency. If done effectively, articulation of the researchers’ own positionality will allows the reader to understand the scholar’s point of view, while not take away from the studied phenomena. By crafting the presence of the researcher within the study, it provides the reader with an opportunity to develop his or her own interpretation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.50). van Manen (1984) points out that explicating the position of the researcher is also important when they know something about the studied phenomenon. In some cases, we are less likely to be “blank slates”. For this reason, foregrounding my role as the Director for Adult Education and Literacy, in its earliest lines, in relationship to my participants was important.
Lights…Camera…Action

Set

I work at Iowa Valley Community College District’s Education and Training Center, which hosts the Adult Education and Literacy Program in Marshalltown, Iowa. The intention of this location was to serve adult Mexican immigrants who migrated to the town in the early 1990’s due to employment options at the local meatpacking plant.

According to the 2010 Census, approximately 25% of the population of Marshalltown is Hispanic (United State Census Bureau, 2015), but as an educator and resident of the town, I believe the percentage to be much higher. When my family moved to Marshalltown, I recall observing the demographics of town. Based on the reaction of the neighbor who questioned my families move, I had thought that I would see “Mexicans” everywhere. That was not the case. My children’s school was majority Caucasian, and rarely did I see Mexicans working in local stores, and, as I recall, there was only one Mexican grocery store in town. Now, I go to high school soccer games and sit amongst Mexican families pointing out my child, the only “blond on the field”. When grocery shopping, I now flock to the Mexican checker, and routinely find myself buying tamales or tortillas from several different Mexican stores in town to see which I like more. No longer am I able to drive around town without seeing an immigrant driving a car, walking on the sidewalk, or playing with their children in a yard.

Yearly, the Center, where I work, serves over 600 people with approximately 50% considered Hispanic or Latino (TopsPro Enterprise, version 2.0). When I was hired, most of the Mexican immigrants who enrolled were in English as a Second Language courses, but overtime I have witnessed a larger number seeking high school equivalency
classes to obtain their diploma. This reflects the transition Mexican immigrants have gone through educationally. Initially, most required language acquisition to survive in a Midwestern rural community. Now, their focus is to have options. I find many students come back to school to get a diploma so they can advance their skills to find work beyond the local meatpacking plant. They talk about returning to education because they have dreams of going to college, having a career, and helping their children with schoolwork. They see education as a way for their family to “succeed” and achieve the “American Dream”. No longer, do they want to live in the “poor” side of town; rather, they want their children to attend the “good” school. Most of all, they want to be an equal member of the community.

I am proud of the Center, which so many of my Mexican immigrant friends call la escuela, “the school”. The Center is located just west of the local emergency room, where the sounds of screaming sirens echo in the entryway of the building daily. The school is on a bus route in the center of Marshalltown, close to the neighborhoods where most Mexican immigrant families, who are new to the town, live. This allows students to walk, bike, or ride the bus to school. The building is separate from the main college campus, which is located on the outskirts of town. The school, a remodel of the old Farm Supply Store, has lent itself to becoming a cultural center, hosting students from all backgrounds.

A few years ago, the college built onto the 10,000 square foot building nearly doubling its size after the capacity within the classrooms grew so large some classes had to be conducted in the hallway. The less cramped space has resulted in a transformation of educational services for students. Students are now less distracted because the
hallways are quiet, unless it is break time, and there is a designated environment located in the front of the building where students are able to socialize. The first half of the building is home to a computer lab, four high school equivalency classrooms, three English and one for Spanish, and a classroom specifically for students who wish to work on improving their grammar and writing skills so they can enter college or formal workforce training. There is a kitchenette with an oven, refrigerator, and microwave for students to use during social events, like end of quarter celebrations, potlucks, and the annual holiday cookie bakeoff. The new half of the building is separate from the old by a small ramp. There are three English language classrooms, a computerized testing lab, a meeting room, and my office located in the new section. Our backdoor is located near the public parking lot where students able to park.

Twice per day, the sound of chatter rings throughout the long hallway as students make-way to their classrooms. There are class hours in the morning and the evening. This design allows shift employees who work at the meatpacking plant the opportunity to make one of the sessions. Each classroom is equipped with audio and visual aids for students and teachers to use. Some are set up with tables in the shape of a square, where others are more traditional having the tables face forward according to the desire of the teacher. Books and writing materials for each student are located in every room. Many students struggle financially, so I have secured scholarship funds that assist those who need help paying for tuition, books, or test fees.

Not being located on the main community college campus has its positives and negatives. At times, we feel like the outcast of the community college because we work with marginalized populations seen as not intelligent and low skilled. This, however, is
not the case (Hotek & Baker, 2004). A study using Marshalltown Mexican immigrants found that the majority had various career and technical skills (Hotek & Baker, 2004). What seems to be hindering to them is the inability to gain the credentials needed to practice within the trade-industry. Researchers suggested over a decade ago that industry sectors, specifically those within manufacturing, should work with the local community colleges to develop “bilingual, modular, and multi-media instructional strategies to teach manufacturing skills in both English and Spanish” (Hotek & Baker, 2004, pp. 128-129). This conclusion came around the same time as the creation of the Center, leading to the official name “Education and Training Center”. Interestingly, expects consider these learning pedagogies to still be best practices (Garrett & Cheek, 2007). The lack of movement toward implementing a bilingual curriculum model for jobs in high demand industry has locally not been supported. The belief still is that individuals must be fluent in reading, writing, and speaking the English language to be hired.

The vision for the Center was to increase educational accessibility for adult Mexican immigrants by having a place close to where they live and work. It was also important to implement different pedagogical approaches to increase language learning. One of those was the use of modular equipment to teach various skilled trades. Purchasing of modular electrical, plumbing, and welding instruments occurred to encourage a more hands-on approach to learning. The curriculum, which was offered in English and Spanish language, allowed individuals to take and re-take the courses at their own pace. Unfortunately, the popularity of these apparatuses deteriorated when hiring of Mexican immigrants within those job markets did not happen.
Working with a transnational population, I never know who will walk down the corridor. I have learned that there are certain times of the year where participation in programming slows. Times like Christmas, Easter, and Dia de los Muertos. These times of celebration find many Mexican immigrants returning to their homeland to visit family still living there (Daniel, 2006). I remember the first year working at the Center and it was Good Friday. My staff told me to “shut down” the school, assuring me there would not be any students on that day. Looking back, and not having listened to them, I recall sitting by myself in my office. Alone. No one came to class. Cultural rituals are important to Mexican immigrants even if that means quitting their jobs or missing school, just to return, “home” for a few days (Grey & Woodrick, 2002).

Much like the literature regarding Marshalltown suggests, the language barrier is and has always been a significant concern (Hotek & Baker, 2004; Grey, 1990; Daniel, 2006; Grey & Woodrick, 2002). This confines the population to working in low-skill jobs that do not require language proficiency or a high school diploma. In Marshalltown, this means working in the meatpacking industry (Richardson Bruna, 2008, 2009; Hotek & Baker, 2004; Grey, 1990). This continues to be the case. It has been my experience since living and working within the Marshalltown community that most people still consider Mexican immigrants lazy and unwilling to learn the language. I believe this to be quite the opposite. In fact, most have difficult jobs, work long hours, and simply do not have enough time during the day to dedicate to the difficult learning process (Richardson Bruna 2008, 2009; Hotek & Baker, 2004).

What is also lacking is a sense of empathy in regards to learning a language (Grey, 1990). I recall a Mexican immigrant man coming to the school asking for help
with reading. Having let his licensure laps accidentally, he needed to take a state issued certification test in order to continue to work with certain paint chemicals. Nervously, he talked about how difficult the test was for him the first time, fearing this time he would not be able to pass. Not confident in his language skills he requested private tutoring on the manual so he could learn the technical language in English, eventually passing the exam. It is through stories like this that my position has transformed. My job simply used to be a building manager who hired teachers and scheduled classes. Now, I am also an advocate and a support network. The people who come day after day to learn English or work diligently on math or writing to test for the equivalency exam are heroic. The determination, persistence, and attitude of these individuals are a testament to the dedication and drive of this population. The challenge for adult educators is to find ways to encourage students to continue working hard to learn the language, reassuring them that someday it will pay off.

**Cast**

There were six “actors” interviewed for the script, but only four were “cast” (see Appendix A for IRB approval). All were adult Mexican immigrants who had experienced an interruption in his/her education, having not received a high school diploma. All had returned to the local community college adult literacy program to gain a high school equivalency diploma or increase their English language skills. In fact, these students, whose experiences the businessmen only seemed to care about understanding in terms of numbers, are the kinds of students I work with every day. I wanted to know more from them in their own words about why they have returned to
school. What did it mean and feel like to be educationally aspirational as a Mexican immigrant adult outsider to this city and country?

I refer to the participants as “actors” for two reasons. First, each person’s choice to return to education stems from the urge to improve, or take action on, in, and for, their lives, or the lives of their family. This reflects an understanding of what it means to be an actor coming out of sociological conceptions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This means that actors live instantaneously in the past, present, and future, moving between each timeframe dependent upon the context of their environment. This provides a human element of choice using creative interpretation and social learning in response to the environment. Then, learning happens through reflection and is reconstructed through meaning making of the lived experience (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Secondly, performers learn how to stimulate the audience through the teaching of different approaches. This is like putting on a mask, a technique used to “transform” a performer’s consciousness of their being. Conversely, as an actor, audience reaction is about the connection they already have to the scene and their interpretation of reality from their environment (Schechner, 1985; Barry, 2015).

**Script**

In recruiting participants for interviews, I developed a script that described my research and promoted it among my students. The script was a summary of what I hoped to do and what I wanted to accomplish. To do this, I needed each participant to help by taking on a role. Like many directors pitching scripts, I needed an agent, someone to help me get the word out; for this, I used a colleague, himself a Mexican immigrant, to serve as interpreter and cultural broker. Together, we recruited participants by making
the rounds and doing announcements to Spanish speakers enrolled in Spanish and English high school equivalency or English as a Second Language classes.

All interviews took place in my office during the months of October and November 2015 at various times of the day that were convenient for the participants. Participants were able to choose if they wanted the translator present during the interviews. Four out of the six people requested translation help. The assistance of my interpreter agent granted me the freedom to provide choice to the participants based on their language comfort, while owning the fact that I do not speak Spanish and our successful communication would require teamwork. Some individuals asked to have the interpreter available in the room, even though they completed the interviews mostly using English. In these cases, they only used the translator when they needed help expressing themselves, finding specific words they did not know in English, or clarifying story details. I, too, used the interpreter to expand upon my questioning.

Each initial interview was approximately an hour and a half long with the two other sessions being thirty to forty-five minutes each. During the first interview, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym, which are the names used in the portraits I provide. When constructing the portraiture I wanted to find the stories that most resonated with me by causing an emotional response. First, I had to determine which life stories connected educational aspiration for the participants. These were the stories that I found myself lying in bed and vividly picturing the “scene” in my head. At times, I had to disregard the extraneous life stories, which were interesting and emotional, but did not relate to my research questions. I had to determine whose stories I would write about and if there were some to not use.
Exposition

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), portraitists must be flexible in their interview process. A portraitist must practice “listening and observing, being open and receptive to all stimuli, acclimating herself to the environment, documenting her initial movements and first impressions, and noting what is familiar and what is surprising” (p. 187). From a phenomenological perspective, Seidman (2013) concurs, suggesting that when analyzing the data collected through the interview process, researchers should reflect upon his/her own learning (pp. 130-131). Taking this cue, I used journaling as a tool to write down my thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and reactions to my participants. This process helped me document patterns or themes that arose during the interviews that I was able to reflect upon during my writing.

As I captured the participants’ stories, I used Glaser and Straus’s (1967) dialectical process proposed as part of the constant comparative data analysis method recommended by Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.189). In this dialectical process, themes emerge by listening to participant responses while conducting interviews. This analytical method allows the researcher to dialogue with the participant gathering descriptive stories, clarifying understandings, and shaping the next question. In turn, this allowed me to reflect upon, examine, and create meaning from participant stories throughout the interview. It is through my multiple written creations that representations of the studied phenomena emerged. For me, this allowed for a deeper, more descriptive interpretation of educational aspiration to occur. The alignment of this data analysis method fit with my personality. The way I learn is through verbal dialogue. By processing in this manner, I was able to dialogue through conversation with
the participants. In turn, I was able to ask clarifying questions by breaking down my thoughts to help guide my interpretation.

This process continued as I re-listened to, transcribed, and re-read the transcribed conversations. With data analysis as an ongoing dialogue between participants’ stories and my journal entries, this process helped me move my “thinking to a deeper level” and I began to develop the big “conceptual idea” for each story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.189). It was at this time when I realized I needed to break away from the chronological narrative that Seidman’s interview approach implicitly created in the participants’ storytelling and, instead, get at the kernels of meaning, which each participant was revealing about their educational aspirations. To do this, I had to give myself permission to step aside from the easy structure of simply re-telling a life’s chronology and listen for the critical incidents in a participant’s life that became salient moments in the interview of educationally aspiring experiences.

This breaking-free process initially was quite difficult for me for two reasons. First, I felt disrespectful not using all the information in the stories I collected. Secondly, it felt uncomfortable to be the one picking among people’s life events to piece together a portrait to make greater meaning. The most significant challenge came once I had named the themes. I wanted to craft portraits to support those themes. To do this, I painted a coherent descriptively rich picture using only key details, not all of them, as my colors. I found myself feeling guilty and frustrated, unable to identify a strategic “how to” process. It felt arbitrary and ambiguous. Then, I went back to my reading about portraiture.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), a portraitist has five techniques to rely on when formulating emerging themes:
First, we listen for repetitive refrains that are spoken (or appear) frequently and persistently, forming a collective expression of commonly held views. Second, we listen for resonant metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the ways actors illuminate and experience their realities. Third, we listen for the themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seem to be important to organizational continuity and coherence. Fourth, we use triangulation to weave together the threads of data converging from a variety of sources. And finally, we construct themes and reveal patterns among perspectives that are often experienced as contrasting and dissonant by the actors. (p.193)

Unfortunately, what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) does not share is that this process does not happen easily. At least it did not for me. I was still frustrated with the format at first, feeling as if I should have chosen a more traditional methodology to convey my discoveries. I let my frustration out on my husband by yelling and screaming that “I had no idea what I was doing”. Taking my bout of verbal abuse and trying to understand, he was able to discern from my rants the underlying objective of portraiture. I needed to take three or four major life events, create a theme around what those events speak to, and describe, very specifically, how those events have influenced each participant’s experience of educational aspiration. Easy for him to say.

Then I returned to the drawing board. Having re-listened to the recordings of my participants’ stories, re-viewed the transcripts, and re-read my initial chronological accounts, I needed a strategy to re-see and re-think. I decided to chart each story. I put the overlying theme I had come to believe characterized each participant’s story or portrait in the middle of a sheet of paper then connected three or four stories that reflected the theme. This was when I made my final decision not to use two of my participants’ interviews.

One participant was determined to use her English throughout the entire interview. Her limited English prevented me from understanding much of what she was
saying. I found myself not connecting to the content of her stories, rather simply trying to find words that I understood. She became emotional immediately during each interview, which limited her understanding of my questions, as well as, her English fluency. I was finding myself repeating questions because I could not make sense of her answers and this increased her emotional response. In the end, I was unable to clarify the precise reasons for her emotions beyond her obvious sadness, displayed by her tears.

In the case of the second participant, although I could understand what she was saying, I was, ironically, unable to find any emotional connection to her stories. She indicated throughout the interviews a desire to fulfill her husband’s wish that she learn English. She never provided an explanation for her own educational aspiration based on her personal experiences. Although this may be a valid reason for this woman, as well as others, it is not a central or common ambition I hear from other adult Mexican immigrant students. More importantly, it was not a theme across the other participants’ accounts apart from the reason of learning English for the improvement of family. That reason was, indeed, a motivation provided in some way throughout each participant’s story and one that I featured, specifically in the case of Speedy’s experience of learning as communal.

I found it difficult to approach the work of identifying an overarching theme for these two individuals different from what I previously recognized in the others’ stories. I did not see the potential of any new portrait of educational aspiration. Thus, with this barrier to meaning making, I decided to work where meaning was easily emerging.

To support my approach to push beyond chronological storytelling, I utilized Lawrence-Lightfoot’s website as reference
She has short audio excerpts of her books, portraying the characteristics of portraiture writing. I was able to choose one of her books that aligned to my project, “The Exit: The Ending that Set Us Free”. I decided to use this passage because it was a representation of portraiture stories having to do with “leaving” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2012). I had bought this book after committing to do my dissertation using a portraiture framework. By listening to her excerpts, I was able to put myself in the story with little effort. Soothed by Lawrence-Lightfoot’s soft voice, her choice of wording, and the descriptive ease of how she told the powerful passage, I listened to her read the same segment nearly twenty times. I focused on her tone, her words, the nouns, verbs, and tenses she used. It was during my listening where I discovered how she set the stage to the “scene”. I re-lived my emotional journey by re-reading my journal submissions and through my interpretation of the portrait themes. Then, a light bulb turned on in my brain, and I began to write.
ACT VI
SOLILOQUY

Scene 1: Maria

The oppression that engulfs a sense of fear is quite possibly the vehicle bullies use to prey upon those they consider to be weak. Whether one thinks of a bully as an individual or a group, it does not matter. Rather, bullies are those who seek superiority through demoralization, and by instilling a sense of terror on another human life, so much so, the lasting effects are haunting. In turn, the victimization felt circumscribes the control one feels they have over their life. To survive means to have overcome the limitations placed upon them at the hand of another.

“I was bullied”

Maria appears much older than thirty-five. As I sit across the table from her, I notice her plainness. She is dressed in a pink sweatshirt that fits snugly to her body showing off the curves caused by motherhood. Her hair neatly pulled back tight in a bun exposed her high cheekbones. She is wearing no make-up, which is noticeable as she pushes up her glasses that have fallen down the bridge of her nose. Maria portrays herself as a strong-willed, intelligent woman who tends to keep to herself rather than socialize. It appears she has become hardened by the trials of her past, as I rarely saw her smile. She watches as I fumble to turn on the recording device with her eyes on my every movement. Sensing hesitation in her voice, we pass the time with small talk.

Maria was raised in the small town of Tepetongo located in the middle of Mexico. Her elementary school, as she described it, was a house whose bedrooms were the
classrooms. Each room housed a different grade level, with two children sharing a desk. There were books, notebooks, pencils, and a chalkboard scattered within each classroom and at first description, school, to Maria, “was a nice place”. However, just thinking about her first grade teacher makes Maria quite sad, as tears begin streaming down her cheeks from behind her wire-rimmed glasses.

Maria’s, first grade teacher, a tall, fat, curly haired woman who on the exterior seemed to have a pretty face, yet relished a sense of hatred in her heart, was a bully. She seemed to center her dislike on kids she felt were not worthy of educating. Maria recalls, being a target by her teacher, constantly belittled as she shamefully told her not to talk and to sit down, while allowing other children to roam the classroom freely and chatter throughout her teaching.

Treatment for Maria’s peers whose mothers were homemakers and fathers who worked various jobs locally was different. Maria, a small, thin child came from a poor family. Unable to find enough work in Mexico her father, a proud, hardworking man, decided when Maria went to school to move to the United States to find work that paid better. Her mother, not wanting to leave Mexico stayed behind working as a laborer in the corn, bean, and pumpkin fields helping her father provide food and clothing for Maria and her two siblings.

After completing ninth grade, Maria again felt bullied. She recalls the Mexican government offering financial assistance to the families whose parents worked locally so their children could attend a nearby high school. Maria’s first-grade teacher had favored these same kids years earlier. Suddenly, noticing Maria’s eyes welling up with tears once again, she explains that no one from the government talked to her parents. The federal
official saw her father’s departure to America as a form of betrayal and although Maria wanted badly to continue school, dreaming of becoming an elementary teacher, was unable to without the help of the government. Her family could not afford bus fare, which forced Maria to quit school.

Maria adored her father. She admired him for his work ethic now recognizing, as a parent herself to two young boys, how difficult it must have been to live thousands of miles away from his family, doing what he could to provide, still being held captive by the limitations of governmental bullying. It was as if a light bulb had turned on. Maria’s eyes stared deeply into mine as I could tell she was reliving those difficult years. I could sense by the quiver in her voice that she did not want to find herself in the same situation as her parents. Her face now reflecting the realization of her mother’s torment knowing she was unable to provide relief to her daughter’s painful schooling and her father’s disappointment knowing how his choices, or lack thereof, directly impacted his daughter’s dreams.

What was even worse for Maria was the despair she felt after her father’s death. Having just buried her father, her mother immediately began making plans to move to the U.S. Still mourning, Maria was angry with her mother for suggesting they leave the only home she knew that her father worked so hard to sustain. Not wanting to disrespect her mother, she obeyed and began packing what little things she owned. Leaving to go to the nearest bus station, Maria watched out the window as her home went blurry. Now, the little square house was just a memory. Passing her father’s grave as the bus heads North toward America, Maria wept, feeling once again helpless. It was not her choice to move
to the U.S. She loved Mexico. There clearly was no other choice. Jobs in Mexico just did not pay what U.S. jobs did.

Maria’s story of bullying continues beyond Mexico. As a quiet, shy, young woman, she spent most of her time with her mother. Closing in on thirty, she had never really dated anyone; much less, thought marriage was in her future, until she met Juan. She and Juan worked on the same pork processing line at the local meatpacking plant. He reminded her of her father, hardworking and kind.

After marrying, Maria and Juan were anxious to find a home and start a family. They attended services Sunday mornings at the local Catholic Church. Afterward they would meet a relator to walk various floor plans of homes for sale around town. They had been working hard and accepting all the overtime they could to put money away each month for a down payment. Maria often found herself daydreaming what it would be like to raise her family in a little house near a neighborhood school, being able to walk her kids to school every day. The day they went into the bank and signed the paperwork for their new home was a dream come true.

Maria’s pregnancy with her second child was not easy. She was exhausted all the time. The doctor’s office never had an interpreter available at the time of her appointment, evoking an eye-rolling complaint from her doctor when hearing her request. Again, she felt bullied. Didn’t he understand how difficult it was for her to continue to attend English classes; six months pregnant with a toddler that she felt she rarely saw, while working overtime shifts trying to keep up with the increasing house payments? Couldn’t he be empathetic as how difficult it was for her to share personal information with an interpreter, always wondering if they were adequately conveying her situation?
Instead, when he would enter the exam room he complained in front of Maria to the nurse.

At one point, she even tried telling her doctor how difficult it was for her to take time off work, which stressed the family’s finances. However, unwilling to listen to her needs, he continued to schedule her next visit during her workday, which caused Maria and Juan to get behind in their house payments resulting in their loan going into foreclosure. For Maria, she left the doctor’s office feeling defeated.

In my role as an Adult Literacy Director, I listened to Maria’s bullying experiences. For me, Maria’s quest to learn English was a method for her to gain control over her own circumstances, releasing her from the tight hold society has had over someone it considers inferior. Maria, however, saw her experience differently. She believed her educational aspiration to be freedom, freedom from further victimization. She articulates it best when she said, “Education opens all doors”.

Scene 2: Speedy

The very definition of family means something different to everyone. Whether family includes a loving spouse, beautiful children, supportive parents, or brothers and sisters, the system generally is made of people related genetically, by adoption or through marriage, but, to some, a network of caring friends is whom they consider family.

“Family is everything—don’t question God”

Speedy arrived to the interview late, which did not seem unusual for him. His attendance in English as a Second Language classes is very sporadic due to working the evening shift at the local meatpacking plant. While outside my door, I overhear his teacher preaching the importance of his attendance. It never fails, he will deflect her
scolding by telling one of his outlandish, and nearly unbelievable stories that seem
scripted out of an action movie.

Speedy, a small stunted man in his mid-fifties is a rock-n-roll fanatic who sports
a mullet haircut as if it was still the 1980’s. He displays a thinning trucker style mustache
that drapes around his upper lip down to his chin resembling an upside down “U”.
Typically, he wears tight fitting Under Armor dry-fit t-shirts, which defines his muscular
arms and small slender waist. Today, he is drinking a lemon-lime sport drink to replenish
his depleted electrolytes after running several miles that morning before taking his
daughter to school. A gold necklace hangs around his neck barin one of the many
Catholic Saints. When he smiles, the light hits the gold castings that surround his front
two teeth.

Family is everything to Speedy. Raised in Morelia the largest city in the state of
Michoacán, Speedy was the second oldest of five brothers. His father, a butcher and
business owner was a short plump man, who dreamt that his petite son would one day
become a famous Matador. From the time he was in school, Speedy and his father spent
every weekend experiencing the thrill of learning techniques of bull fighting, observing
daring movements of the radiant “Toreros”. Feeling lucky to have his father’s full
attention Speedy, too, fell in love with the idea of wearing beautiful sequenced costumes
custom tailored to show off his sleek muscular body. Life was exhilarating, learning how
to look an angry bull in the eye, taunting him to run toward the velvet red cape he held at
his side, only to pull it out of the way, avoiding piercing of the cloak by the sharp horns.

Speedy says he remembers enjoying life, not having a care in the world, when one
day a Catholic Nun at school invited Speedy into her office offering up the advice to
“never hate God” when life doesn’t go well. Sharing that his life may look fine now, but can change rather quickly. Laughing in disbelief, he simply thought she was crazy and ignored her warning.

At age twelve, Speedy noticed his father’s interest in spending time at weekend bullfighting lessons stopped. Concerned by his father’s behavior, he saw his dad being “Macho”, a term Speedy says happens when Mexican men have too much money and their priorities change, no longer being a respectable family man. Speedy came home from school one afternoon to find his mother gone. He was devastated and blamed his father for not putting his family first. Instead, his dad was spending time with other women, drinking heavily, and betting on cockfights, until he eventually lost the family business. Angry at his father for his behavior, Speedy said he was furious that his mother deserted him and his brothers, leaving them in the care of his father who threatened to hand over the youngest two brothers who were three-years-old and seven months old, to the local orphanage. Family meant too much to Speedy so he and his older brother Victor vowed to care for the boys while his father migrated to the U.S. to find work.

The next few years were very difficult. Speedy’s mother lived with a man who physically abused him and his father moved to the U.S., leaving him and his brothers homeless and forced to sleep on the streets. Not uncommon, the boys were joined by other children living on the streets who did not have a family. Overtime, many of the street kids became Speedy’s extended family.

Taking his responsibility to heart, providing for his brothers was important for Speedy. It was difficult, at times, when gang violence and exploitation from the local police taunted him with promises of a more secure life. Speedy says, the “fucking
police” knew he, and his brother Victor, were orphaned and defenseless and would prey
upon them. The police would chase the boys when they got off the bus from school.
When caught, the men threw the boys in the bed of the truck and drove them to a quarry
an hour away from town. Hitting them with fists, a butt of a gun, and holding a gun to
their head, the policemen would tell Speedy and his brother they were going to die if they
didn’t agree to steal for them. In return, they guaranteed to take care of the boys.

Crossing his arms in front of his chest and tears welling in his eyes, Speedy says
as tempting as it was to be cared for, he never faltered because he was “no thief”. He
knew he would be useless to his brothers if he, too, abandoned them by ending up in jail
or even dead. With tears rolling down his face now, Speedy says instead he told them, “I
will not work for you. You will just have to kill me”.

At one point Speedy tried living with his grandparents, farmers who lived nearly
an hour from his school, but he was unable to earn enough money to afford bus fare from
the farm to school, school to his job, and back to the farm each day. Knowing that he
needed to find a home, food, and clothing for his small family he decided he must quit
school and do what he knew best, cut meat. He never minded following his father’s
footsteps because he remembers the good life being a butcher had once provided to his
family. Plus, it was better than stocking fruit and vegetables at the local street vendors
for very little pay.

Speedy’s father and stepmother visited from California to find him roughed up
from his latest street fight. He explained that his black eye, chipped front teeth, and
scarred skin were simply the cost of survival in Morelia. Horrified, his stepmother
demanded that Speedy and his little brothers move to the U.S. to live. Speedy’s eyes lit
up as he began dancing around in his chair, laughing as he shares how excited he was to
go to the United States having watched American made movies to learn English, hoping
to see the metal rock band *AC/DC*, and dreaming of what life would be like living with
dad again as a family. Plus, if he stayed in Mexico, he was not sure long he could
continue fighting the local street gangs to keep his family safe.

Speedy says the move, although not without its bumps, was a good one. Smiling,
flashing his gold trimmed teeth my direction he shares he met his wife at work and he has
been blessed with two beautiful girls. His goal is not to stop working in the meatpacking
industry because to him having a job means stability for his family; rather, “Education is
a way out”. After finding God through reading his Bible, he no longer questions God’s
plan; rather, now he embraces the challenges set before him using education as the
foundation to become a better person, not for the money or fame, but for humanity to tell
his story.

As we spoke, Speedy answered his iPhone to talk with his wife about the morning
argument he had with one of his daughters. Still angry, he apologizes for the
interruption, sharing how hurt he was because his daughter had pushed him away when
he went to kiss her goodbye before school, expressing to him her embarrassment of his
affection. Speedy’s reaction to his daughter draws upon his conviction that he must hold
true to his principles and pass on the importance of family. As a father, he believes, it is
his role to ground his daughters, using the stories of his past as lessons, to pass along the
advice he expects them to live by, “family is important---don’t question God”.

Scene 3: Tony

Whether when envisioning an achiever one evaluates that success on the amount of money in the bank, the volume of physical possessions owned, or by a milestone accomplished, each of us have a gauge which defines achievement. Regardless of our method, success comes once we reach a goal, resulting in a flood of energized emotion to satisfy a desire.

“I am an achiever”

Tony, arrives early for his interview nervously giggling when extending his hand to greet me, offering up a respectful “Good morning ma’am”. Tony, a tall man with long legs and a thin stature, ducks as he enters through the doorway. His face illuminates when he smiles, showing nearly every white tooth in his mouth. His deep voice is quiet when he speaks making it difficult to hear him. The softness in his tone coupled with poor articulation amplifies Tony’s need to repeat answers to my questions.

Tony regularly comes to school dressed in dark name-brand jeans, a neatly ironed button up dress shirt, mostly blue in color, and white tennis shoes. He is much older than expected, thirty-seven, given his well-groomed and youthful appearance. His face, is cleanly shaven, and appears soft to the touch with a sweat fragrance of aftershave trailing behind him. His dark wavy hair is styled so he can comb it back, keeping it away from his face. Tony’s nervousness is evident by the volume of sweat running from his brow and dripping into his dark brown eyes. He quickly grabs a Kleenex from a nearby box and wipes his forehead dry.

Tony has been attending high school equivalency classes for nearly one year to acquire his diploma. He says, after researching adult literacy programs he chose to
commute an hour each direction from his home to attend classes because the program offered curricula in native language. Taking classes in Spanish was important to Tony because as an achiever, he felt he could be more successful building upon prior knowledge, allowing him to get his diploma in less time. Currently, having passed three of the five required exams, Tony has two remaining tests left, social studies and math, which he feels he will complete in the next month. Continuing to work tirelessly, Tony’s commitment to driving over one hundred miles four days a week, rarely missing class, and studying on the weekends reveals how dedicated he is toward achieving his goal.

Tony has always set his sights high. He grew up in a small rural town in the state of Jalisco where the main source of employment was agriculture. Tony said he was never interested in that type of work, instead he relished in dreaming of ways to his father’s business more successful financially. When talking about his father, Tony’s smile would widen and his voice would crackle ever so slightly causing his cheeks to redden with embarrassment. Admittedly, Tony says, his father’s relationship was different with him from his siblings. He recalls his father spending a lot of time talking to him about what he wanted to do when he grew up, what he was good at in school, and how important it was to get a good education.

Shyly, Tony admits he is the smartest in his family, an overachiever, whose ambition drives him to stay motivated until he completes a goal. With his cheeks red from embarrassment, Tony says his siblings, unlike himself, did not like school; quitting in the fourth grade to focus on learning different parts of the carpentry trade. He never liked working with his hands and being the youngest of eleven siblings he rarely got the chance to help in the workshop anyway. Instead, his passion was accounting and finance.
As a child, Tony dreamt about being a businessman dealing in import and export trades. At first description, Tony says, school was easy for him. Then, sharing his concerns about the quality of teachers, he said there were many teachers who were not good at their jobs. He specifically recalls choosing to not ask questions or speak to teachers for fear of repercussions, remembering teachers hitting students on the head with a ruler until they cried, because they had asked a question.

The year Tony was to enter tenth grade the government financed a new high school in his town. However, Tony says he had “become lazy” deciding not to go onto high school. His decision was difficult for his parents, especially for his father, who had encouraged him to set his goals high. But, as Tony sees it, politics in Mexico influence career success regardless of education.

Explaining further, Tony says, in Mexico the only way to acquire a “good job” is by having an influential “network” of friends or family. He recalls having friends who were engineers and architects who ended up doing the same job as he did because they did not have connections to help them get jobs in their profession. Many, in fact, left Mexico and went to the U.S. to find jobs in order to work in their discipline. For Tony, he felt the likelihood of going to college and getting hired, as an accountant seemed unachievable, taking a “miracle” because he did not have connections.

When Tony’s father passed away he and one his brothers worked hard to try to keep his father’s business profitable. Still, not liking the work, he knew he must help his family survive, which was failing due to the economic decline of the country. After his brother died, Tony experienced other problems beyond his family’s struggling business.
The number of drug cartels invading his town was raising, murder and kidnapping was increasing, and crime due to corruption was escalating. Looking down to the floor, he revealed his religiousness, sharing that he often prays for the safety of his mother and siblings who still live in his hometown. Feeling overwhelmed and defeated, unsure of his future, Tony noticed his classmates and their fathers leaving Mexico to work in the U.S. The jobs were in the fields or factories and paid much better than those in his homeland. Tony believed he, too, could be successful in providing for his family if he moved to the U.S., only planning to work a few years and save enough money to return home and find a job.

Knowing very little English, he realized to survive in the U.S. he would need to learn the language. Admitting how difficult it is to learn English, Tony says it was important to him to learn the language of the country. As he described it, “When I came to the US one of my goals was to learn English as fast as I could because I knew people who stayed here for 30 years and then went back to my town without [knowing] any English. That was weird to me.”

Returning home to live is no longer an option for Tony. Now, able to communicate in English, Tony has set his sights higher. He is working to obtaining his high school equivalency diploma so he go onto a community college, get a business degree and secure a more reliable career, than waiting tables. Nervously giggling, he shares how good it feels to have options. As his eyes fall to rest on his lap, picking at his fingers, he whispers softly, as if the possibility of achieving his educational goal just occurred to him, “I should have continued studying [in Mexico] no matter if I could find good opportunities or not.” Sensing disappointment for giving up, the sadness on his face
begins to dwindle as his lips curve upward, no longer is Tony willing to give up on his dreams—success is about achieving.

Scene 4: Liz

Whether quitting is simply an act of not participating or abandonment of a responsibility, the choice to vacate may seem unavoidable. Sometimes quitting helps one escape from reality for self-preservation and other times it is a means of defiance. Either way, the decision, at first, may seem harmless yet have lifelong repercussions. The decision to press on rather than terminate comes through learning.

“I don’t want to quit, again”

Liz is an attractive woman in her mid-twenties with dark brown hair that lies straight, down the middle of her back. As usual, she is wearing a thick white headband that pushes her bangs away from her face and out of her dark brown eyes. Her accenting make-up highlights the oval shape of her eyes, which twinkle from the florescent light. She wears dark brown thick-rimmed glasses that, too, are oval in shape. Dressed stylishly Liz is wearing brand-named denim jeans with a stitched flowery design on the back pockets, a V-neck white t-shirt, and a light pink Columbia fleece jacket that compliments her dark skin. Liz’s soft voice reflects near perfect pronunciation, indicating her life in Mexico was a long time ago. Appearing calm and un-rattled in the unfamiliar setting, this mother of four seems wise beyond her years as she sits with her feet crossed and her hands shoved loosely in her jacket pockets.

Born into poverty, Liz’s parents lived in a small village, Valle de Santiago where, her father, unable to find work locally, would leave for months at a time to work as a
landscaper in San Diego, California. After Liz was born, he moved the small family to Tijuana allowing him to cross the border each day to work and return home at night. Initially, school, to Liz, was fun. She had many friends, played games in the courtyard during recess, and she cared for the stray cats that roamed the schoolyard in search of food. Never considering her family rich, Liz said there were times she shared her sandwich with kids at her school who were so poor they complained about being hungry.

However, living in Tijuana had other challenges too. Liz’s mother and baby brother would walk her to school each day passing local fruit and vegetable stands, clothing markets and bakeries before arriving to the square building. On one particular day, Liz recalls walking hand-and-hand with her mother when two men began following close behind. Continuing to look behind, and gradually walking faster and faster, Liz says her mother eventually pulled her into one of the stores to wait for the men to leave. Crying and scared, it was not until years later when she understood that Tijuana had become corrupt with gangs and crooked police who would hire men to kidnap and kill young children for their organs or sell the children to an underground adoption ring.

Her family’s move to the United States at the age of eight was difficult. At the time, Liz did not understand why she had to leave her school, her friends, and her home. A story too familiar for many immigrants brought to the U.S. by their parents at a young age. Understanding now that life in Tijuana had become too dangerous, initially Liz says the move triggered a sense of hatred in her.

Liz’s parents enrolled her in the elementary school where most of the Mexican kids new to town attended, where she spent her first two years in a separate classroom for
English Language Learners. Not making friends easily, Liz gained a lot of weight hiding her eating habits from her parents. Her weight gain fueled the agitation from the other Mexican kids, who would call her names in Spanish to avoid reprimand from the teacher.

One time when Liz was the most humiliated she says she recalls having addressed Valentine’s Day cards wrong, putting her name in the “to” area rather than “from”. When the kids opened her cards during the classroom party, they laughed and teased about her mistake. She recalls feeling dumb, running home after school crying and telling her mom that she “never wanted to go back to school”. Her mom, however, was naïve to the issues Liz was experiencing making her go back the next day. Liz says she does not blame her mother for her quitting school because she did her best to be encouraging, saying how her mother would help her learn English even when she, herself, did not know the language. Together, Liz says, they learned “the colors, the numbers, and the ABC’s”.

In fourth grade, Liz says “something switched” in her brain and English became easy. She finally understood what her teachers, peers, and people in the stores were saying, helping her parents with translation. Having joined a local boxing club Liz also was losing weight, and she began to establish friendships. Unfortunately, Liz says, these new friends were not positive.

Starting to skip school, Liz’s school principal went to her house to talk with her parents about her truancy. Not wanting any legal trouble, her parents begged her to “be a good girl” and go to school. Liz said she would agree to make them happy and leave her alone, but when her parents left for their morning shift at the local meatpacking plant she
would call her friends to come over to her house and hang out. It was not long before Liz began experimenting with drugs.

At fourteen, Liz continued to spend most of her time doing drugs and having sex with her eighteen-year-old boyfriend. Frustrated and not knowing what to do, her parents contacted her probation officer and had her sent her to “lock up”, a local shelter that housed delinquent youth, where she stayed for a month. While there, she went to school, sobered up, and admittedly, she made her parents feel guilty for placing her out of the home. Desperately wanting to go home, she promised her parents she would go back to school, only if they agreed she could move in with her boyfriend and his parents. Her parents approved, reluctantly, knowing how important it was for her to get an education so she could have an easier life and not have to work in a meatpacking plant. By December, however, Liz again stopped going to public school after finding out she was pregnant.

Scared, Liz returned home and started to attend the alternative high school hoping to finish her education. Once her baby arrived, she was overwhelmed with responsibility and quit school again. Getting pregnant three more times, Liz attempted to acquire her equivalency diploma on several occasions throughout those same years, quitting each time for different reasons. Sometimes she felt not smart enough, occasionally she needed to find a job, and other times her boyfriend made her feel guilty as if she was putting her needs before her children.

Fearing failure once again, Liz discloses how nervous she was to start classes, yet again. She was reluctant to commit because “I end up quitting all the time”, however, this time she says, “it’s different”. She is different. Concurrently enrolled in Certified
Nurse Aid (CNA) classes in the morning at the community college, Liz also attends evening classes working toward her high school equivalency diploma.

For the first time I notice that Liz is beaming, sharing that each day she is getting a little closer toward her CNA certificate and her diploma. Surer now than ever before, Liz says she is not going to quit, not this time. Noticing determination in her voice as it became louder, and seeing her eyes widen, she reflects on what she has learned from her choice to quit school. Now realizing how the sacrifices she is making will pay off not only for her, but also for her children, Liz takes responsibility for her past actions and acknowledges that she is the only one who can control her future; it is now up to her.
Crafting the four portraits provided a meaningful learning activity for me that furthered my empathetic realization about the nature of four essential phenomena as related to the aspirational adult Mexican immigrant learning experience: learning as finding freedom, learning is communal, learning as family mobility, and learning as perseverance. I had the privilege of witnessing each participant’s reflection on their personal life experiences, guided by my questions. Reviewing their answers allowed me to interpret and develop thematic meanings as to how they experience educational aspiration. These themes then helped guide me back to the literature. Together, I use what I learned from my participants’ experiences, as well as, from the related research to identify emergent implications for community college administrators. In particular, because of my own professional positioning, I made connections to the essential role adult literacy educators have when proposing changes to policy and practice to meet the needs of adult Mexican immigrant learners. First, however, I expand and reflect upon my meaning making related to each identified theme.

**Learning as finding freedom**

The theme learning as finding freedom represents the larger concept of marginalization. The significance of Maria’s story and her victimization of bullying by her teacher showed how, while living in Mexico, she felt as if she was at the margins of her education. As an example of adult Mexican immigrant learning aspiration, her story reflected a dependency upon others of higher social mobility and the influence of her
environment, like those within the Mexican government, to determine whether education was an opportunity. Her story demonstrated the determined strength she has exhibited throughout her life to break down the wall these educational “bullies” repeatedly tried to build around her. That strength comes from her learning.

As an adult in the U.S., Maria talked about her continued experiences with cultural demoting through social exclusion, disrespect, and the feeling of being unheard by those she was reliant upon to help her and her family. This was exemplified through her inability to take off work to attend doctor appointments, the behavior from the doctor when she would ask for an interpreter, and not being able to make learning English a priority due to having to work overtime to keep up with the growing house payments. Despite or perhaps because of her feelings of marginalization, we saw her desire to become included within American society. Maria envisioned moving from the margins to the center through home ownership and through her acquisition of the English language. Both of these types of “capital,” Maria believed, would allow her to take back her world.

The drive of Maria’s educational aspiration was through the importance for her to find her own pathway in life independent of others. Her example of feeling bullied aligns with what Rocco (2014) addressed as a needed sense of belonging within a society, one often denied through “exclusionary inclusion”. Mexican immigrants may experience some inclusion within society when they become a worker within the labor force, however, often will continue to feel excluded as a member of society. So, while Maria “belonged” as a member of the workforce, of the economic community, her struggle to be heard by her doctor was an example of her “non-belonging” to the social community.
American society, as we have seen through the recent political rhetoric, asserts that uneducated Mexican immigrants have infringed upon U.S. soil, steeling jobs from the citizenry and refusing to speak English. These remarks suggest that Mexican immigrants should not be entitled to the same basic human benefits, such as financially providing for their family or basic survival, placing them into a specific class. This considers Mexican immigrants to be a lessor class within a hierarchical order where Anglos are at the top. We saw Maria refer to this hierarchical social order throughout her story. For example, she discussed the story of her doctor not considering her work schedule and the costs that taking off work incurs to a Mexican immigrant working in a low-wage job. This was evidence that her reality was not at the center; that it was not good enough to merit acknowledgment or accommodation. Rocco (2014) concludes that it is this form of living practices related to exclusionary inclusion that preclude Mexican immigrants from becoming engrained in American society, marginalizing them as “perpetual foreigners” and separating them from the dominant white social order (p.xxx).

The difficulty Maria had learning the language, while trying to work aligns to Grimshire’s (2012) findings regarding the effects of age and culture on learning the language. For Maria, her continued work on learning English drove her aspiration to, again, become less reliant upon others, and in this case, that meant interpreters. This was another way that Maria’s story highlighted learning as an aspiration for freedom from societal restraints. Fighting what felt like an uphill battle against time and identity, Maria demonstrated her fighting back against bullying through her educational aspiration. Her real fight was not about learning English; rather, it was about becoming an equal and autonomous member of American society.
This is important for members of the adult literacy community to be aware of because it helps us understand that the desires of the population go beyond learning the basic language skills. At times, we see Mexican immigrant students coming and going from our programs and instructors become stagnant within their classrooms, learning the same topics and doing the same activities. By understanding the importance of societal inclusion, it allows instructional programs to organize opportunities where Mexican immigrants can experience being a member of American society.

**Learning is communal**

The theme learning is communal signifies the support network characteristic of an environmental culture of learning in one’s life. The experience of being part of a family, not restricted to the literal sense, was essential to Speedy’s educational aspiration, but it went beyond people. Speedy’s environment also played a significant role in his educational aspiration. This was evident through his stories of being homeless, running from the corrupted police, and living in a community overrun with street gangs. Speedy’s story suggests the importance of a support network within a nurturing environment as seen through his early years with his confidence of being a Matador having been fed by his relationship with his father and his disbelief in the nun’s warning. We saw how environment, culture, and family, together, directly affected his educational aspiration as his stories share the outcomes of these aspects colliding. Speedy’s educational aspiration was denoted through caretaking for his brother after his father became “macho”, the homelessness he experienced, and having to quit school in order to have his family survive.
He demonstrated the pride he had for family through his value around how different cultures, together, can advance in a new environment by learning from each other. He suggests through his stories that everyone has something to contribute. His stories highlight how, for him, the idea of communal represents a mutual appreciation for culture, family, and one’s environment, emphasizing the significance these aspects are in order to have a healthy and effective educational system. Speedy’s story about his affection toward his daughter and her rejection reminds us of this importance as he reflects on the teachings of his past that he wants to instill in his daughter. Throughout his experience he learned to build a network of support from others, many unrelated to him, like the homeless children, while continuing to maintain his morals by not faltering to the enticements of the police. For Speedy, learning in an environment where one builds new networks was just as important as being able to share the history of past connections. His experiences exemplify the importance of using ties to culture and family to promote learning within a safe environment.

In Plascencia (2012), the author shared his story of migrating to America as a language learner who knew very little of its cultural and societal practices. He spoke of the importance of understanding social norms and behavior and learning the language, in order to experience social inclusion. To do this, however, there needed to be an environment and support from those within the new culture. In Plasencia’s case, as a child, he observed the other students and relied upon his teacher to guide him through daily routine and social norming in a safe environment (2012). This reflects the reliance Mexican immigrants have on societal members, including adult literacy language instructors, to help with assimilation. For example, an adult literacy classroom provides a
safe environment where Mexican immigrants, like Speedy, can ask clarifying questions about English words or terms, cultural behaviors, and societal norms. Students must feel respected and protected to ask questions freely. These conversations lead to learning and require the delivery of information to occur in a caring, concerning way by instructors.

Another example of this kind of cultural sharing in the environment local to Speedy’s experience was from Marshalltown Lutheran Church Reverend John Allan (Woodrick, 2006; Grey & Woodrick, 2002). Allan played a significant role in establishing a friendly atmosphere in Marshalltown during the town’s initial influx of Mexican immigrants. He was one of the first community leaders to invite the Mexican immigrant population into a church, providing them a place to worship. He worked with the community college and established language-learning classes and he openly discussed social norms with, in particular, the younger newcomers. He developed a caring and concerning environment where Mexican immigrants were able to express their cultural values, learn about societal norms, and develop a supporting network of “family.”

Allen’s approach to welcoming Mexican immigrants opened a floodgate of learning experiences, both for the long-standing Anglos of the town, as well as, its newest members. Allen was quoted as saying (Woodrick, 2006):

“We need to reach out, not just for the people’s sake, but for our own sake, too. When we share cultures we share the universal church-catholic. We are doing the work of the church. (p.282)

Churches in other Midwest towns that experienced an influx of Mexican immigrants followed suit and were also instrumental in responding and accepting the cultural differences between the Anglos and the Mexican population. To increase cultural inclusion into the religious community, many of these churches planned social events to
celebrate Mexican holidays, while others played Mexican music during worship services or established a Spanish service (Woodrick, 2006; Crane & Millard, 2004). In the way that churches serve the role of bridging unfamiliar territory, Speedy’s story illustrated that educational aspiration for adult Mexican immigrants requires a safe environment for cultural sharing to occur. We saw this when Speedy talked about accepting the trials that are before him using education as a way to move beyond those challenges. For adult literacy educators this means we need to provide a warm, nurturing environment where we value cultural expression, creating a “family” support network.

**Learning as family mobility**

This theme represents the reality in the lives of adult Mexican immigrants of the profound dependency others have on those who have successfully migrated. Tony’s story represents how his educational aspiration fueled his intelligence, his desire for professionalism, his stamina for hard work, and his continuous effort of improvement. Examples of these characteristics are through Tony’s desire to be an accountant, his quick learning of the English language, and his dedication to driving over a hundred miles each day to attend high school equivalency classes. Underlying all of Tony’s individual exceptionalism was an awareness of his efforts on behalf of his family still living in Mexico. While Tony himself will never return home, his family in Mexico continues to play a central part in his life in the U.S.

Tony story shows his motivation to move beyond being a low-skilled laborer. He expressed his frustration at the amount of time it took him to succeed, wanting to move on to a credential program where he can begin to see career results. He showed his drive to “jump through the hoops” and gain the academic and language skills he needs to go on
to college and earn an accounting degree, defined by his obligation to provide for his family still living in Mexico.

Tony discussed the lack of jobs and the financial and political instability of Mexico as motivating factors for his migration. These reasons align with the “push-pull theory” that has caused Mexican immigrants to feel the “push” to move out of their homeland and the “pull” to fill jobs across the border in the U.S. (Grey & Woodrick, 2002; Martinez, 2008). Typically, migration happens within families living in rural Mexico where there is less opportunity for work. This was the case with Tony. He did not want, nor does he like to “work with his hands.” Instead, he has dreams of becoming an accountant. This dream meant he had to leave Mexico since its realization would have been impossible otherwise.

Fomby (2005) discussed the various roles and responsibilities of family members who migrate, especially when it comes to financial obligation and immigration. The children who emigrate have a role within the family to provide financially for those who were unable to migrate and are still living under disadvantaged conditions back home. Data shows that normally adult males migrate because of their ability to do physical labor or the likelihood of them having a technical skillset or educational aptitude (Fomby, 2005). As the only child within the family to have completed the ninth grade, Tony understood that his family was reliant upon his intellectual abilities to become successful and assist them financially, while his siblings care for his mother still living in Mexico.

Hoteck & Baker (2004) suggest that a misconception about Mexican immigrants is that they come with little to no skills. Tony’s story proves the reality of this misconception. For adult literacy educators, understanding adult Mexican immigrant
learning experience, as aspiration to succeed on behalf of one’s family, means we must understand the importance of assessing students’ employability skillsets and interests. In turn, align work-based learning opportunities for in-demand jobs to language learning strategies, guiding students toward those programs. While at the same time, we must advocate innovative ways to fulfill our students’ other educational needs such as gaining an equivalency diploma or learning a specific skilled credential. By doing this, we can decrease the time it takes them to get into a living wage job.

**Learning as perseverance**

Adult Mexican immigrants may experience their educational aspiration as moving from margin to center, as finding a new learning family, or as taking care of the family left behind. Liz’s story reminds us of the frustration of learning in light of the larger objective of career advancement. She talked about the difficulty of learning the language until a transition happened within her brain. Liz shared her defiance toward assimilating to the American culture and the difficulties of being a young mother. Her story represents a realization that quitting continued to put her more and more behind in her career goals. On the contrary, she showed her perseverance by aligning her education goals to the job market, while at the same time working toward her high school equivalency diploma. Her ambition showed the importance of aligning work-based programs to high school credentialed opportunities.

Liz’s story demonstrates the emotional motivation that can occur when students learn their basic language skills, while also gaining vocational abilities. Her story represents a cultural change we need to make in adult literacy education from a mindset of helping our students “get a job” to helping them “conquer a career.” The importance
of gaining a workforce skill for career integration is directly related to providing for family and, thus, expanding potential earnings. As educators, we can do this through alignment of basic skills with job training and employment opportunities, which reduce the time it takes immigrants to assimilate into the workforce. Understanding our students’ educational aspiration as connected to their human aspiration of family will help us rethink educational approaches. Liz’s story demonstrates how participating in a job-training program, while at the same time taking equivalency classes, effectively works when you have a support network comprised of financial assistance, social and academic support, and leadership from potential employers.

Liz’s portraiture complements Martinez’s (2008) research, which suggests that Mexican immigrant students are more reliant upon education leaders and less likely to need a social support network. This premise proposes how important it is for adult educators to learn about students at an individual level to place them into job training opportunities, which align to their skills or interests (Marinez, 2008; Szelènyi & Chang, 2016). This, however, seems to contradict Speedy’s experience where he links educational aspiration to the importance of having a social network. It is because of their past educational experiences where each individual connects to what they feel defines their educational aspiration. This example shows that adult educators of Mexican immigrants cannot use a “cookie cutter approach”. Instead, we must treat each person individually and learn about each person’s experiences. If adult literacy educators take this approach, it will assist them in providing the most appropriate educational service to each person based on their aspirations, rather than providing a “one size fits all” approach to learning (Martinez, 2008).
Crafting the portraits of Maria, Speedy, Tony, and Liz helped me to put into a framework what I was coming to know and feel throughout my work as an adult literacy educator. The four portraits I crafted do not attempt to portray the chronological education history of an adult Mexican immigrant learner, but the human journey of adapting to a new culture, the social and economic structure, and what that meant to their continued learning. By focusing on how Mexican immigrant adults experience educational aspiration, it was my intention to add a deeper humanistic understanding to educational policy and practice that, too often, starts and stops with merely economic considerations. I wanted to provide community college administrators, like myself, a broader understanding of what to consider when developing educational programs and policies that will both meet the needs of Mexican immigrants, while also reducing the workforce gaps for employers.

Adult Mexican immigrants experience educational aspiration as a way to feel empowered, become involved within their community, provide for loved ones, and live as a contributing member of society. Each person, individually, has his/her own motivation behind their aspiration, which drives them to chase their dreams. They are human; just like me, just like you, the reader. That must be at the forefront of our understanding; however, the messages we heard from Maria, Speedy, Tony, and Liz must prompt us, as educators, to do more to support their educational aspirations.

These stories corroborate the need to approach adult literacy education in a new way, one that provides instructional reform designed to expedite workforce training. Future policy and practice must bring a humanistic understanding to the challenges of Mexican immigrants. As advocates, we must listen to and learn from the stories of our
students to get at the heart of each person’s educational aspiration, remembering that there is not a “right” or a “wrong”, but a “different” need for each individual learner. Then, provide an inclusive supportive environment that welcomes cultural differences, gleans individuals’ potential, and develops those natural talents to reduce the middle skills workforce gap.

Curtain Call

As a child, I spent most winter breaks in Mexico, learning about the culture, experimenting with the language, and making lifelong friendships. The Mexican population means more to me than variables on a data scale, assessment results, and demographic statistics. Since my childhood tourist adventures, living and working in a community that has a large population of Mexican immigrants, I am fortunate to be able to experience, in a deeper way, the cultural differences I grew up with and valued as a child.

Portraiture writing is an analytical approach a researcher uses to attempt to capture the core of human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It aims to bring to light a humanistic or cultural impression of educational aspiration through empathetic learning. I am not naïve to the economic challenge that a depleting skilled workforce presents to our nation. The literature suggests that economically our nation has become reliant upon Mexican immigrants to relieve the economic burden and that this segment of our population can be critical in filling the increasing number of middle skills jobs. Nonetheless, these significant barriers must be addressed.

Mexican immigrants are more likely to enter the higher education arena through a community college institution (Szelényi & Chang, 2016; Teranishi, et al., 2011; Zehr,
Many start at their local adult literacy program with the desire to move into workforce training after becoming “proficient” in the English language or upon completion of a high school equivalency credential. Unfortunately, Iowa’s adult literacy programs have not modified their curriculum to meet the changing needs of the Mexican immigrant population nor considered the needs of our economy (Grossman, 2013). Until recently, most adult literacy programs offered curriculum that addressed basic life and work instruction like going to the grocery store or filling out forms to register their children for school. Although these skills are important and still needed, adult literacy directors are required to advance the curriculum, focusing on employability skills and work-based learning models that align to a career pathway (Grossman, 2013; Edelman, et al., 2014; Iowa Department of Education, 2015). Hereafter, adult literacy programs must take into account how Mexican immigrants experience educational aspiration to proceed with effective policy and practice re-designs.

No longer can adult education and literacy programs provide the same structure to their classes as been done for the last fifteen years. Our nation and the Mexican immigrant population do not have the time. This means program reform. The goal of WIOA is to decrease the time it takes to educate workers and get them into the workforce making my dissertation quite timely (Edelman, et al., 2014). The portraits I crafted can serve to accelerate enhanced empathy and understanding surrounding the barriers adult Mexican immigrants bring to community college adult literacy programs, like the one I work in. Mexican immigrants and employers are asking community colleges to reduce the time it takes for credentialing, calling upon adult education and literacy educators, like me, to develop innovative policy and practices, which enhance the educational
advancement of this population. Knowing the barriers and aspirational resources these individuals bring, helps us accelerate our response to reform. Therefore, given this backdrop, what could adult literacy programs and those who run them glean from the four portrait themes when considering policy and practice development?

In closing the curtain on my understanding of Mexican immigrant’s educational aspiration, I suggest four changes as humanizing responses to what the stories of Maria, Speedy, Tony, and Liz have taught us. These changes include implementation of a skills assessment, alternative high school equivalency diploma approaches, designing and aligning linguistic work-based curricula, and collaboration with employers to enhance an environment of community belonging.

First, we need better approaches to educational assessment. We know this population comes with various skillsets that future employers could draw upon, seen in the Speedy’s theme learning is communal and Tony’s theme learning as family mobility (Hotek & Baker, 2004). Speedy’s ability to cut meat and Tony’s understanding of running a carpentry business exemplify potential workforce skills. Currently, however, community college programs do not have the tools to measure or even gather information about already learned skills.

The accuracy of the educational assessment required by the Department of Education to measure language ability is antiquated and does not evaluate employability or technical skills. Martinez (2008) suggests that understanding what skills Mexican immigrants have would allow educators to find appropriate workforce tracks to allow for workforce skill development. Tony acknowledged the importance of finding an adult education and literacy program that provided opportunity for him to complete his high-
school equivalency in Spanish, noting the importance of building upon his current knowledge. Inappropriately, however, individuals who want to gain their equivalency credential in Spanish are still required to take an English reading and math pre-assessment to determine their educational ability. This seems counterproductive when trying to assess the level of learning of an individual. When trying to evaluate if an individual, who speaks Spanish, has the reading aptitude to take a Spanish high-school equivalency test, it would best serve the student to be assessed in that language. Currently, Spanish high-school equivalency students have to make an educational gain by demonstrating that they are able to increase their English reading level before they can take a Spanish final exam. Unfortunately, this feat is near to impossible for many students because they have only received instruction within their native language, Spanish, and have not worked on their English skills.

I am proposing that assessment processes and policies must change to fit the goal of the student. We are asking Spanish-speaking students to fit into the mold of antiquated thinking by conforming to an assessment that only speaks to their educational capabilities within the English language. As we heard within the themes, learning as family mobility and learning as perseverance, it is imperative that programs reduce the time it takes for individuals to gain the necessary credentials required for workforce placement, including attainment of a high school equivalency diploma. To do this, it only makes sense to build on prior knowledge. The current assessment does not provide any guidance as to the academic capability of the student within their native language. This leaves adult literacy instructors guessing the competence of Mexican immigrants desiring to obtain an equivalency diploma.
Secondly, community college adult literacy programs must establish alternative methods to provide a high school equivalency credential. From the portraits of Tony and Liz and their themes of leaning as family mobility and learning as perseverance, we learned that the current approach does not satisfy a learner's desire to prepare themselves for the workforce. Community colleges must seek an integrated skills model like Washington States’ I-BEST program. The I-BEST model provides individuals an opportunity to develop a workforce credential to meet the growing middle skills demand, while also gaining a high school equivalency diploma (Washington State Board of Career and Technical College, 2013; Edelman et al; 2014). This type of integrated education and training provides a structure where students can experience educational progress at a faster rate, while also working toward gaining their equivalency credential (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2013). A significant aspect to this approach resulted in Washington State’s legislature approving two alternative options for earning a high-school diploma or its equivalency, beyond the traditional methods.

The first opportunity to earn a high school equivalency diploma allows individuals who are highly proficient in high school to work on his/her associates degree at the same time as their high school diploma, similar to Iowa’s dual enrollment option (Washing State Board for Community and Technical College, 2013). The second option, HS 21+, serves individuals who are over the age of 21 years. These students are able to demonstrate their skills through competency based assessments, prior education credits, documented work experience, and prior learning portfolios (Teisberg, 2015). The touted program meets students academically where they are at, moving them through the educational system faster by establishing an individualized plan based off each person’s
learning gaps. The third option allows individuals to earn a traditional equivalency diploma independent of a workforce degree or skill. In Iowa, that means students must pass five tests: Math, Language Arts Reading, Language Arts Writing, Science, and Social Studies. Each test requires students to achieve a cut score in order to pass.

By opening up these alternative methods of degree attainment, individuals, like Liz, are able to receive integrate basic skills, while gaining the workforce competencies employers need to meet the growing middle skill demands and make a living wage (Sullivan, 2007; National Skills Coalition, 2014). This provides the learner with meaningful educational experiences where they can obtain necessary basic skills aligned to a workforce credential. In Liz’s portrait that highlighted educational aspiration as perseverance, we saw how she would attend her workforce training during the day and her high school equivalency class at night, which works, but was exhausting, especially for a mother of four. In Iowa, the new federal workforce policy provides the platform for the design and innovation of streamlining vocational programs to the needs of the workforce. Therefore, making a change toward the Washington State model should be possible. This would mean, however, that Iowa law would need to change and policies be modified within the Department of Education (see Appendix D for the Memorandum to the Department of Education). Additionally, this would allow adult literacy educators to align career skills to the equivalency diploma and language learning programs.

Third, we must create programs that affirm difference and draw on cultural strengths. Speedy’s portrait themed, learning is communal, emphasized the importance of creating learning communities that feel like family. These communities would see past the “deficiencies” of language and provide avenues of instruction that develop
proficiency through activities that draw on the human assets of learners in a classroom. Maria’s marginalized themed portrait represents her educational aspiration, which helps us understand why such community building would be important.

In order to jumpstart these reforms, I believe adult education and literacy professionals must begin to bridge the gap of understanding with local business and industry professionals by providing an environment for thinking outside the box. I propose that conversations need to begin by identifying language skills required for various technical jobs. For example, while Basic English skills are necessary to communicate with employers, a complete mastery of the English language is not necessary to be a machine operator. This skillset, while very technical, can have vocabulary development put in place specifically for that job. Welding is another example of a career that has high earning potential, with the possibility of only requiring Basic English to communicate with an employer.

Like Martinez (2008), I suggest that community colleges approach the connection between language and skill development with employers by integrating bilingual instructors who are willing to provide language instruction alongside core curriculum. Frankly, this model is different from what many of today’s programs use, including my own. There are obvious skillset differences, along with the financial means, that are necessary to recruit these multi-faceted instructors, but this type of learning, at the speed necessary, requires drastic change. One of these changes comes in the form of policy modification. It will be important to provide exceptions to the educational requirements for community college instructors. One exception could all allow experienced individuals to teach even though they do not have the required educational degree to
teach within the community college system. This would facilitate and position an increase in the number of skilled bilingual individuals who have a wealth of experience to serve as role models for adult Mexican immigrant students.

This new design in thinking could provide Mexican immigrants access to learning within their first language, yet give them an avenue to gain the English language skills required for the job, at the same time (Hotek & Baker, 2004; Martinez, 2008). This humanistic model provides an understanding about meeting the learner where they are at educationally, envisioning oneself in their situation. The difficulty of learning a language causes many to stall out in their ability to develop further skills and our workforce is not in a position where employers can wait additional time (Hotek & Baker, 2004). If language learning is closely tied to skills learning and, in turn, to career advancement, then adult Mexican immigrant students will be interested and incentivized to stick with the challenge.

Language learning, although important, is not the end all to having a skilled workforce. I also propose that we need to continue the conversation by providing additional opportunities like job shadowing, internships, and apprenticeships, in addition to linking language to skills learning. Specifically, work needs to happen with Iowa’s apprenticeship programs to give prior learning credit. This change would significantly reduce the hours of on-the-job training required before considering a person fully credentialed. Moreover, this movement of blending linguistic education with real world job opportunities would incorporate an understanding that language learning is a developmental process and can happen through job placement immersion. Community college administrators must provide an innovative policy structure for this type of flexible
learning to occur by developing an academic support system that empowers the students’
learning (Martinez, 2008).

Finally, to start these conversations, community colleges can bring the business
community to the table using Employer Sector Partnerships. These collaborative efforts
allow employers to have a say in developing the courses and skill plans that future
employees need to have to do the jobs within that sector (Edelman, et al., 2014;
http:www.insightcced.org/past-archives/what-is-a-sector-initiative/). These meetings
provide an atmosphere where adult literacy educators can work alongside employers to
develop specific work-based language curricula. This would allow students to enroll in
English language classes that align to the workplace, while at the same time participate in
skill-training coursework. For instance, in the advanced manufacturing sector, employers
would be involved in determining the level of language proficiency needed for a position,
like a machine operator. This would allow adult literacy educators, along with skill
instructors, to work together to provide a side-by-side language instruction model that
mirrors each job-training unit. For example, when teaching a student blueprint reading
they will also learn the English terms that align with that curricula section.

As suggested above, there are societal and economic gains if community colleges
join language acquisition instruction with job training programs. In my own context, I
have begun to hear business community members acknowledge the significance Mexican
immigrants have on sustaining local economic development, indicating that more should
be done to invest in the needs of the population. Ideally, this indicates that there may be,
in fact, a move already underway from the societal belief of “exclusionary inclusion”
toward fuller forms of community belonging, which align to Maria’s theme, learning as finding freedom.

There is a recent detection of this ideological change. Local business leaders are collaborating with the Marshalltown’s Community School District and Iowa Valley Community College District having formed the Marshalltown Business Education Alliance. One of the initiatives of the local coalition is to bridge the gap between the community education systems and the business community by developing a unified front and promoting the value of education. This group has focused its efforts on increasing access and educational opportunities for those needing adult education and literacy services. Unofficially, the goal of the group is to integrate the “them” of the Mexican immigrant population into an “us” of the Marshalltown community.

Since the collaboration formed, development of a tuition assistance program formed to help immigrant students with their tuition costs with English and Citizenship classes, leading to noticeable promotion and support within the meatpacking company. Unfortunately, this type of assistance is a benefit and continued financial assistance is always at risk of going away. Nevertheless, this initiative seems to be a good first step in breaking down the barriers that keep immigrants from feeling a part of society and held within low-skilled wage-labor jobs, as themed within Maria’s portrait.

Although the general intent for the group was for local business and industry to meet their workforce demands, other business leaders have since taken it upon themselves to start asking questions about the educational aspiration of Mexican immigrants who I serve, asking to tour my classes. Throughout these visits, they want to know how many of the students have children, if these parents understand the workforce
opportunities for their children, and if they have expressed the effects language learning has had on the family unit. As noted prior, the majority of students whom I serve are within the working age; therefore, it is important to go beyond talking about their children and look at how these individuals can contribute to the jobs currently available within the Marshalltown community. Still, the focus of local business and industry leaders has been to provide work-based opportunities to the children of my students who are presently in the secondary system. Currently, these leaders are focusing efforts on providing workforce information to the youth by offering internships, scholarships, job shadowing, and apprenticeships to entice them into middle skilled jobs. Unfortunately, these same incentives are not offered to adult literacy students, making my dissertation quite timely. These leaders must consider my students, who are dedicated to living in Marshalltown and wanting to advance to a career, as their future workers.

Ultimately, beginning to talk about the educational aspirations of adult Mexican immigrants opens the doors of communication about a subject that has been controversial. If viewed as workers at the plant, they are only cogs in the economic machine and our responsibility for their education is limited to the technical training required for them to simply do their jobs in the most efficient, profitable way (Richardson Bruna, Vann, & Perales Escudero 2007; Richardson Bruna, 2009). If they are viewed from a humanizing perspective, as lifelong learners whose educational aspirations draw from experiences we can all identify with, such as the longing for acceptance, the desire to be valued for what you believe in, the importance of supporting family, and the wish for hindsight; then, our responsibility for them expands to something more (Richardson
Bruna, 2015). Much like it would be for ourselves and to those whom we feel obligated to in our own lives. “They” become “us.”

It was my hope that these portraits help the educational community understand that there should be no room for controversy when it comes to recognizing another’s humanity. One responsibility I have taken on was to share these stories through the portraits this project has allowed me to craft. It is now up to the leaders of the community, including myself, to share in that responsibility by providing a supportive educational network for Mexican immigrant adults. If done well, these developed strategies will move the population beyond low-wage low-skill positions, filling the much needed middle-skills gap and, in turn, provide a direct avenue towards social and economic equity.

Whether it was Maria’s need to relocate to the U.S. after her father’s death to find work, Liz’s father’s inability to make a living wage in the family’s rural village, Tony’s failed attempt at keeping his father’s carpentry business solvent resulting in his migration, or Speedy’s victimization of Mexico’s police and gang corruption; what these portraits reflect is the push-pull analogy of economic forces that affected their education (Martinez, 2008; Grey & Woodrick, 2002). It became apparent throughout my learning that poor economic conditions prompted the New Latino Diasporic migration across the border to the U.S. for each of my participants. To fully comprehend the role I play, I needed to understand each individual’s educational conditions.

Transnational globalization links migration to economic sustainability (Grey & Woodrick, 2002). The lack of jobs in Mexico coupled with the existence of jobs in the U.S. in the form of low-skill labor positions, makes possible the significant numbers of
workers willing to receive a minimal wage or less. This causes immigrant workers to find employment in difficult environments where they are paid less, they have little to no benefits, and, if undocumented, cannot do anything about it (Grey & Woodrick, 2002, 366; Hotek & Baker, 2004). This type of marginalization creates a labor and societal structure based off the “haves” and the “have nots”. A dynamic, which feeds off a culture that already historically, has felt socially excluded (Rocco, 2014). I want to work toward inclusion.

Past research about integrating Mexican immigrants through community college and vocational education has addressed strategies to increase effective and efficient support service practices, but has failed to link educational aspiration to life stories as it pertains to adult education and literacy. Providing this linkage was important because it allows a humanistic and empathy building view of the barriers Mexican immigrants experience and the issues adult literacy practitioners need to consider when serving our nation’s largest diverse population (see Appendix E Overview for Adult Literacy Educators).

People come bringing their unique individual educational experiences and motivations. As a social constructivist, I felt it was important to picture the environmental and cultural understandings of educational aspiration so I could interpret a holistic picture of what that looked like for each participant. An overall understanding, that I took away, was that it is necessary for adult education and literacy programs to develop an academic plan for each student responsive to their individual experience. The difficulty administrators will have is finding out about each student’s experience and having enough time to formulate those plans. This challenge provides an opportunity for
further research to find and incorporate effective activities into existing practices that allow this to happen.

The political rhetoric currently afflicting our nation includes exaggerated stories of jobs being “stolen” by Mexican immigrants. Election grandstanding and radical candidate platforms of deportation that include “sending them back” and “building a wall” have dehumanized Mexican immigrants regardless of their immigration status. This has caused a sense of anger in Anglos and fear in Mexicans. Undeniably, each of my participants highlighted within their stories the economic gain of migration for their family; however, the story the public rarely hears is the reason why. This counter story is what my portraits aim to provide as hope for healing.

“Their story is...”

I am emotionally drained. Returning from my brief, but productive meeting with the business leaders, I glance in my rearview mirror before I pile out of the car and head back into the school, barely recognizing the woman in the mirror. I look disheveled, with dark circles under my eyes, my blonde hair tousled all over my head from the brutal Iowa wind, and only a faint rose-colored outline of lipstick still noticeable on my lips. I take a deep breath before putting the key in the door to my office. I have been told I get too emotionally invested in my work. I do. It is who I am—passionate, driven, and devoted. Knowing that one of my strengths is positivity, I recharge my energy giving back to humanity as an educator and advocate for adult learners. I smile and share a warm greeting to the diverse line of people standing in the hallway outside my office waiting for their teacher to arrive.
Once again, my thoughts return to my morning. I recall my feelings of confidence when getting dressed in my power suit. I chuckle a little at myself—what a mixed message! Anglo woman needs stylish ensemble to convey a message about the educational aspirations of Mexican immigrants to a room full of white upper-middle class businesspersons. Whom was I kidding, thinking that clothing would reduce the exclusiveness of the group. The thought that something as simple as clothing will make me feel included within a room where the men all sit on one side and the women, and loan Mexican male, flock to the other, and I get to talk about marginalization, how fitting. Yet, I know not to dress the part only would have enhanced my submissiveness to the hierarchal bureaucracy of the group, and I am too bull-headed for that to happen. So, I did, and will always do, what it takes to deliver the message of my students. I know that the clothing is not what told the message nor was it going to get the depth of the stories heard. I have to believe that by telling the stories of my students, describing the themes from my research, and sharing changes I am making to my program, that I have made a difference. Some people are not fortunate enough to find their purpose in life. For those that do find their calling, some choose to ignore it; not me—I embrace it with enthusiasm. That is what the business people saw today.

My participants taught me so much about their educational aspiration, but most of all they showed me the importance of humility. To be proud of where you come from, promote whom you are through your skills, to never give up or give in, and to continue to learn. Today, I planted a seed. Tomorrow and thereafter, I will water that seed until it becomes well rooted, and starts to grow.
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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

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
515 294-5256
Fax 515 294-1277

Date: 9/23/2015
To: Jennifer Wilson
2375-F 198th St.
Marshalltown, IA 50158

CC: Dr. Katherine Bruna
N154 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: How Mexican Immigrant Adults in a New Destination Community Experience Educational Aspiration: A Phenomenological Inquiry

IRB ID: 15-486

Approval Date: 9/22/2015
Date for Continuing Review: 9/14/2017

Submission Type: New
Review Type: Full Committee

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

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), 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.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- 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.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

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 B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How Mexican Immigrant Adults in a New Destination Community Experience Educational Aspiration: A Phenomenological Inquiry

All interviews will be done in a semi-structured manner where follow up questions may be asked dependent upon the answers to the established questions.

Research Questions to answer:
1. How do Latino immigrants from Mexico experience educational aspiration?
2. How have life events influenced Mexican immigrants in their educational aspiration?

Interview #1

A. Educational Experience in Mexico
1. Where did you grow up in Mexico? Describe to me your town/city/village.
2. Describe the schools within the town/village/city.
3. Can you describe what your teachers were like? Did you have a favorite teacher? Why was she/he your favorite? What was easy? What was hard?
4. Explain your family expectations in regards to education.
5. What did you want to be when you grew up?
6. What did your parents think of the school? What were their educational experiences?
7. What grade were you in when you stopped going to school? Tell me why you stopped going to school? What was that like for you? Tell me what feelings you had when you quit school.
8. What could have kept you in school?
9. Talk about moving to the U.S.? How old were you? Why did you move to the U.S.?
10. Talk about what you were told about the U.S. education system? (Who told you, were they right?)
11. Why didn’t you go back to school when you came to the U.S.? What was the education expectation from your family when you came to the U.S.?
12. What else do you want me to know about your educational experience in Mexico?

B. Educational Experience in US
1. Tell me about when you decided to go back to school? How did you decide to come back to school? Why did you return to school? Who did you talk to about going back to school?
2. Was there something that happened that made you want to go back to school? Tell me about what happened.
3. Tell me what you thought school would be like when you came back? What did you want for your future?
4. What do you/don’t you like about learning?
5. Tell me about how your family responded to you when they found out you were going back to school?
6. What feelings did you have when you came back to school?
7. What are your immediate plans after you finish school? What are your long term plans?
8. What else do you want me to know about your education experience in the U.S.?

Interview #2 Educational Experience Critical Incidents
1. Tell me a story that demonstrates your family’s expectations regarding education. I’m interested in all the details you can provide.
2. Tell me a story that demonstrates why you couldn’t finish school in Mexico.
3. Tell me a story that demonstrates why you left Mexico.
4. Tell me a story that demonstrates why you’re going to school in the U.S.

Interview #3 Hindsight is 20/20
Member checking session to determine that all information has been documented correctly (translated the correct meaning). Descriptions reviewed with each participant.
1. How would you want your kids to tell your educational story?
2. If you could go back to when you quit school what would you do differently?
3. If you could be/of anything what would you be/do?
4. What are your future educational plans?
5. Given what you’ve told me about your educational experiences in Mexico and your educational experiences in the US, what does your educational experience, overall, mean to you?
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: How Mexican Immigrant Adults in a New Destination Community Experience Educational Aspiration: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Investigators: Jennifer Wilson, Dr. Katherine Richardson Bruna

This is a research study. We want to learn about your educational experience as an immigrant from Mexico who didn’t finish school. Please read this information to see if it applies to you. If you say yes to these three questions you can participate in this study:

1. I am an immigrant from Mexico
2. I do not have a high school diploma from Mexico.
3. I do not have a high school diploma from a U.S. high school.

If you have answered Yes to all three questions and are interested in learning more about the study and your participation then I (Jennifer Wilson) would like to make an appointment to talk to you. Here’s some more information about the study:

1. If you choose to participate, we will talk three times and each time will last about 2 hours.
2. We can talk in either English or Spanish or a combination of both. Jon Nunez will be the translator, if we need him.
3. If we use a translator, I will ask the questions in English and Jon will repeat my questions in Spanish. You can answer the questions in English or Spanish. If you use Spanish Jon will translate your answers to me.
4. I will ask you question about:
   • Your school in Mexico
   • Why you came back to school
   • What you want to do with your learning.
5. I will record our talks and then type out our conversations so I can read them and learn more about you and your stories. I may hire a company to listen to our talks and type out our conversation. If I do this, this company is bound by confidentiality and cannot tell your identity.
6. A purpose of this study is to write what I learn about the experiences of Mexican immigrants seeking education. In order to write up what I learn and protect your identity, I will ask you to give me a name that you would like be called. I also will not tell anyone that you are helping me with my research or describe you in ways that could identify you. To make sure you feel comfortable with my description of you, I will share that with you and ask you to help me change it in ways that you want.
7. I will make sure I understand your answers to my questions and you can fix or change things that are wrong or tell me to not use write about something you told me.
8. I will give the boss of the college a copy of my final report. This will help him learn more about the Mexican immigrant students we serve.
9. I will not ask you about your documentation or citizenship status. If you tell me, I will not write about it.
RISKS

1. People might find out by reading my report that you participated in the study because of the stories and personal information you will share. For example: your age, your place of birth, where you lived in Mexico and your move to the U.S. I will share the description I provide of you with you before others read it so you can change it in a way that feels comfortable. But, there is the possibility that someone might be able to connect the information to you.

2. You may become emotional because of the personal stories you share, it’s OK to cry or laugh when we talk or when you tell me stories about you, your family, or your children. I might too.

3. You may feel embarrassed if others hear your stories so we will make sure we are in a room by ourselves when we talk.

4. If you can’t do all three interviews or if you miss two appointments, I may need to ask you to not be in the study anymore.

YOUR RIGHTS

1. You can participation in this study only if you want to. You can change your mind at any time and choose not to participate.

2. Your decision not to participate will not cause you to be punished. If you don’t want to that is OK. You can still attend classes. The college does not care if you do or don’t participate in my study. You will still be able to take classes if you don’t participate.

3. You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to.

4. You can be asked questions in English and/or Spanish and can answer questions using English and/or Spanish.

5. Except for the translator, no one else will sit in on the interviews or translate.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no value to you. It is hoped that your stories will help schools understand education experiences of students like you. This will help teachers develop policies and programs to meet life and work goals for Mexican immigrants.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs and you will not be paid for participating in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Paperwork identifying you will be kept locked up following all laws and rules and will not be given to people. Federal government agencies, some departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may look at and/or copy papers that have your information to make sure that the rules were followed.
To: Dr. Jeremy Varner, Administrator Division of Community Colleges

From: Jennifer S. Wilson, Adult Education and Literacy Director

Date: April 20, 2016

Subject: Proposed program and policy changes

Let this memo serve as a formal request to set the agenda for next week’s meeting to discuss changes to program policy and allow creation of innovative practice, which is outlined in this memorandum. The following changes proposed would provide increased access to education for underrepresented individuals, in particular Mexican immigrants, increase community college enrollment to credit and non-credit programs, and meet the workforce needs of Iowa’s employers.

During this time of low enrollment and with the onset of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act policy, it is imperative that as education leaders we find innovative approaches to learning. Without a doubt there is an importance to educating the youth of this State; however, there is a large forgotten and underserved population of working-aged adults who aspire to move into middle-skilled jobs. Unfortunately, Iowa’s higher education administrators have yet to design effective policy and practices that meet the needs of these individuals who are ready, willing, and able to go to work. I am speaking about those I served within my adult literacy program each day. Region 6, like other community college areas, for twenty years has experienced an influx of Mexican immigrants who arrived in the U.S. to work within the meatpacking industry. This has resulted in a significant demographic shift within our state. Counties such as Marshall, Woodbury, Sioux, and others are expecting to experience a minority-majority flip by the year 2040. Although plant work was the lure that got this population to migrate to communities like Marshalltown, these individuals no longer desire this type of work. In fact, Iowa, like most of the nation, is becoming more reliant upon the Mexican immigrant population to gain the credentials required to move into jobs that will reduce the growing middle-skills workforce gap. This reliance is primarily because the Anglo population is depleting. Unfortunately, most of these immigrants lack any formalized education, and nearly half do not have a high school diploma or its equivalency. It is important to recognize, however, that many do come with technical skillsets and workforce ethics Iowa’s employers’ are seeking.

Together, these factors have resulted in a perfect storm, with the potential to open the doors of opportunity for Iowa’s Community Colleges, the state’s employers, and our citizenry. I would like us to work together to establish effective and practical education
and training practices for our state’s future workers, which means we must re-look at how community college adult literacy programs are doing business. In particular, I would like to address with you the following initiatives during our time together.

1. Launch a skills-based assessment for adult literacy programs
   - Change assessment policies for Spanish high-school equivalency students.
   - Develop an evaluation tool for technical and academic skills where students can receive proper career counseling based on their skillsets.

2. Design alternative high school equivalency approaches
   - Establish provisions that include competency-based assessment, prior education credits, credit for work experience, and learning portfolios.

3. Align linguistic work-based curricula and career pathways for in-demand jobs
   - Identify language skills needed for middle skills in-demand job training.
   - Incentivize the hiring of bilingual instructors who are skilled in the core instruction.
   - Create exceptions for bilingual instructors with technical experience but lack an education degree.

4. Collaborate with employers
   - Utilize Employer Sector Partnerships as a means to educate employers about the benefits of a diverse workforce.
   - Implement a job shadow, internship, and apprenticeship program for adult learners, and create an exception to policy to give credit for prior learning hours.

It is my goal to provide you a more in-depth analysis at our meeting of specific policy changes required to pave the way for the above recommendations. During our meeting, I expect to develop a strategic action plan that involves very specific activities and a short turnaround timeline to take steps toward moving this educational agenda forward. In the meantime, I encourage you to devote sometime to researching Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education Skill Training (IBEST) program, which includes the state’s reformed measures for providing alternative equivalency diploma for non-traditional adult students. You can find this information at http://www.wtb.wa.gov/Documents/ABEBoardUpdate_Combined2013.pdf I believe with these policies and programmatic changes Iowa’s Community College system will become a model that other state’s will look to when serving underrepresented populations.

CC: Dr. Christopher Duree, Chancellor of Iowa Valley Community College District
APPENDIX E

OVERVIEW FOR ADULT LITERACY EDUCATORS

Educational Aspiration of Adult Literacy Mexican Immigrants

- Learning is finding freedom
- Learning is communal
- Learning is family mobility
- Learning as perseverance

Recommendations to educators

1. Develop alternative methods for high school equivalency diploma completion
2. Design "career" tracks
3. Align English language classes to job-training programs
4. Individualize academic plans based on educational aspiration
5. Facilitate workplace and employer relationships
6. Help make learning easier, relevant, and faster
7. Understand "They" become "Us"
8. Plan for economic sustainability
Dear Participants,

I want to first thank you for your willingness to discuss your educational aspirations. The information you shared during your interviews has led me to make recommendations to the Department of Education and Iowa Valley Community College’s Chancellor regarding policy and practice changes for adult literacy programs. Your stories of educational aspiration taught me how important learning is to you and your family. I learned from listening to your experiences about the kinds of skills immigrant adults, like you, have which are the kinds of skills we value in our workforce. It is important for teachers, like me, to develop programs so you can build on these skills while you are also learning English to gain employment with the community as quickly as possible.

From you I learned that programs like mine have not designed effective policies and practices that meet your needs. Below are my recommendations for change:

1. Change the assessment immigrant students take when they want to take English or high school equivalency diploma classes. I propose a skill-based test that evaluates language and workforce skills in both English and Spanish. This test would provide information about what skills you already have and those you still need in order to get your high-school equivalency diploma.

2. Change the options for immigrant students getting their high school equivalency diploma. I propose an evaluation of your prior education in the U.S. and/or country of origin. I also propose credit be given for your work experience, and for job-training classes that lead to a certificate or credential at the community college. This would let you get a diploma faster.

3. To provide an assessment that helps teachers understand the job skills and interests of their immigrant students. This would help teachers develop a career preparation plan with students based on their interests.

4. To re-design English language classes to allow immigrants to learn the language at the same time they are taking classes to learn a job skill. These classes would have bilingual teachers providing the job-training instruction. This would make it easier for you to learn both job and language skills related to a specific profession and get you into the workforce faster.

5. To provide learning opportunities which orient immigrants to the different jobs in and around Marshalltown. This will allow you to get to know different employers through job shadowing, internships and apprenticeships, and learn about the skills needed for the different professions.

Through these changes, my goal is to provide a more productive educational experience so adult immigrants, like you, can move from having a “job” to getting a “career”. It is because of your willingness to talk about your educational experiences and aspirations that I was able to develop these recommendations.