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Inspired Start: Experiences of Adult Students Confronting the GED Process

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Pilar Erin McKay

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Inspired Start: Experiences of Adult Students Confronting the GED Process

by

Pilar Erin McKay

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Frederick Erickson, Chair

Options are limited to gaining a high school equivalency for dropouts. The General Education Development (GED) exam provides people who have left school one way of gaining their secondary school credential. Employing the use of in-depth interviews, auto-ethnography, and participant observation, this study reports the descriptive findings of twelve GED preparation class students to understand why they left school, what motivates them to return and continue attending preparation classes, and how they will use the credential after they pass the exam. Despite most students reporting a pleasant elementary school experience, students entered high school with a decreased commitment

towards schooling and an increased interest in socializing. Eventually, a precipitous drop in participation led them to dropping out of school. Returning to the GED process, for many students, was the product of a sudden life event – whether it was health-related, personal, or economic – students found themselves in a situation where they were inspired to gain the equivalency. Most students planned on entering a career after gaining their equivalency, either with their next step to re-enter the workforce or continue their education. The GED process is not simply about the certification, it is about the personal redemption of the dropout to prove to themselves and their families that they have matured and overcome their situation.

The dissertation of Pilar Erin McKay is approved

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Dedicated to

Timothy McKay, my uncle and godfather

Stan McKay and Felisa Brea, my parents

John McKay and Mary Ana McKay, my siblings

Annie O'Rourke McKay and Gumersindo Brea Rodriguez,

My grandparents who received a high school equivalency as immigrants to the U.S.A.

My teachers at Perry High School, Perry, New York

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Acknowledgements

“People are hard-headed, some people are more hard-headed than others, and all that has made me a stronger person.” – Betty, GED Student

Sitting in Moore Hall at UCLA, on an otherwise forgettable day, I received a copy of the Freshman Year Survey for a class assignment. As a first year graduate student, I was trying to figure out what topics were the most interesting for me to pursue. I do not remember the class’s name, but it was a very good statistics class where we learned to do multiple regressions by hand. Although I have not been able to capitalize on that particular skill – as much as I see it as a very neat bar trick – the class will forever be associated with introducing me to my longest-term research topic: the General Education Development (GED).

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP)’s Freshman Year Survey, administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), is given to a wide number of students entering their first year of college. I remember being handed the survey when I was a freshman at Cornell and scribbling answers outside of registration as a student. Yes, it sounds ridiculous that thirteen years after freshman orientation, I can remember filling in bubbles for a survey. What I did not know at the time was that my future graduate school was administering the test, not the institution I was only then joining.

On that day at Moore Hall in graduate school, I reviewed the survey with fresh eyes – not those of a freshman in their first days of college life. I noticed that students

chose their mode of secondary school certification. One of the choices was the GED. I was not familiar with the GED at that point. I had not gone through the process myself, nor had any of my peers. Additionally, I did not know at the time that two of my grandparents had taken the exam. I spent a moment speculating about who these students were and why they were in higher education, and I would end up studying this exact topic with the CIRP data a few years later.

Over my graduate school career, I will have studied the GED in three different projects. First is the aforementioned quantitative analysis using HERI's CIRP survey for GED-certified students in higher education. I also participated in, and observed, an online preparation class. This dissertation is the product of a comprehensive exploratory study that incorporated qualitative research methods such as ethnography, auto-ethnography, participation observation, and in-depth interviewing.

Please allow me to thank several people who have helped me earnestly pursue this topic in my research. I am grateful for the support I received at the University of California at Los Angeles. Dr. Fredrick Erickson, my chair, has been an inspiration since I first took a class with him in 2005, in which he reviewed research tapes of a class he had observed many years prior. His clear passion explaining his studies and their meaning to the communities he researched reminded me why I decided to pursue social research methodology in graduate school. I am grateful for the support of my committee, including Dr. Richard Wagoner, Dr. Carlos Torres, and Dr. Tom Weisner. I am also grateful for the support of Dr. Jeffrey Prager, who advised me up until my proposal. I am grateful to my interim Social Research Methodology advisers, Dr. Jose Felipe Martinez and Dr. Michael Rose.

UCLA gave me the opportunity to meet two professors who profoundly affected my research. Dr. Mel Pollner led a qualitative methods graduate seminar in the UCLA Sociology Department, which was inspirational for me. I am fortunate to have spent time in his classroom and interacting with him and students in that fantastic course. I met Dr. Harold Garfinkel while serving as a coordinator for the Economic and Social Research Council's Symposium on Sociological Research Methods symposium in 2007. Even at his age, he contributed modern perspectives to research questions.

The administrative and financial support I received made graduate school not just manageable, but enjoyable. I am grateful for the support of the Gates Millennium Scholarship and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund during my higher education career. The support staff led by Amy Gershon at the Office of Student Services at the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences was integral to my success at UCLA. This remarkably professional staff is never as nervous as we are when we hand in exams, applications, or paperwork.

I was very lucky to have the support of my research site. Due to the Institutional Review Board, I cannot thank anyone by name, but I do appreciate the support from the staff and all of the students who participated in this study. They were all an inspiration and I wish them all well in their future endeavors.

Before this project, and while I was in graduate school, I held research positions and jobs to support myself as I finished school. I am grateful to my supervisors during my time at UCLA: Dr. Norma Sanchez, Dr. Ivan Light, Dr. Roger Penn, and the Freshman Cluster Program. Outside of school, I thank John Dorger, Kathleen Kindle, and

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I was fortunate to have the support of friends and family during this study. I thank my family: Felisa Brea, Stan McKay, John McKay, and Mary Ana McKay. I am grateful for the support of my friends: Kathleen Anderson, James Berry, Jacquie Billings, Megan Bork, David Caito, Chris Caito, Deborah Chichester, Dr. Phoebe Cohen, Melissa Davies, Matt DeCamp, Matt DiCicco, Justin Finch, Ryan Fitzsimmons, Timothy Gentile, Dr. Damhnait Gleeson, Barbara Glenn, John Glenn, Joanna Greenbaum, Adam Gullo, Dr. Polar Humenn, John Lacey, William McDougall (I finally finished, Will!), Aighleann McKiernan, Dr. Thomas O'Donnell, Heather Parfitt-Jackson, Josh Rice, Eric Robinson, Jane Schmid, and Bernadette White.

Eight years after I started graduate school, I end it with this dissertation. I hope this inspires others to follow their academic and methodological pursuits. What I have learned about myself is not nearly as interesting as what I have learned about the people who work so hard to complete their high school education. I urge you always to remember, it is never too late to go back to school – whether you are going back to earn a GED, a bachelor's degree, a professional degree, or your Ph.D.

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HONORS AND AWARDS

Gates Millennium Scholar (2000-2007)

Bartels Action Research Fellowship (2002-2004)

Chapter One

Introduction

Interviewer: "Coming back to school, how has it been?"

Jove: "It's been good."

Interviewer: "It's been good..."

Jove: "Good emotion. To see not only for my age, to see older people coming to study, that's why there is some, for my part, there is hope to continue my education to get what I want to become. Yeah, that's why I keep coming."

This is a study of people who turned their back on school. They left the educational system before graduating, and they had to live without a high school diploma. The dropouts, now adults, in this study told their stories while preparing for the General Education Development exam (hereafter, GED). While the secondary school process is mainstream, ameliorating the status of current un-credentialed adults is not as well documented. These adults confidently – or innocently – took on the workforce, and companies hired many of them. However in 2010 and 2011, the participants of this study found that they could no longer continue their professional and personal lives without the GED.

This study is about a different kind of 'dropout'. These dropouts were adults, and they were no longer eligible to return to high school. In this study, the stories of dropouts are the main source of data, rather than the raw numbers that tend to be the focus of discussions on this subject in the post-dropout literature. Rather than simply

address quantitative data in a new way, this study delves into the life stories of these dropouts when they left, when they returned to prepare for the GED, and what their hopes were for what they could achieve with it. This study is not just about being a product of their own choices or a failure of their school systems, but instead it explores how these students returned to overcome an educational deficiency. In doing so, the GED is a redemptive process, which helps understand how dropouts go from being the scourge of the modern education system to return to school to fix their stigma and grow with their equivalency.

School teaches students academic topics; however, some research supports the idea that there are other non-cognitive skills that are imbued on students as they progress through school (Rumburger, 2011). Dropouts are assumed not to gain these skills because they leave school. By explaining why certain GED students are not equal to high school graduates in certain ways, researchers imply that they lack motivation, self-esteem, and the ability to persevere (Rumburger, 2011). This study, on the other hand, shows that these former dropouts and current students did exhibit these traits, but they did so in ways that perhaps were not expected. The subjects of this study took responsibility for the decisions that led to their leaving school in the past. They also blamed themselves, and they were actively trying to change their situation for the better.

What makes the population in this study unique is they are people who have decided to take the GED, to return to a classroom, and to prepare them for whatever is next in their professional and personal lives. In some cases, the intent was to show their families and their children that they could complete this significant challenge. To others, they wanted to finish something they knew they could have achieved in the first place.

Others experienced a life-changing event and they wanted to conclude a chapter of their life that they did not feel was worth celebrating. Finally, for almost all the students in this study, they wanted leave ‘jobs’ to explore ‘careers’, which for some included the possibility of continuing their education. For the people in this study, the practical challenge was to complete a series of classes in preparation for a battery of tests known as the GED, but the personal one was to grow beyond being a ‘dropout’.

Background of the GED

Although today the GED is the most mainstream way for someone to gain a high school equivalency, when it was first administered its trajectory was unclear. Quinn’s (2002) study of the GED’s history shows that it was established as the counterpoint to the Carnegie Standard-Unit System. The Carnegie Standard-Unit system became the foundation for the secondary school curriculum in the twentieth century, and it established credentialing based on how long a student attended school. In opposition to this system was the General Education curriculum, which was developed in response to a changing workforce and trying to bring in a “general education” curriculum that potentially would appeal to a broader amount of students and the idea of “testing” for credit and for “life experience” appealed to them (Quinn, 2002).

Advocates for both schools of thought wanted to affect educational policy in throughout the twentieth century. For the most part, the Carnegie Standard-Unit System has continued to be considered the standard. Quinn (2002) asserts that during World War Two, the General Education Development team would be able to capitalize on events in order to advocate for their viewpoint. The team advocating for the General Education

Curriculum was in charge of developing coursework for the armed forces, and they just so happened to be the same professionals who developed the GED exam (Quinn, 2002). During the war, a large number of GIs were leaving high school to enter the armed forces. In doing so, these service members were postponing their secondary schooling. The General Education Curriculum camp sought to have students pass the test in order to be granted a credential as opposed to being granted “honorary diplomas” upon return to the United States (Quinn, 2002). The exam was adopted and, after the military accepted the GED, the exam was marketed directly to states’ boards of education (Quinn, 2002). From its modest beginnings, the test is now the most accessible way to gain a high school credential. This history helps to explain how the GED is still administered and written by one organization, the GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education (and recently, in a partnership with the company Pearson), with accreditation standards controlled by each of the states (GED Testing Service, 2012; Quinn, 2002).

GED Profile of Students and Testing

California created several qualifications on what age a person can be when they take the GED. At the time of this study, a test taker must be at least eighteen years old, or turned eighteen within sixty days and take the test sixty days after they would have graduated from high school (California Department of Education, 2010). Students who were in the military or incarcerated could take the test at seventeen; however, they would not receive the actual credential until their eighteenth birthday (California Department of Education, 2010). Age restrictions, like California’s, may be put in place to reduce the possibility that students would leave school because they can finish secondary school by

taking the GED exam. Some researchers speculate that the GED itself could contribute to students leaving school (Tyler, 2003). California has removed this advantage, as someone younger than eighteen, except in the cases listed, cannot gain a credential. In 2009, California had the highest number of GED testing candidates (58,136) and the most taking the test in Spanish (5,543) (Service, 2010).

A GED test taker may have used various modes of preparation before attempting the exam, or not prepare for the test at all. For those who did prepare, they could have self-directed their preparation by studying out of a review book or attended adult or night school. They may have attended tutoring in a community center or through a non-profit organization. Another way to prepare is by taking classes, and in the case of this study, the students attended a class administered by a community college's non-credit division.

This Study

Although there are many paths to the exam itself, I chose to follow one very particular method: GED test preparation classes at a community college. This way was the easiest for me to prepare for the exam. Classes were free, campus was accessible, and preparation was interactive. In addition to interviewing students, I engaged in an auto-ethnography, where I took the classes along with some of the students I interviewed. This study, for the most part, focuses on the data from interviews conducted with GED preparation class students in the Fall of 2010 and the Spring of 2011.

This manuscript covers the literature, method, descriptive reporting, and discussion of findings pertaining to this study. It begins with the Literature Review chapter that includes a focus on literature pertaining to the GED and GED preparation

classes. The Method and Research Site chapter will introduce the research questions and descriptions of the field. A discussion on the use of qualitative research to explore the GED process is included in this chapter. The first descriptive reporting chapter, Analysis of Early School Experiences, Family Life and Leaving School, reviews the findings from the twelve student interviews about their lives and early school experiences as well as an analysis of their reasons for leaving school. The second descriptive reporting chapter, Returning to School and the GED Process, covers the students' perspectives as they took their GED preparation class and planning to take the exam. Goals and Workforce Aspirations after GED-Credentialing, the last descriptive reporting chapter, covers the hopes and aspirations that students have after they take the GED. Following this chapter is a Discussion of Findings that reviews some of themes that emerged in the overall study.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

The GED is in the unique position of being a credential for adults that tests them on secondary school level subjects. The remedial nature of this credential could have given it a less-than-desirable sheen than it has recently received from educational theorists. The expectation is that the outcomes of those who complete the GED are often compared to those who have finished high school. However, many theorists have given the GED much attention as a “non-equivalence” (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane, et al., 1995) and they have made their point. The outcomes of their studies had major policy implications; for example the Bush administration era “No Child Left Behind Act” was legislated not to count GED students as part of the high school graduation rate (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). The authors, Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) attributed the change to the GED’s poor performance, however, in the literature it is easier to find a studies comparing wage non-equivalence than studies discussing what the GED does for test-takers in terms of jump starting careers and changing their lives. Being that the GED is the primary high school equivalence in this country, and therefore an official second chance that America offers to people who did not finish their secondary education, domestically or internationally, a more thorough discussion of the GED in terms of its context in adult education is valid to understanding its process and what it could mean to potential test takers.

In order for a GED test taker to be in the position to need a high school equivalency, they must have previously left school prior to graduation. Understanding the motivations that students have to drop out of school informs the areas of this study, which went in to depth with participants about their decisions to leave school while vital to this study. Leaving school is only one element that defines these adult students. The other key elements are their varied motivations to return to the classroom. Reviewing adult education literature, there is evidence that life-changing events may accelerate the decision for certain adults to return to the classroom (Cross, 1981). This was case for many of the students in this study.

This study has a review of literature that believes the GED is a “non-equivalence” to high school (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane et al., 1995). This study will contrast with many of these studies that focus on the “non-equivalence” of the GED as compared to a high school diploma. This study highlights the possible situations that GED test takers live with as being unique as compared to their high school counterparts in their age cohort. However, starting their educational careers later has tremendous impact on work experience gained, career progress, networking and other issues that are related to work advancement. Although external data provides an unbiased assessment of where people of all educational backgrounds “end up” in their lives, the oversight in these analyses is that the depth of differences between GED-credentialed persons is vast when compared to high school credentialed persons. People who complete high school mostly likely did so when they were teenagers as compared to GED test-takers are mostly likely to be adults who did not complete high school and could be incarcerated, in the military, or have been out of the education system for some time. Also, they may have

entered the workforce immediately following their departure from school, or were consistently unemployed. They may have worked in the same industry or moved from job to job in different fields. The same trends could have happened to the high school graduates in their age cohort, however, they finished their credential on time ensuring that they would not have to spend any time “catching-up” like the GED test takers have to do. This study provides a perspective of who GED students are and what the process could be like for students who are preparing for the tests.

Before these students returned to take the GED, they dropped out of high school. As covered in Meeker et. al. (2008), push factors (“those that are within the school”) far outnumbered the pull factors (“those beyond the school control”) especially pregnancy or parenting a child for reasons that students left school in their study conducted in Texas (Meeker et al., 2008). However, the study does not describe in much detail if those push factors are defined or controlled by the school: for instance, what would cause a person to internalize that they had a “bad attitude or made poor choices,” if this was not somewhat socialized within school (Meeker et al., 2008)? However, Meeker (2008) does find that, for the most part, there were structural issues that caused the students in their study to drop out of high school.

This review of literature starts within the context of adult basic education and “lifelong learning” in the US. This is followed by a review some of the literature that addresses why people leave secondary school - specifically to understand what some of the largest issues are for those students informing Chapter Four. A discussion of adult education, including a review of the reasons and motivations that GED students return to school to take the test, and a review of in-class experiences for certain preparation

courses will help to provide context to Chapter Five of this study. Finally, the last section will review the literature focused on the outcomes of the exam, and will help to provide context on how GED students fare as compared to high school graduates and whether this is an equitable assessment for students who gain an equivalency. The review of literature on outcomes informs Chapter Six of this dissertation.

Adult Education

The complexity of the GED is tied to how it teaches secondary school material – meant for teenagers – to adults. The median age of GED test takers in 2010 was twenty-six years old, which is above the age threshold of legal adulthood (Service, 2010). Although legal adulthood is easy to define, the age of maturity is more difficult to establish. Despite the classroom material being nearly identical to the curriculum of high school students, GED test takers are part of the adult education system. Key to the GED process is to understand the some of the ramifications of being an adult learner due to age but not classroom content.

The common American education system that caters to adults is higher education, which includes community colleges, colleges, and universities. Adult basic education maybe included on some colleges or community colleges; however, there is a separation between adult education and higher education in educational history. Hudson (1851) began his “history of adult education” by discussing the development of adult literacy classes with a curriculum focused on the Bible, not the extensive history of post-secondary education in the United Kingdom (Hudson, 1851). Adult education or learning is framed as “instruction of the illiterate poor,” not university-level education (Hudson,

1851). Starting with the Society of Friends in 1812 in Wales, who established schools in New York and Philadelphia, Hudson (1851) progresses through the several subsequent iterations of adult literacy programs that developed in the 19th century. Others of these educational societies were engaging in teaching, especially from a moral point of view (Hudson, 1851). Eventually, societies began to sponsor lectures on certain personal improvement topics like “mutual improvement in useful knowledge” or “scientific subjects” such as “principles of Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Electricity, Pneumatics, and Astronomy” (Hudson, 1851). In Hudson’s (1851) account, there was not a significant connection with the higher education system in Great Britain and his discussion of “adult education”. Instead, the topic of the book was a documentation of various ad-hoc adult education societies focused on the working class, ignoring the fact that the upper class had their own system of education including college and university (Hudson, 1851).

The United States has included adult basic education with higher education in significant ways. The Higher Education Act of 1965 listed adult basic education along with postsecondary education in the definition of “lifelong learning”. At the time the act was under consideration and signed into law, the high school graduation rate has been estimated to be at 77.9% for 1961 through 1965 (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). It is unclear that the preponderance of adults who still needed basic education was a driver to include it in the act. The act states its definition of “lifelong learning” as:

Lifelong learning includes, but is not limited to, **adult basic education**, continuing education, independent study, agricultural education, business education, and labor education, occupational education and job training programs, parent education, **postsecondary education**, preretirement education and

education for older and retired people, remedial education, special educational programs for groups or for individuals with special needs, and also educational activities designed to upgrade occupational and professional skills, to assist business, public agencies, and other organizations in the use of innovation and research results, to serve family needs and personal development (Higher Education Act of 1965, Title I, Part B, Section 132, qtd. in Cross, 1981, author's emphasis).

This definition would include GED test takers, since they are either engaging in adult basic education, continuing education or remedial education, whichever way the process is defined to the student, teacher, or program.

Although states set the age limitations for the GED, it is mainly a process for adult students and this has ramifications it – from its curriculum, to the design of preparation materials, to fitting in the lives of their students. Although there are clearly defined definitions of adult education, adulthood itself is not as easy to define. Adult education thresholds have become another sociological determinant for adulthood. For the most part, American adult learners can be anyone who is over the age of eighteen. That being said, there is clearly a great difference in maturity level between people of all ages in all environments – from the workplace to college to GED studies. Norman (1999) wondered when the “transformation occurs” for people to turn in to an adult learner. He pondered if maturation is an internal, biological change or a sociological-defined process (Norman, 1999). Norman observed that many developmental theories for psychological maturation covered childhood, with studies focused on newborns and children ages six to nine, but theories stop short of the range of adulthood, from ages sixteen to twenty-five,

which coincidentally tend to be the years to which adulthood is sociologically assigned (Norman, 1999).

Sociological adulthood has different age thresholds for different activities including “the time someone can vote, can drive, can drink, or can become a parent” (Norman, 1999). In fact, for the average GED test taker, they would only be able to rent a car in this country for about a year at the time of their test.¹ Sociological adulthood can be related to educational progress since the age of eighteen both coincides as the legal age of emancipation and the age of high school graduation. If a student leaves school and does not graduate, then they have missed an educational rite-of-passage and milestone of adulthood. Tying the end of secondary education so closely to adulthood leads to social ramifications for those who did not graduate. In this study, students would describe themselves as being mature now, but not at the time of their decision to leave high school. This situation leads to idea that perhaps age is not a sufficient way to define maturity or adulthood for educators. Furthermore, in this study no student reported that they were re-entering the education process because of their age; however, in a few instances, they did mention life-changing events or becoming “mature”.

There are theories about adult education being a different process method applied to children. Knowles contrasts andragogy - focusing on adult learning - to pedagogy, the act of teaching children (Cross, 1981). If adults and children are different cognitively, it follows that so too must the teaching styles to approach them. One of the four major assumptions that Knowles creates for andragogy is that adulthood changes someone from “a dependent personality” to being a “self-directed human being” (Knowles, 1970 qtd. in Cross, 1981). In this way, Knowles advocates “self-directed” curriculums. Houle (1961)

¹ Legal age to rent a car in the U.S.A. is twenty-five. The median GED test taker is 26.2 (Service, 2010).

pins the idea for a “self-taught” curriculum back to the early 1800s when the demand for education may have exceeded the ability for universities to expand. Instead of expanding these institutions, the idea of “self-education” was introduced at this time (Houle, 1961). Knowles’ Theory of Andragogy has been one of the more popular theories, despite educational theorists dismissing this theory (Elias 1979, qtd. in Cross, 1981). Kallen (1962) also purports that adult students are more interested in classroom materials than the classroom itself:

Obviously if the teacher is to think of teaching as a facilitation of learning, what is studied becomes of far less importance than how it is studied. The adult, unlike youth, studies because he wants to, not because he must (Kallen, 1962).

GED students may have an interested in the subject matter and finishing the GED, however, none of the students who had tried self-directed curriculums had proceeded quickly to the passage of the exam. They came to these GED preparation program in order to help them finish, and many of them found the classroom as a positive addition to their education.

The desire to return to school may not be about increasing academic knowledge, but could be a way to replicate – or live for the first time – an experience that students had missed. In Lytle’s (1991) study, one student admits that “If I could go back to the tenth grade, maybe because I want what I missed. The education that I missed, I want it now” (Belzer, 2004). This student was “strongly in favor of imposing more structure” in her non-traditional GED program “through homework assignments and tests” (Belzer, 2004). Some students may want to have a more directed and traditional experience in school, however other adult students want a new experience. In Belzer’s study, other

students in the program liked the new classroom style of their GED preparation program (Belzer, 2004). What students had previously learned about classroom behavior and culture were very strong for them as they returned to schooling (Belzer, 2004; Lytle, 1991). Adult learners can either demand traditional classrooms or be turned off by the concept. For Kallen (1962), he establishes that adult education is “very much unlearning”. He means that adult education is:

...the liquidation and replacement of habitual rigidities of attitudes, feelings and ways of thought and of work, by a viable configuration of self, society and nature that will nourish and channel curiosity instead of starving it (Kallen, 1962).

Kallen (1962) clearly held a strongly negative view of traditional schooling, as he referred to it as starving curiosity. Kallen (1962) observed that in night school “the psychological assumptions regarding teaching, learning, and their conditions were employed indifferently in both, handling the adult like the youth”. These studies reviewed certain issues concerning adult learners returning to schooling, but classes in this study were very close to a traditional American class experience. In the descriptive findings chapter, we will review how these students reacted to this particular format.

Motivations to Return

GED test takers in California are adult students, as outlined in the first section of this literature review. Although they avoided the completion of school, this incomplete experience still greatly influences what they expect from education (Lytle, 1991). They may now be adults, but GED test takers are diverse in terms of when they left school and

the amount of time they have been out of school and their demographic distribution (Service, 2010). As adults with different lives and expectations, we also find that GED test takers have different sets of motivations, which we will review in this section (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Comings et al., 1999; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). We have a clearer idea of who GED students are—diverse groups of people who have left school and have decided to pursue their equivalency. Beder and Valentine (1990) reviewed three types of adult student motivations developed by Houle (1961): goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. These three categories become very useful in understanding the motivations of GED students.

Goal-oriented students may be more motivated to remain in adult education classes than activity- and learning-oriented ones are. In a study conducted in New England, Comings, et. al. (1999) found their respondents reported a variety of motivational goals like “individual, citizenship, work-related, family-related, and GED, ADP, or Rand W” (Comings et al., 1999). In this case, they found a preponderance of goal-oriented students and that persistence in adult education classes was closely tied to making specific goals (passing the GED) rather than a generalized individual goal like “self-improvement” (Comings et al., 1999). In particular, students with the highest persistence rates in the study were those with work-related (77.6%) or citizenship goals (77.8%—although this was a small base).

Life-changing events may shock an adult student to re-enter education. In Cross (1981), 83% of adult learners in a national telephone survey reported that they were motivated by “some change in their life”. In this study, many students self-reported life-changing events from losing their jobs due to the economy, health-related issue, gaining

sobriety, finding religious inspiration, or relationship issues. Cross's (1981) findings were certainly still applicable to these results nearly thirty years after her study was published. Life-changing events could create a sustainable motivation for adult students to complete their high school equivalency and other educational endeavors.

GED Outcomes

Although the GED distinguishes a group of dropouts with literacy skills similar to those of graduates, there do not appear to be immediate rewards for taking and passing the exam (T. M. Smith, 2003).

T. M. Smith (2003) sets the tone for the literature on GED outcomes. GED-credentialed persons come from a variety of different backgrounds, from multiple years spent in the workforce or military to incarcerated populations. In an effort to find comparison groups, GED test takers are often compared in relation to high school graduates in their age cohort. Despite the idea that the GED has to preform "immediately" and reap "rewards" as T. M. Smith (2003) describes, the credential does not directly make up for the years spent elsewhere and gaining careers that are easier for high school graduates to attain. The outcome studies covered here will mostly compare high school graduates and GED-credentialed persons on the same terms in wage and income analyses. These studies emphasize the lack of equality between high school graduation and equivalency; however, they offer little in terms of a solution for dropouts who need a second chance or employers who increasingly need a credentialed workforce.

From a labor economics perspective, Cameron and Heckman (1993) completed one of the most seminal works in the area of high school equivalents. Utilizing the NSLY survey, they were able to highlight significant findings concerning the usefulness of the GED as an equivalency degree. Their findings included that the GED-credentialed persons “are not identical to traditional high school” in a few important areas: their professional ability (as measured by the Armed Forces Qualifying Test), their wages, their hours worked, and their post certification education and training decisions (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). This study, while completed some time ago, still provides major evidence of the GED not adding up to high school education. Although they demonstrate strong findings, they lack an understanding of the reality of GED-credentialed persons. It would be more equitable to compare them against the newest cohort of high school graduates – not people with a high school diploma their own age. For the most part, participants in this study did not credit learning on-the-job. This could be different for other GED students coming from different industries than those covered in this study. Since these students were planning to almost “start from scratch”, their behaviors were closer to a student leaving high school than a person who was already mid-career. Students had not anticipated the lost wages of being a student while returning to community college at the same time their age cohort could be plodding along on their career path. Comparing the wages of GED-credentialed persons against their own cohort should be done to check their progress, however, a thorough understanding of what it means to stop and restart a career should include the lag in time to catch up with one’s cohort or the reality that they will not catch up quickly or at all. This is a more nuanced explanation of the “non-equivalence” dilemma.

Another defining study explored if high school dropouts benefit from the GED credential (Murnane et al., 1995). Murnane et al. (1995) reported that approximately one third of dropouts eventually gain their certification by obtaining a GED. The authors found four major outcomes through their research. First, that GED-credentialed persons do not “fare as well” in the labor market as compared to conventional high school graduates. Second, that although there are positive effects on their rate of wage growth, “[the rate of wage growth] may only apply to those who use the credential to gain access to a training program or to a different job” (Murnane et al., 1995). Reporting predicted earnings, the researchers concluded that the GED was not “a powerful strategy for escaping poverty” (Murnane et al., 1995). The study cast doubt on the GED as being the best way to “give dropouts their second chance” (Murnane et al., 1995). They questioned whether it was a good idea for policy makers to push the GED on to dropouts. (Murnane et al., 1995). What makes the Murnane, et. al. (1995) article so influential is that it takes the lukewarm findings on labor force outcomes of GED findings and questions the worth of the program itself versus how to improve the program. The findings could have begun to influence dropout retention researchers to consider it a “much less valuable credential” (Orfield, 2004).

John Tyler reviewed the most recent research pertaining to the GED in 2003. Tyler (2003) avoided qualitative GED studies, therefore this study would have been excluded in his analysis. Instead, the paper “focused on how the GED related to some outcome measure (not just economic)” (Tyler, 2003). His four major conclusions from the literature, which he believed was the “recent GED research” despite leaving out studies on the topic, were:

1. The GED may encourage some students to leave school early
2. There are economic payoffs to a GED, but they accrue only to dropouts who leave school with low skills
3. The economic payoffs of a GED take time to accrue
4. Post secondary education and training are fruitful but little used routes to economic success for GED Holders (Tyler, 2003)

Tyler (2003) suggests further research to explore other outcomes not related to the labor market including making a person a better parent, better citizen, or a “healthier or happier individual.” The third finding is directly related to this study’s criticism of studies like Murnane, et al. (1995) and Cameron and Heckman (1993). If studies using wage data controlled for the GED-credentialed person’s reality when she or he starts a career, including starting from scratch like a high school graduate that year not in their age cohort, then accruing economic payoffs would not seem as negative or unexpected.

By omitting results that dealt with more subjective material, Tyler (2003) may not have taken into account the findings of Valentine and Darkenwald (1986). They conducted a cluster analysis on people after they attained a GED in order to understand what types of GED test takers existed (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). To build these clusters, they asked what the benefits of attaining a GED were. The most reported benefit was “feels better about self“ (94.2%), which was by far the highest amount reported (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). For those respondents with jobs, 50.6% reported they

did the job better and 48.8% reported they would be more likely to keep their job (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). For respondents who were also parents, 49.4% felt like they were setting a better example for their children (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). These results add depth to the GED as a powerful psychological tool as a “second-chance certification”. Although Cameron and Heckman (1993), Murnane, et al. (1995) and Tyler (2003) assume that economic measures are the key to understanding the GED, Valentine and Darkenwald (1986) shows that there is more depth to the process. For 94.2% of respondents to report that the GED made them feel better about themselves means the GED is a major force to remove a social stigma in American society.

Dropout theorists have been proving the inferiority of the GED as compared to high school credentials for decades. This may be a way of assessing a person’s worth by their mental aptitude as proven by whether they can graduate from a traditional high school or not, which is also favoring the Carnegie method. This study posits the idea that within an age cohort, a high school diploma and a GED are non-comparable for economic outcomes. Despite having some understanding of what a GED can do for labor market outcomes and postsecondary opportunities, (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane et al., 1995) comparing the GED against the high school diploma is not equitable. A GED restarts a career process, whereas maintaining a labor market trajectory after high school certification has additive growth.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here covers aspects of the GED as it relates to adult education, motivations to return to the educational process, and attempts to measure the

outcomes of the GED. Remembering that the students covered in this study are adult students is helpful when reviewing the findings of the study. The particular aspects of being a certain type of student or how they entered the classroom relates strongly to context built from their situation of being out of school and being adults.

Chapter Three

Methods and Research Site

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the process of the GED through the use of the various qualitative research methods. The review of literature provided a theoretical and somewhat normative evaluation of the GED, which was too focused on the equivalency's transactional value is versus how the test takers interacted with the process. Two previous qualitative studies, Belzer (2004) and Dowdy (2003), provided a good description of the process for specific groups of people but these examples did not adequately explain how test takers felt the GED affected them while they were undergoing the process. Belzer (2004) was interested in understanding the efficacy of a certain curriculum for GED students, which is the closest to the intent of this study. However, this study is focused on how this class as part of the GED students' educational history from elementary school to today, what motivated them to return and stay in class, and what they believe the GED will help them achieve after they are completed.

Some key findings in this study will be easily relatable to anyone who has taken part in the American public educational system. There are similar social, familiar, and personal pressures amongst GED students and those who complete high school. As subjects of this study recounted their personal stories, many of their reflections are similar to those who were a traditional student in high school. While the students in this study may have made different choices, and their circumstances presented different pressures, their concerns during their adolescent, and early adult years can hardly be

considered exceptional. Peer group influences and unsupportive families distracted these students so that anything was more appealing than sitting in the classroom. Qualitative research methods made the extent of understanding why they left school, chose to return, choose to stay, and what they hope to achieve into a rich narrative.

As a foundation to this study, there had been an exploratory study of GED-credentialed persons in higher education to explore economic and personal improvement measures for these students to go to college. This study used survey research data from the Higher Education Research Institute's CIRP Freshman Survey from 2000 to 2005. This study was strong foundation to understanding the GED process from an outcomes perspective. During a brainstorm early in the formation of the first project, my advisor at the time, UCLA professor Mike Rose, mentioned "at the end of the project, you could end it by taking the exam". While this may seem like an offhand remark, this statement spawned many other approaches that eventually became the basis of this entire product. To complete the project by taking the exam would require serious preparation, precisely like the subjects of the study. This preparation became one of the focal points of this study, which was the use of auto-ethnography. To truly understand the subjects, it was vital to know what it felt like to be at that crossroads between high school and the workforce. As this study's design and concept grew in scope and complexity, it became clear an auto-ethnography by itself would be insufficient to capture the GED process for people engaged with it. The people and the culture are an integral part of preparing for the exam, even if the researcher knows what it is like to be a GED student. Classroom observations were added to the methods to best capture classroom behavior. Concurrently, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand more about the personal

experiences of other GED students. As the analysis took place, the importance of the interviews as the main data source to understanding the process became apparent. In-depth interviews became the primary method in this study, supported by the auto-ethnography and the classroom observations.

This section will review the methods used in this study in detail. In this section, we will review GED terminology used in this study, research questions and methods, data collection, data analysis, and field site. While entering the field with a series of guiding questions helps the research find immediate grounding in the site, having the possibility to change while in the field helps the research and researcher explore process from various standpoints. It started as a researcher-centric study with auto-ethnography and moved to a subject-centric study with the use of in-depth interviewing. Without this evolution, the process could not have been studied as holistically as would have been otherwise.

GED Terminology

An effect of not being mainstream is that the GED does not have simple terms to describe it or its students. First, the GED is a battery of exams, not one test. In this study, the GED will be described in plural, such as “GED exams” or the “GED battery”. Students will need to pass all of the tests, not “the” test. People who were actively in a classroom preparing for the test are students of the GED process. They will be referred to as “GED students” or “students”. At times, GED test taker will be used to describe people in the GED process. A GED test taker is a person who may or may have not

taking preparation classes. This term was used in the literature review section because prior literature does not delineate who has prepared for the exam.

By defining these terms, the GED can become more concrete to people who may have not had previous exposure to the process. GED test takers can be anyone in our community; in fact once a person acquires a GED they can enter higher education and explore any field of study or start a career. Understanding how to talk about the GED is beneficial to those who study higher education, labor markets and adult education.

Research Questions and Methods

The goal of this study was to understand the process for GED students in an urban area. The GED process had been narrowly described in the literature – either focusing on particular curriculum design (Belzer), outcome measures (Tyler 2003; Murnane, et. al. 1998; Cameron & Heckman 1995) or the reflection of the process to one’s life (Dowdy, 2003). Designing the study to focus on students’ personal experiences while they studied the GED was vital to the project’s purpose, and it is what makes this study unique. When originally conceptualizing the study, it was important to reflect on traditional educational experiences throughout the United States, including my own. What was the difference between education levels, such as elementary, middle or high school? Do classmates, the school, the environment, the home or the students’ maturity level define each level of education?

The challenge was how to frame this study to capture the process and personal experiences before these students dropped out, during their GED process, and what the test takers expected to do afterwards. The method used in both Belzer (2004) and Dowdy

(2003) were applicable to this study as well, specifically in-depth interviewing. Both Belzer and Dowdy were able to distill students' stories to an extent that their study could explain in-class (Belzer, 2004) and life (Dowdy, 2003) experiences of GED students and test takers. To set this study apart as one of process and not simply an example of narrative, auto-ethnography was explored and employed to understand what defines the GED as a different educational phenomenon as compared to the traditional progression.

This study went through two major evolutionary steps. During the creation stage of this study, two approaches heavily influenced the foundation of the study. First, the idea of researcher as meaning-maker led to an exploration of an auto-ethnographic orientation for the study. Second, was the foundation of institutional ethnography (D. Smith, 2005). These two methods influenced broad, exploratory questions to try to understand the process. These are the guiding questions used throughout the conceptualization of the study:

1. How does someone take a GED?
 - How does a person learn to pass the GED?
2. Is there a GED classroom culture?
 - If so, what is it?
3. What are the aspirations and motivations of GED students?
 - What are the hopes, dreams, and goals of GED students when deciding to take the GED? What motivates them from living without a diploma to pursuing the GED?

As the study took place and data was collected, these questions evolved into their final version. At first, the researcher-as-knowledgeable was useful. Building on the

premise that Erickson (1986) described for interpretive, participant observational research, there is an interest in “the relation between meaning perspectives of actors and the ecological circumstances of action in which they find themselves”. Several qualitative researchers have helped shaped the way that the study was conceptualized and executed (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 1999; Burawoy, 2003; Duneier, 2002; Erickson, 1986; Erickson, 1996; Erickson, 1998; Erickson, 2004; Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Hayano, 1979; Livingston, 1986; McHoul, 1982; Mehan, 1975; D. Smith, 2005; Whyte, 1993). Focusing on the studying the GED process influenced the decision to use qualitative research methods during this study. But solely relying on my observations, the benefits of triangulation are lost to this study (Erickson, 1986). To build a rich picture of the GED in 2010, the students needed to be interviewed and the classroom needed to be observed.

At the inception of this study, the comparison of the GED classroom and the traditional public high school classroom seemed essential to this study. Belzer (2004) describes a very particular type of GED program, one that has changed a traditional classroom from to a different model in order to help students have a different experience from the traditional classroom. However, the students felt that this program was not like normal school. In order to define what the GED classroom is, I had to observe what the classroom is like—and it was, in practice, much like a “normal school” in Belzer’s paradigm. What became clear in this study is that the “normal” classes were working for these motivated students and having teachers who cared by listening, answered questions, and demonstrated patience was the catalyst for the students having a good classroom experience.

For data collection in the auto-ethnography, I took field notes after classes for the Fall 2010 semester. For the classes in the spring and summer, I rely only on narrative and class notes because I had not received my IRB ruling on the auto-ethnographic portion of the study until August 25, 2010. The notes for the classes involved my personal reflection on the material. Due to restrictions until my IRB for classroom observations was approved, I could not and did not report on my experiences with students in the classroom. However, I did regularly record my expectations and performance in the class, the weather of the day, my activities during class, my lack of activity during the class, and homework. As part of this study, I had my own classwork, homework, and some of my tests and quizzes taken in the class for review as records. For the math curriculum, my only observations were taken in the auto-ethnography since I did not observe them as part of the classroom observations portion of the study.

Auto-ethnography had an enormous influence over the conceptualization of this project. In order to give the auto-ethnography its backbone in this study, both reflexive ethnography (Burawoy, 2003) and analytic auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006) were used to guide the methods used. Due to the structure of the study, I used more of an analytic auto-ethnography with a “commitment to theoretical analysis” (Anderson, 2006). The GED process is as much about learning how to take the test, and what is required from the material, as it is learning the GED culture of the classroom and process. A principal goal of this study – emotional empathy with the subjects – was already underway as I negotiated the preparation process. Although the original conceptualization of the questions focused on outcomes, when the study was in the field the process was

less defined by grades and achievement and more on preparation for passing.

Understanding where the test fit in the participants' lives became more important.

The knowledge of the process from the student perspective helped during data collection. For example, the interview guide went through quiz practices in the Language Arts classes. We were able to use the Language Arts text book during quizzes and tests, except for the general aptitude exam given in class. This was a challenge for me, whether during a quiz I would peak for hints or help in the book. Knowing this was a dilemma for me, I added this question to understand if my classmates had a similar trepidation about using the book. One male student² reported that he did not use the book “No, I don't...you have to prepare because you, when you take a sample GED test, there is not going to be a book there and if you (sic) trying to get right now, test or a quiz, I know it's open book, but you still have to go through the book and it's not fair for my part. I call it cheating, you are cheating yourself.” Whereas, another student³, a mother of four, said “No, I use my notes more often than the books...like maybe one time, I've used the book, I had a question where I didn't participate in the class. Yea, but no, I usually use my notes. I think the notes are very helpful.” Being in class like the students, I understood the trade-off between using the book during tests and challenging yourself was a difficult decision to make. Having the perspective of other students confirmed my feelings on the freedom to use the book (closer to the male student's perspective), but made me understand the use of books or notes (the action of the female student). By simply observing a quiz, I may not have had the internal conflict to explore this question greater depth.

² Jove, male immigrant from Nicaragua

³ Betty, female student on CALWORKS (California's Welfare to Work program)

The utility of the auto-ethnography and participant observation to developing an understanding of the GED process decreased following data collection and during data analysis. These methods had been extremely useful in learning about the site, student culture, and classroom content. For the process itself, however, the participant observation and auto-ethnography methods were deemphasized and the in-depth interviews emerged as the main method of this multi-method project. Due to this understanding, the second evolution of research questions in this study emerged:

1. Why did GED students leave school without receiving a diploma?
2. Why had students returned to class and remained motivated to continue preparation?
 - What is the in-class experience like for GED students?
3. What are the aspirations and motivations of GED students?
 - What are the hopes, dreams, and goals of GED students when deciding to take the GED? What motivates them from living without a diploma to pursuing the GED?

To better understand this evolution, the next part of this section pairs each research question with the method that helped shaped it.

First Question: Why did GED students leave school without receiving a diploma?

A person leaving school defines the premise of the GED. Without this action, there is no need for a person to have a second chance to complete high school. An oversight in the original conceptualizing questions was not including a theoretical exploration of how this leaving could affect their returning. In order to understand the

process of the GED, the premise of the students had to be analyzed. The juxtaposition of who the student was today to who they were when they left high school helped to fuel their decision to return. Learning why they left school will help to understand if these students' reasons make them exceptional – or not – as compared to other dropouts. Understanding these reasons could help determine if there are particular reasons that can predict GED attainment in future studies.

The evolution of this question was hastened due to the structure and execution of the interview guide. The interview guide was a hybrid oral history and topical research instrument. Incorporating some of the techniques used in oral history, such as broad personal history questions and allowing students to share their personal narrative, helped strengthen the data collected to develop this question. The guide started at the beginning of their educational careers and facilitated their reflection on that time period. Thoughtful, nuanced, and detailed accounts of their early education indicated that these students experienced school similar to the mainstream narrative of early school. The inclusion and elevation of this topic as one of the main research questions was done after initial analysis of the data. Like the discussion guide, findings of this study will start at the beginning in order to describe the GED process in detail.

Second Question: Why had students returned to class and remained motivated to continue preparation?

If leaving school defines the premise of the GED, then what makes it unique is the act of returning to school. Both returning to school and staying motivated to stay in class

once there emerged as important themes in this study. How the GED fit in a students' life at this time emerged in the findings of the in-depth interviews and the auto-ethnography.

The original question focused on the in-class culture of the GED. Establishing a common GED preparation culture would be a worthwhile exploration. However, visiting one field site did not uncover enough data in order to do this effectively. The motivated students interviewed did not really interact with other classmates. In fact, they tried to avoid relationships in the classroom. One female student⁴ said: "I've learned that some stuff are a distraction for what's true and value, like you know, like physical attention. Like, in class I've noticed people hitting on you [plural you] and stuff like that. Or just, let's go kick it after class, that's what probably brought me here." Despite this, the same student said that seeing her classmates go through this process helped her stay motivated. There was less a culture than a bond of collective friendship that existed amongst students. After analyzing her statement and conducting my own in-class observations, the evolution of the question focused less on the collective and more on the individual as the findings indicated that this was a more solitary experience than believed at the inception of this study.

Third Question: What are the aspirations and motivations of GED students?

The last question is directed towards students themselves. This question remained untouched from the conceptualization of the project through the data analysis. The continued importance of understanding the rational and emotional reasons why these students engaged in the process helps to understand what could motivate more people to undergo the process. The interviews focused on various aspects of the educational

⁴ Betty, female student on CALWORKS (California's Welfare to Work program)

careers, their life, and the classroom that housed the classes the students attended to prepare for the GED battery – as mentioned in the development of the previous questions. The last part of learning why students engaged in the GED process is to understand what they were hoping to achieve with the certification. In the analysis, understanding if the process was transformational (Clark, 1993), or was purely economic in the end, is essential.

While in-depth interviews emerged as the main method of this study, this does not mean the benefits of triangulation were not used during data collection and analysis. Auto-ethnography built the shared reality of the classroom so that data collection proceeds with an in-depth knowledge of classroom practices. Classroom observations confirmed much of the auto-ethnography, plus allowed a more in-depth analysis of what was going on in class when not just focused on my own experiences. Despite the findings being focused on interviews with students, the other methods were invaluable to understanding the GED as an educational process.

Position in the field

Another issue for consideration this study was my position as a researcher in a GED preparation classroom and testing site. In the classroom, the students and I had many differences, as I did with the teacher. The first difference was immediately apparent; in that I have spent the majority of my life in classrooms, from high school, undergraduate, and graduate school. I had taken standardized tests for college and graduate school requirements. Furthermore, I had been a teaching associate and taught seven quarters of classes at UCLA. Needless to say, a classroom was not an unfamiliar

place for me. If I progressed traditionally through the American education system, I would never need a GED preparation class. Instead, continued my education and stayed in the classroom for many years after my last high school class. For the GED students, they may have not entered a classroom since they left high school. In a way, these students were entering an environment I was very comfortable in and learning a culture that is second nature to me. I had to be mindful of not being too relaxed in the environment, and do my best to always empathize with this firm point of division between me and the other students. For instance, I had to remain engaged with material that I considered elementary. However, in practice, I engaged with most material and was only bored when there was nothing going on in class or when I finished exercises earlier than the rest of the class. I told the teachers that I was a graduate student so they could anticipate my class work and aptitude tests. I also warned them that I anticipated answering questions incorrectly, and that it was preferable for them to treat me like a regular student. I wanted to participate and learn – which meant to engage with material. As expected, I did always answer correctly, and I did learn from these mistakes.

With this qualification established, the GED preparation classroom is a new experience for me. The course material was something I have not studied in a decade or more. I had a great deal to re-learn and some topics I learned for the first time such as elementary grammar. Additionally, I had to learn the way that the GED essays needed to be written and adjust my writing style accordingly. Also, the classroom was more ‘traditional’ than the last classrooms I had encountered. At the graduate level, classes tend to be more collaborative, discussion-based, and demand independent study. In the

GED preparation classroom, the teacher lectures, students answer questions by raising their hand or being called on, and there are quizzes and tests.

Another factor in the classroom was my relationship with the teacher. My background was most like the teachers of the classes I attend. We had the highest level of education in the classroom. I was aware that I had more in common with the teacher, but I was there to be a student. So I sought to maintain a certain amount of distance in order to insure that my status did not disrupt the classroom.

Considering my higher education background, and at the risk of contradiction, my family history was also relevant. My father had recently retired from the Post Office and had returned to college. My mother is a lecturer in Spanish at a state college in New York. Two of my grandparents had taken the GED: my maternal grandfather who was from Spain and my paternal grandmother who was from Ireland. I am only one generation removed from successful GED students, and I am the first person in my family to attend graduate school. I also grew up in a rural town in New York where median incomes were modest, house prices were low, and most students attended public community colleges for their higher education experiences. My father grew up in a working class neighborhood of the Bronx, New York and my mother's family still resides in a rural part of Northwest Spain, where they have a dairy farm. The research site, in a working class neighborhood of Los Angeles, was not unlike the communities I grew up in and where I visited with my family. With my educational background, I was very different from many of the students in the classroom, but my background helped bind me to the people – and their stories – that became the subjects of this study.

Apart from economic or regional considerations, ethnicity and gender mattered a great deal in this study. The ethnic make-up of the classes was mostly Latino and Asian. The Latinos in Los Angeles tend to have Central American backgrounds. I am a Latina with a European background, but I grew up with Latinos from all over the world. My community where I grew up was majority Caucasian, so most Latinos from the area ended up creating a community no matter what part of the world they were from originally. Finally, I am a woman, as were fifty percent of those interviewed and many of the students in the class. I do not believe that my ethnicity, gender, regional origin, or family history caused a significant distortion of the conduct of the study or the findings that will be presented.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between the Fall of 2010 and Spring of 2011. The three methods used in this study have been mentioned – auto-ethnography, participant observation (i.e. classroom observation) and in-depth interviews. This section will review the timing and process for each of these methods and outline the interview profiles for the twelve participants. The profiles will be useful in the analysis and discussion chapter.

I started the auto-ethnographic portion of this study in the Fall of 2010. I attended the following GED preparation classes during the daytime sessions:

- Writing Essays
- Whole Numbers and Decimals
- Fractions
- Reading Non-Fiction

- Writing Sentences
- Reading Fiction
- Writing Mechanics

In the spring of 2010, I took Ratio, Percent, and Proportions in the evening. I also briefly took Writing Essays in the summer of 2010, until an illness took me out of class for several weeks. I retook the class in the Fall of 2010. At the end of the Fall of 2010, I had taken all of seven of the classes in the GED preparation curriculum. In addition to these classes, in the Fall of 2009, I took an online class through the community services division of another community college in Los Angeles County. This college was not a part of the same community college district as the one where I conducted research. In order to gain a better idea of the GED classroom culture, I recorded observations from a few classes, which included:

- Fall 2010: Reading Non-Fiction and Writing Sentences
- Spring 2011 (one week of class): Writing Essays and Writing Mechanics

I also only observed classes in the Language Arts curriculum, so the classroom observations were not as holistic as the auto-ethnographic portion of the study. During the Fall 2010 observations, I was still taking the classes as well as observing them. This meant that some of the observations were co-mingled with my actually doing the work for the class. For example, while taking a quiz I would have to both take the quiz and observe. At times, my notes went into the textbooks since I was simultaneously taking the class. The Spring 2011 observations were less participatory than the fall. At that time, I was no longer taking the class and could focus on just observing the classroom.

The classroom observations helped to uncover what was going on in the classroom amongst students, Language Arts teacher, and me. The in-depth interviews were to gain insight on the student and teacher experiences in their GED preparation process. Late in the Fall 2010 semester and mid-way through the Spring 2011 semester, I interviewed twelve students. I completed six interviews with students I had met during the course of my own GED studies. The last six were done with students I had not met them previously to the spring semester. The interviews were held in the quad outside of the classroom or on benches outside of the non-credit trailer office. The students approved these locations. The interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the students. All students approved, signed and were given an informed consent form for their participation. As part of the consent process, they knew that their participation was voluntary, they could stop at any time, and that their participation would not affect their classroom performance.

The twelve participants had many similarities, but had significant personal differences. The study included parents, children, men, women, employed, unemployed, disabled, those taking both night classes and day classes. In order to organize these interviewees, the following section will create a profile of each student interviewed.

Table 3.1 Interview Profile

Student	Gender	Age	Family
#1: Mack	Male	Older	No children
#2: Susan	Female	Older	Children
#3: Jove	Male	Older	Children
#4: Charlie	Male	Middle	Children
#5: Igor	Male	Middle	N/A
#6: Betty	Female	Middle	Children
#7: Jen A.	Female	Young	N/A
#8: Jen B.	Female	Young	N/A
#9: Nate	Male	Young	No children
#10: Sam	Female	Young	Children
#11: Luke	Male	Middle	Children
#12: Laura	Female	Middle	Children

Data Analysis

The data for this study consisted of interview transcripts of twelve students and their language arts teacher, an autoethnographic journal and field notes from language arts classes observed on several occasions during the Fall of 2010 and one week in the Spring of 2011. The audio for the interviews was recorded and transcriptions were done manually. The transcripts from the interviews were analyzed either “open-ended”, or towards the end of the study, or more “closed-ended” process once analysis had started to

take shape (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). For the exploration of the data, several transcripts were coded with what Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) describe as literal codes in order to begin to understand major themes of the study. After going through a series of interviews, and major analytical themes began to emerge, the analysis for the existing coded transcripts and the additional ones focused more on interpreting passages rather than line-by-line analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

After the initial codes were determined, I organized data in to a spreadsheet that covered each interview and major themes and points along their timelines. This helped organize findings and key quotes while having key demographic or descriptive data (i.e. when student dropped out of high school) to determine patterns. Some items from this spreadsheet appear as tables in the study.

Major themes were also analyzed through narrative analysis of interview data. The analysis fit best as shown as a progression through the students' own timeline from dropping out, to returning, to plans after they completed their GED. Once this progression was determined, key narratives were analyzed and included when they highlighted a particularly notable experience at that point of the timeline. Narratives were chosen for their detail of a certain phenomenon observed through the interviews. Disconfirming accounts were included as much as possible in order to show alternative life experiences.

As I went in to the field with an exploratory point of view with this study, I decided to maintain this perspective as I analyzed data. Open coding helped to provide the foundation of the interpretation of the students' experiences and then helped to provide the basis to distill the experiences together.

Field Site

This study took place at a community college in a city in Los Angeles County, California. The college is on the border of East Los Angeles, which is part of the city of Los Angeles and Monterey Park. The college is part of the Los Angeles Community College District, which includes nine community colleges in Los Angeles with 27,703 students in the Fall of 2009 (District, 2010). Of the student body, 6.0% of the students are “transitional” or students who are either enrolled to improve basic skills or to gain their high school diploma (Office of Institutional Research, 2009). Despite the ethnicity statistics accounting only for credit students, of which GED students are not, the college is predominantly Latino (75.9%) followed by Asian (18.5%), Caucasian (2.6%), and Black (2.3%) (Office of Institutional Research, 2009).

The campus itself is typical of a community college campus, small and active. Several of the buildings in use, in April 2010, were older buildings on campus, a collection of mid-century academic buildings. Many were labeled with fields of study (i.e. Architecture) on the outside of classrooms. There was a great deal of construction taking place on campus during this study. The community college was building new academic buildings and parking garages. The southwest part of the campus had the athletic facilities, including a football stadium and a natatorium. There was a statue of the college’s mascot near the southwest entrance of the campus. Fliers, posters, and corkboards full of student events around the campus indicated the varied activities of the student body. There were parking lots around campus, many were reserved just for permit parking, but there was a fairly sizeable lot for day-pass visitors with overflow on the “old” baseball park. The college had buses, and several city buses and a regional East

Los Angeles 'El Sol' buses also had routes that serviced the college. Also, there was a light-rail stop south of the campus, but was around a half an hour walk to campus.

The non-credit division was housed on the northeast side of the campus. Non-credit offered basic skills classes intended for adults, such as English as a second language, basic math, basic writing, and basic reading. The latter three courses were all based on a GED preparation curriculum and used textbooks that are GED preparation books designed to prepare students for the exam. Any student, with or without a diploma already, could take the courses because, ultimately, they were basic skills courses. A student who enrolled in these classes received a student ID number and card. The non-credit classes were also free to enroll in and they were ungraded.

The non-credit division was housed on a quad with a collection of classroom trailers that appeared to be temporary classrooms and received constant foot traffic all day with many students attending classes in the morning and night. There were about fourteen to fifteen total, in two rows, with an office and a bathroom. The non-credit division shared this quad with credit-division English and Nursing. This section was a bit disconnected from campus, being on a hill, up a staircase, and not a main thoroughfare used by the student body. There were also satellite classes offered in an off-campus community center in a nearby city. Despite having few credit students in class, GED students could interact with for-credit students, in the parking lots, walking to class, or going to stores on campus.

I attended the GED preparation classes for the writing and math sections starting in July 2010. There were two sessions for classes each day one in the morning and one in the evening. I attended classes during both sessions to become familiar with the

differences between the morning and evening classes. Classes lasted approximately two hours. This field site fit the study best because:

Cost effectiveness: I could register for classes as someone who was not a traditional GED student. There were no tuition or course costs associated with enrollment. Even though course books were handed out to us during classes, I opted to buy two textbooks that were about \$40 total. The math textbook was especially useful since we had regular homework assignments for these classes.

Easy to attend: The college had GED preparation classes in the morning and evening. I attended evening classes when I was working full time in the spring. When I was a full-time student, I attended all the classes in the morning that left me enough time to complete graduate school course work or a part-time job in the afternoon.

Location: The College was close to my house and the commute took between twenty and forty minutes, depending on the traffic.

Physical Classroom

From the inside, the classroom itself looked very similar to classrooms in my educational career. From the outside, the building resembled a temporary building – those that are often used for a construction site offices. Before attending courses for the auto-ethnographic portion of this study, I had not attended classes in a temporary classroom

structure. At this community college, there were a few quads that consisted of these types of buildings, probably due to the high volume of construction at the campus at this time.

The classroom's actual layout was instantly familiar. There was a marker board on the south side of the room, buttressed by desks with computers built in to them. The desks were in sets of three on either side of the room, with a walkway down the center. The front of the classroom contained a teacher's desk on the south side and old haikus written by former, presumably adult, students on the wall surrounded a desk, a marker board on the wall, and a rolling board that could be flipped to expose another marker board. The cabinet that contained the books for class was on the north side of the classroom. For the Writing Mechanics and Writing Sentences classes, the teacher would pass out textbooks that were held in this cabinet. Students purchased math books for class. For the reading class, the teacher would hand out the assigned books (*House on Mango Street; Knife, Fist, Stick, Gun; and The Shawl*) at the beginning of class from this cabinet. The reading fiction books were short enough that we would have a reading period in class for about one hour to an hour and fifteen minutes to finish assigned writings and then discuss topics related to the reading. The class would hand back the book at the end of the class each day. The non-fiction reading class's book required homework assignments to finish and students were expected to take the book home and complete them. There was also a TV in the class that was stored next to the cabinet.

The classroom was outfitted as a computer lab. Most of the desks had working computers in them. We never used the computers during our classes as part of the curriculum or an exercise, the bookwork and lecture were the main modes of instruction. However, students used the computers during class for other reasons. I assumed that

students were using them for recreation, and at times, some students were pulling up videos. However, two instances changed my opinion. I was handing out books for one class and noticed an older Asian female using her computer. I assumed she was checking her email, but as I moved closer, I saw that she had Google translate up on her screen. She was using the computer during class to help her with English translation. The second instance of computer usage that changed my opinion took place after a Writing Essays class. I had observed a group of four students, and I noticed they were talkative and seemed generally unmotivated. When I actually listened to them, however, they were actually teasing each other about their grades and their progress in class. At the end of class, they found sports videos online and were showing off to each other. After they handed in their work, and the class was mostly cleared out, they started playing the videos to each other. They even called the teacher over to show them some of the trick plays in a sports game they had found. The computer was not a distraction. It seemed to be a reward for them. My initial assumption was unfair, and I was glad to know it was wrong.

These two instances support the amount of times that I would look up and see students just looking down at the computer. I could not tell what each person was doing at the computer and before these two experiences, I would have assumed wasting time. However, just as easily we could see that may be there were translating the class, or checking email to check on a job opportunity. It is difficult to say without checking the websites they visited while in class.

The classroom was populated with large number of students. At the beginning of the semester, there would be sitting room only. The back of the classroom had one larger

shared table, which could sit four to five students. I found myself sitting on a stack of unassembled tables towards the back, south side of the classroom. Students sometimes had to improvise seating, however by the end of the term, enough students had dropped out of class for us to have traditional seats.

For the Language Arts classes⁵ that were analyzed in this study, the teacher often circulated the classroom, but lectured in the front of the class. He wrote often on the marker boards in the front. The side marker board was rarely used.

Philosophy of Language Arts Classes

Despite being a very traditional classroom, the daytime Language Arts teacher did maintain a strong philosophy for his classroom. He had taught GED students for many years, and through an interview with him, had mentioned that he noticed that teaching traditionally was not working. That there was something more to the GED process that he needed to support. He understood that he needed to compensate for the hardships that these students were living with, so he developed the in-class philosophy of Kaizen. He defined Kaizen as small steps for continual improvement to attain mastery. He would provide lectures on this and loop back to the concept during class.

The definition of Kaizen was written on the side chalkboard. This remained on the board through both semesters of the class. The GED was one part of their mastery of their education. Students were mostly receptive to the idea. With exception of Igor, who considered that he did not need any philosophy outside of his religion, most students thought that this reflected their reality. Laura felt that the approach was beneficial: “I

⁵ Only one teacher’s classes were observed for this study. These classes were during the day and I received teacher consent to observe them. A classroom informed consent was given to students.

think that it's great. The way he makes us write about personal things sometimes...draws myself to the writing, makes me want to write." Kaizen and mastery personalized the experience helped to motivate and encourage some students.

In-Class Work

Most of the students were taking multiple classes in the GED curriculum, and some were taking all the classes offered every Monday through Thursday. During the day, this would amount to classes from 8:00 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. Three classes were offered in the morning and each class lasted nearly two hours. For the entire week, this was approximately 18 hours of classes. In this study, more than half the students interviewed were taking classes during the day. The other participants were night students. The night classes were a series of two classes starting at 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. These students would mostly have work obligations during the day and could only attend the night classes. Although I never observed the night classes for this study, I did attend a night class in the spring of 2010. I had to take the Ratio, Percent, and Proportion class in the evening because I had work obligations that kept me at work until 5:30 p.m. With the commute, I ended up making most of the classes on time. Without the night classes, I would have been prevented from attending due to my work commitments at the time. This is a common situation for night class students since many worked during the day and could only attend classes in the evening. However, more students attended morning classes than night classes overall.

Each of the classes I took had a significant amount of classwork associated with learning the material. During the first math class, I found myself not keeping up with the

homework as much as I should have. I would skip doing assignments or hand them in for no credit. When I eventually went to class full-time, I felt more responsibility to follow through on the classes. I came up with ways to keep up with the classwork. For the math classes, once I was assigned the homework assignment, I would try to complete it as quickly as I could. I would stay after my last class of the day, and finish the work. It was similar to a study hall. For the reading class, I would sit in my car in between classes and try to read as much ahead as I could. In the reading classes, we read specific assignments in the book during class and I would usually read ahead of the assigned range. In case I arrived to class late or missed a class, I would not be that far behind the rest of the class. Both types of classes had quizzes and tests throughout the semester. We had to study for quizzes, but most of the time I studied for them before class began or not at all. The material was at a basic level for me. Students reported that they did study for the tests more than I had observed myself doing.

The Language Arts teacher employed traditional methods to go through the material once actually inside the classroom. He would spend some time talking to the whole class together, introducing a subject, having us open books, follow along with instruction, and then he followed it up with an activity. The activities from the book could either be close to the GED format or testing a concept in an original format. The book's mini-quizzes were multiple choice and would resemble the eventual tests on the subject. Sometimes in Writing Sentences or Writing Mechanics classes, we would write out sentences and correct them, something that is not done on the test. The teacher gave us ample time to complete these exercise, often fifteen or more minutes. Then, we would

come together and correct the questions. If there were a time crunch, he would list the answers. More typically, we would review the answers with a discussion.

Conclusion

This study offers a unique point of view on the GED process because of the use of certain qualitative methods. Instead of relying on classroom observations and in-depth interviews, I have used auto-ethnography to bring in the perspective of researcher who has taken the classes. As the findings and discussion section will go into detail, this helped in both areas because I was able to catalogue observations from the perspective of a student and also to have conversations as the way classmates or people who went through the same program are able to.

Chapter Four

Reporting of Early School Experiences, Family Life, and Leaving School

Introduction

This section reviews the data focused on early school experiences, family life, and leaving school for the twelve GED students interviewed for this study. In order to understand why these students returned to the classroom to complete a GED program, we need to know why they left their high schools in the first place. Defining GED students' experiences helps us understand what was special or not about their high school years compared to mainstream students, essentially, why they chose to leave school while others did not. The subjects in this study are often remorseful about their educational histories, but were their actions during high school really that counterintuitive, countercultural, or special compared to teenagers who actually graduated? I observed students who had been in honors classes or participated in extracurricular activities, and they still dropped out of school. Some of these students faced impediments in their lives, including unsupportive parents, distracting friends, and childhood illnesses. Lack of motivation to continue school or their academic careers led these students to drop out of school. For the majority of them, this apathy towards traditional high school had more influence on them leaving than any in-school factors, including teachers. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight some of the reasons that students had in their decisions to leave school. This decision is the first step to leading them to the GED process later and helps to understand what mattered to students when they dropped out.

Laura's narrative shows how at-home factors can derail the educational career of a promising young person. She had great potential to be a successful student after being recognized for her aptitude in math and science during middle school. However, her experiences at home and at school represent one way a student can become distracted, disillusioned, and, ultimately, dismissive of school during their adolescence.

Laura's Narrative

When I met Laura, she was a mother of a kindergartener. We discussed her educational career, starting with elementary school. Laura was a bright math student in elementary and middle school. "Math was my favorite. I loved numbers. It just made sense to me. Everything else was too complicated." Her school recognized her potential and promoted her to take honors math and science classes. Laura speculated: "The only reason [she was accepted] for science is because I was good at math." However, the complication of "everything else" would eventually define her initial educational experience.

"Everything else" was significant. Laura's parents both left home when she was very young. She attributed their leaving to their drug abuse. Her family had different priorities outside of academic achievement. She said:

Laura: Well, my mom left when I was like maybe six and my dad was down and out when I was five. My grandmother, may she rest in peace, was an alcoholic. My uncle was a crack head. My other uncle was a cokehead. And my other uncle was a pill-popper so they did other things too. It was never brought up [her being

in honors classes], The weekends were brought up. When I got home, the music would be blasting.

Interviewer: Already?

Laura: Yeah, I'd come home, I would walk up a block, and we were up on the fourth floor. I would hear it echoing down the alley, and I knew what kind of day I was going to have. It was never discussed.

Interviewer: Your accomplishments in school?

Laura: Yeah

Laura's placement in honors classes did not exactly make her feel proud. "I don't know if I would describe it as proud. Yeah, yeah, I felt accomplished. Just felt silly being there." She felt different from her classmates in her honors classes and that she did not "fit in". Students were mostly Caucasians or Asians "with nice stuff". Reflecting on this time, she felt it was impossible not to be jealous of their possessions. "They all have freaking nice lead pencils, and you are a kid, and you want them. And sitting there, I felt out of place, so I didn't want to try." Despite her potential to achieve in the class, Laura was demotivated by material possessions she observed other students using.

Since her honors classmates were not like her, she gravitated towards people whose lives were also shaped by drug abuse. She associated herself with people who behaved like her family because she thought they were "cool".

Interviewer: Ok, so at the time were you hanging out with your honors school friends outside of class?

Laura: No, outside of class, I was with a different crowd.

Interviewer: Different crowd

Laura: Yea, trying to fit in with the cool crowd, I guess.

Interviewer: ...why did you think they were cool?

Laura: They just, they did things that my relatives did. I didn't have my mom or my dad around, they were both substance abusers and then all my older relatives, ah, smoked pot, and drank and did that home and as a child, I ran around and I saw that growing up, so when learned to do it myself, um, it was easy to interact with other children who were doing it...

Laura admits her social life was "easier" by keeping company with drug abusers. She maintained her grades until she eventually stopped caring. At that point, she "showed up for the class, and do the work," she said "but I wasn't able to keep up any more." She started smoking pot in eighth grade and eventually: "I stopped going to school. Around the eighth grade, I got kicked out of class."

"I went to high school basically to have fun," Laura admitted. She was no longer in honors classes and was hanging out with a bad crowd. Eventually, she was "kicked out" of school again in the tenth grade. "I was caught on campus with marijuana." For a week or a week and a half, Laura found herself in juvenile hall. "Yea, I went there, and it wasn't for me. I never got arrested after that."

Interviewer: What was going on there?

Laura: They were meaner, more hostile. The adults there were more hostile there. It's dirty, they tell you when to shower and when to use the restroom. When you got to go, you don't want to squirt your pants, but you don't have that option. So, you use the sock that they would use the prior day, you should take it off at night, you use that as your sponge the next day to shower with. They give you like a

fifty cent size shampoo slash conditioner slash body wash slash bar soap so you have that all in your sock. And you use that for your hair and then the rest for your body. It was not an enjoyable experience.

After leaving juvenile hall, Laura was placed in adult continuation school. “It was the same thing”, she answered when I asked how adult continuation went “I wasn’t really trying, so they asked me to leave. So I transferred to an adult school, and I didn’t try there either.” Following many years, having a child of her own, a break-up with her daughter’s father, and a desire to start a new career and in an effort to “save her family”, she returned to the classroom to prepare for her GED.

Laura left school for some of the same reasons other GED students who participated in this study also dropped out. She fell in with the wrong crowd. A number of students admitted to making the “wrong” friends while in school. For them, the groups were defined by different behaviors. Nate’s tagging crew, Luke’s pot smoking friends, or Jen B.’s laundromat clique. Today, many of the participants acknowledge the foolishness of ditching class with their friends; however, at the time, they were willing participants. Another common element was that Laura’s family was neither supportive of her academics nor created a stable home environment for her. Some parents were going through divorces or were thoroughly uncommunicative. Luke and Laura’s experience were the most alike when it came to their parents’ combination of drug use and divorce. Laura, as well as Luke and Igor, all started drug use while in high school.

As shown in Laura’s narrative, school performance is strongly affected by at-home circumstances. Families – both parents and extended – influence the educational

careers of children in the home. Parents, as described by their children, were in two vastly different groups. The first set of parents was unsupportive, distracted, and destructive. These parents were drug users or left the home and did not prioritize their children's lives, let alone their education. The second set of parents was passive, unknowledgeable and powerless. These parents would have rather seen their children finish school, but the students craved a greater degree of engagement. The degree of chaos in the house also affected students' predilection to leave school. Students mentioned their parents' divorce, drug use and general apathy as all distracting factors to their educational career.

As an institution, school was rarely the only factor the students cited for their decision to leave. Elementary school, for almost all of the students, was remembered fondly. They described it as a place they liked and where they had fun. When entering middle school or junior high, the respondents' attitudes towards school dull considerably. Happy and buoyant memories are replaced with difficult classes and bad friends. The students in this study start to tell stories of losing interest, increasing absences and decreasing grades. For some students in this study, they did not even officially graduate from middle school before starting high school.

Most of the students finally dropped out during high school. With the exception of one student who left school in 8th grade in Nicaragua, the remainder left at some grade during high school (9th through 12th). The students who dropped out domestically all shared similar experiences of losing interest in academics. This would manifest in skipping class or "ditching". It was not always the grades or academic ability that would contribute to a student leaving. Often they did not attend school and, while some were having a good time, their time away from the classroom therefore contributed to a deficit

of credits to graduate that year. They reported that they stopped caring and when they stopped caring, they stopped coming to school.

There was a subset of students in this study who exhibited characteristics that would normally predict academic success. This group included Laura, the former honors math and science student, Sam, the soccer player, and Charlie, the amateur boxer. Qualities like academic excellence and extracurricular activities usually predict positive school behavior, but these students still left school. A fundamental learning from this study is understanding that having some of the typical keys to academic success is not enough to keep all students motivated to stay in school. Furthermore, the memories of their formerly exceptional school experience did not disappoint them, instead, they recalled this time period without much emotion. Their current experiences of Laura, trying to do something for her family, Sam, attempting to be a good role model from her children, and Charlie starting a new career, were far more powerful for them. In fact, Sam admitted that since leaving high school, “I haven’t really changed. I really haven’t changed. I like coming to school, I just hate the homework part.”

The majority of students felt that it was their fault they left school, and that it was caused by laziness and immaturity. Their reasons for dropping out were not always direct, but often vague and passive. To them, it made sense to leave school. It was a rational decision. For example, they may have had a job already that would hire them even if they left school. Or they may have attempted to continue in an alternative curriculum and lost interest. Some students had a combination of factors, like Sam who became pregnant and left school because she was constantly tired during class. Two

experienced being pushed out: Luke, who was brought into the principal's office at 18 and asked to leave, and Igor who aged out of the system.

Chapter Four analyzes the early school experiences of students who leave school before attaining a high school diploma. Early school experiences are defined as students' elementary, middle, and high school careers. This chapter reviews the details of family life during high school as students remember today. Negative factors in the home could distract students or led them to be socialized to make the "wrong", in their words, kind of friends. The final part of this chapter will discuss the factors or drivers leading to the decision for these students to leave school.

Family Life

Igor's Narrative

The first question of the interview began with elementary school. Most students described their early school experience in the classroom, but Igor immediately told a story about his family life. "Elementary school was kind of, um, I didn't learn that much," Igor started to recall, "At that time my parents were getting a divorce. Well, they were separating. They would break up and get back together at that time." His parents' divorce affected his school performance. "I wasn't focusing on school that much. I was hyper. And um, I didn't pay attention in class." His progress did not improve as he aged. "As I got older, it was the same thing. I would get easily distracted and, um, teachers would tell my parents maybe it was because of the break up, the separation of my parents." Igor was not convinced. "And I kinda, I guess I took it like that, but I don't

know if that it was, I was small.” Igor’s parents finalized their divorce when he was seven. “So, when they ended up getting divorced that kind of did affect my schooling, somehow I guess.”

When he left elementary school, his diagnosis did not improve. “When I got to junior high, they told my parents that I had ADD and ADHD. They asked them to tell me to take medication, but I didn’t want to take medication, but I didn’t want to take medication, neither did my parents. So I didn’t take any and I was still hyper.

Hyperactive”. This meant was that he “didn’t pay attention and any of that stuff, so I still got easily distracted, didn’t do my work”. This eventually affected his schooling to the point that Igor was moved to a special education school. “They put me in a special ed school, and when I was in the special ed school they gave me more help because it was more one on one.” Given these stories, it is clear the relationship between Igor’s parents affected him, and related to that, his school performance. Whether or not his parents’ divorce caused his hyperactivity, he did feel distracted enough by the experience to describe his elementary school years mostly as the status of his parents’ issues.

Family life is essential to the development of a young person including their academic performance. In this study, many of the GED students blamed their parents for not being more involved in their schooling. Even when they admitted that their parents were disappointed in their failure to graduate, the students wondered why they were not more involved. Another set of parents apparently passed on their bad habits to their children. In this study, the primary bad habit was drug use. Finally, instability in the

family that was often caused by divorce consistently caused distractions for the students. Although the students in this study took responsibility for their dropping out, they often used their family life as a reason they were not motivated to go to school. In terms of obstacles for education, parents' country of origin, drug usage or marital issues caused the most instability for these students in their homes.

One reason that parents may not have been involved in their children's education was a cultural difference. There was a substantial number of parents who had not been educated in this country, nor had they completed the full course of study in their home country. Therefore, many of these students were children of immigrants who were undereducated themselves. In Table 4.1, 50% percent of students had parents who were not born in this country. It could be difficult navigating classroom materials without parents who spoke English. For Betty, she noted when she went to a Spanish-language classroom:

I got used to it because my main language was Spanish to start off with. It was a little bit easier, it was easier, because even though my Mom didn't go to school, when I was going to school here, my parents didn't speak English, so I had to do my homework so nobody helped me with my homework, like I do with my kids.

Table 4.1 Country of Origin of Parents

Student	Country of Origin	Parents Language	At-Home Language
Betty	Mexico	Spanish	Spanish
Charlie	Mexico	n/a	Spanish
Igor	Mother-Mexico Father- USA	n/a	n/a
Jove	Nicaragua	Spanish	Spanish
Nate	Guatemala	Spanish	Spanish
Susan	Mother- Mexico Father-USA	n/a	n/a

Family could be a major distraction; however, dysfunctional families could be supportive households for students. Susan reported that her parents had an uncommunicative relationship, but she did feel that her parents did care about her education, but there may have not been enough urgency. She acknowledged that her father wanted her to complete school and was disappointed when she did not at that time and, today, her mother is happy to see her go through the GED process. Similar to Susan’s situation, Charlie’s home situation caused a major distraction for him, “...I couldn’t really concentrate in class because I was thinking of things that we were going through”. When Charlie left school, his father could observe that he was not doing anything productive. He requested that Charlie move to Mexico, which Charlie agreed to. That time in Mexico, where Charlie was not in school but was working, was different for him and gave him something to do. Despite having had some strain in his family caused by his parents, his father’s recognition of Charlie’s condition after he dropped out made a positive impact on his life.

The stability of parents’ relationships can be vital to the development of students as they go through school. Divorces and poor parent relationships cause major distractions for students. For Igor and Betty, divorce caused instability in the home. For

Igor, the emotional instability affected his memories and, potentially, his health when he was diagnosed with hyperactivity. Parents' relationships could also upend a child's life, as in Betty's case. When her parents divorced, she moved to Mexico for a year. Poor parent relationships, like lack of communications, lead to unsupportive households that can distract students from school.

Lack of communication and stability certainly is destructive, additionally, parents who abused substances in front of their kids caused a major distraction and an extraordinary negative environment for their children. Luke and Laura admitted that their parents abused drugs issues while she was in school. Laura reflected that she was drawn to other students who may have had similar family backgrounds. She started abusing drugs while still in school. Luke's parents were absent as well as abusers, which negatively affected him as he went through school. He started using drugs at the same time his friends were experimenting. Luke exhibited a slight competition with his twin brother, who would garner more positive attention from their family. Whatever reason, his twin brother did not start abusing marijuana until years later. Both Luke and Laura started using drugs with a group of friends who made them feel comfortable. They did not just start using drugs because of their parents, but at least for Laura, it acclimated her to the culture of abusing drugs. Parents who abuse drugs were not only poor role models, but obviously were not creating a supportive environment for their children.

Early School Experience

Elementary School Narrative

Jen B. had limited classroom experience because she was often ill as a child. At first, she liked her time away from school, but admitted that the social atmosphere is what she missed the most:

And I thought back then, I thought it was kinda cool, because I got out of going to school. I got used to not going to school a lot, because I was always ill, so I got used to not going to school after home studies...Now, now I see a differences. I know it's like I didn't get to do a lot of stuff because I had home studies. Socialize with people and stuff like that.

Eventually, her home studies experience, which assigned an instructor to meet with her at home during her illnesses, would affect how she performed in school:

When I went back to school, it was like junior high...I got to socialize with people, but I wasn't used to being at school...like I would leave school, I would ditch because I didn't like being in school for eight hours. You know, because my home teacher was there for one or two hours. I wasn't in school for eight hours.

Home studies did not acclimate her for full-time school. Jen B. admitted that she wished that she had home studies again when she was older, and did eventually become sick again during school and required a teacher to visit her house. Having home studies while she was so young introduced her to independent study and having a shorter school day, which she believed led her to be unable to adjust back to the eight-hour school day.

The GED students remembered elementary school as a largely positive experience. Most of them, Luke being an exception, reflected on good memories they had at this time. Luke remembered he “barely passed” and was more focused on childhood distractions like “cartoons and stuff”. The rest of the students fondly remembered some of the aspects they particularly enjoyed from this time, including the level of interaction with teachers. “You only have one teacher,” Sam said, “and it’s awesome”. As the interview progressed through middle and high school, one of the major differences between the higher levels of school and elementary school was the level of teacher to student interaction.

Susan reflected upon a simpler time when she was in elementary school. “I think the innocence, the innocence, the safe, the safe environment, and ah, just your parents being there, taking you to school...dropping you off, taking you to school. Once you go to Junior High, your parents don’t take you to school, it was much more of a safety.” Susan’s parents had been uncommunicative during much of her schooling, so elementary school as remarkable as a time when she admitted they were participatory in her life.

The majority of participants attended school in the United States. Only three of the students in the study – Jove, Nate, and Betty – had gone to school in another country. The experience in the United States was much different for two of these students. The third, Betty, did not mention a significant difference. For Nate, his experiences in Guatemala shaped his first classroom experiences in the United States. He felt that his experiences in class in the United States were much more positive than what he had experienced abroad. School was very different in Guatemala:

Interviewer: What made it different?

Nate: If you didn't bring your homework, there were severe consequences.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Nate: The teacher picked up a ruler and hit me once when I didn't do my homework. That was, that was really bad... Yeah, I thought it was going to be like that, and the teacher was like, you don't write it in the math book and the fact that they were kind and understanding, you know do it my way, you could work around things, and that was pretty good.

Not only did he have to learn how to speak English in his school, but also he had to learn how to act in an American classroom. Despite this learning curve, his experience highlighted that the teachers were, as he said, "kind and understanding", which helped him become acclimated.

There was only one student who was taught predominantly outside of the United States. Jove was originally from Nicaragua and was a child there during the war. School would be suspended for a year at a time because of the war, and his family did not have money available to pay a teacher when school was suspended. Eventually, as a young adult he came to the United States where his education was more informal. He taught himself English while working at a gas station. He was among the most active in the GED preparation classroom and answered questions while demonstrating good command of the language despite admitting to be shy in his interview.

Middle School Experiences

Middle School Narrative

Poor transitions can help bad academic habits develop in middle school. Small class sizes and supportive teachers – a key component of the subjects’ elementary school experiences - are replaced by larger middle schools that combine elementary schools and rely on individual students to direct themselves. For Betty, both of the elementary schools she had attended in the city “went to the same middle school.” Middle school for her, “I think that’s when I dropped out. I dropped out in the seventh grade.” Unlike other students, she admitted that middle school was a good time. “In the beginning, it was fun. I was looking more what was happening [socially] than in classes.”

In middle school, Betty increased her amount of friends, but not their quality. “I met a lot of people there. That’s probably where I made some bad connections. I started hanging out with the wrong people missing class.” Middle school itself was a more independent experience, which for Betty was positive. “It was good, you had to change, go to a lot of classes, depend on yourself to go to one class to the other and participate.” When Betty entered the seventh grade, classes became more difficult. “...When I started going to seventh grade, I guess the classes started to get a little difficult and so I wasn’t paying attention, I was sitting at the back of the class instead of the front of the class, so I think that I stopped going to school for a like a year, so I never completed eighth grade, so I never completed middle school.”

For Betty, this did not preclude her from entering high school. She would return to school and enroll in a large urban high school near downtown LA and then an alternative high school that focused on individual study. Eventually, her mother started a

“graveyard” shift at work, so Betty assumed the daytime baby-sitter role in her family and stopped going to school. Her parents did not push her to finish school, as she notes, “So, my parents never pressed on the issue, well, they never went to school.” After officially dropping out of school and observing what has happened in her life, she learned the value of education. She had a series of dead-end jobs and could see that she needed education to move beyond her professional limitations. Betty was the only student who admitted to being on CALWORKS⁶, and using the support to help her pay for childcare and using this time to focus on her studies. The bad habits acquired in middle school caused lasting damage to her educational career, but the GED is one way for her to start overcoming these deficiencies.

Middle school⁷, or junior high for some of the older students, was the end of the congenial elementary school years. Many of the participants went to school in Los Angeles County, where this next school level consolidated many smaller schools in different neighborhoods. This expanded their social circles, however it may have led to more distractions in lives of many of these students. In their life stories, this was the first time that many of them mentioned negative influences and “hanging around the wrong kind of friends”.

⁶ California’s “welfare to work” program

⁷ This section focuses on the school between elementary and high school. Today, this is typically classified as ‘middle school’, which contains fifth through eighth grades depending on the school district. For some students, they went to junior high, which housed seventh through eighth grade. This section of the interview focused on this “transition point” and did not focus much on curriculum, so middle school and junior high can be comparable.

Middle school was more academically serious than elementary school had been. The subject matters challenged the students and they needed to be more responsible with their studies. They went from being aided by teachers to having to act more independently. They were no longer having the fun they reported in elementary school and adjectives like “difficult,” “scary,” “more intense, more school work, more hours to study...more studying” were used to describe the experience.

Participants also started to become truant—middle school was their first experience of “ditching class” for many of the students. Although the students were very young, they would still leave school by themselves. As has been covered, Jen B. had been ill for much of elementary school. However, by the time she was healthy enough to return to school she had already been socialized to a short school day. She admitted she never acclimated back to the longer school day. Her grades were “pretty good” in middle school. “They were A’s and B’s. In my eighth grade year, that’s when I kind of laxed off, I didn’t want to go to school any more. I wanted home studies again.” Because she was healthy, she had to attend school. Her principal gave her an ultimatum: either she came to school or she was not going to pass that year. “So, I had to literally go to school, even on Saturdays, to catch up on my days.”

Middle school was not always a negative experience. Charlie admitted that he enjoyed his time. Spanish was his first language, so by Middle School he was familiar enough with English, “After I got the hang of it, I liked it. I actually liked it through middle school.” His inflection point was later, “the high school is when I started not caring so much about school.” Charlie felt that going through middle school showed that he was “getting bigger” and he enjoyed participating in activities, including band. His

friends made fun of him, so eventually he dropped out. “I guess it was a bit of peer pressure, and I didn’t want to be seen as like, you know, different.” Despite dropping out of band, he did remain in another extracurricular boxing until the time he dropped out of high school. “I pretty much dropped them at the same time, school and boxing.”

Middle school was largely a transition point for these students. They were being pushed to act more independently and the subject matter was harder. In addition to these changes in class, students were able to try and take part in truant behavior with friends who were – in their words – the bad crowd. Pushing the limits and ditching in middle school started to introduce these students to leaving school altogether, which most would do during high school.

High School Experiences

High School Narrative

Susan ditched class many times when she was in high school. Not only did she skip class for weeks at a time, she would involve herself in altercations at school. Susan said, “and then high school, I was very rebellious, I became very rebellious”. Academics were not a priority for her, “I wasn’t taking classes seriously, I would ditch a lot. A lot of classes. I made it to the twelfth grade, but with low, well, my credits, low credits because I wasn’t going to classes.” For many of these students, their friends and family also did not graduate For Susan, however, this was not the case. Her ditching caused her to not

graduate, but “all my friends graduated and, um, I didn’t, and that was disappointing to my Dad, all my sisters and my brother had graduated and I didn’t”.

One extraordinary element of Susan’s story was her reputation as a fighter. This started earlier than high school, “Because I think when we were in elementary, we were picked on a lot, me and my sisters”. Eventually, her sisters and Susan would keep quiet, but her sister “she went through a lot of bullying, a lot of bullying.” After putting up with this behavior through elementary and middle school, Susan’s father heard about what had been going on with his daughters. He told Susan, “I don’t want you girls fighting, but if someone picks on you or pushes you physically, defend yourself. You aren’t going to be picked on, defend yourself. And that was it, the first something and I wouldn’t start the fights, if someone were to pick on me, I would just fight back.”

These fights would eventually take place in school, “usually in the bathroom”, Susan admitted. Susan was one of the older students in the study, so policies on school violence and attendance are dramatically different today – something Susan acknowledged often when referencing raising her own children. As for her fighting in school, the administrators were aware, but to Susan, did not understand the severity of the altercations. Recalling one incident, “Here comes another administrator, and instead of him just saying ‘hey, what’s going on,’ He said ‘stop, stop, go to your class’, like he didn’t get us, like what’s going on, because this girl was like ready to attack, and I was ready to defend myself, he just shushed us away just go.” Susan sensed there was a major difference between fights among boys and between girls, at least in school administrators’ perspectives. She remembered that administrators would stop the male fights, but “shush” the girls’ fights. “Yea, so, little girls’ stuff, go back to your

class...they would go shush, go to your classrooms. Stop this nonsense.” She noted that this policy has changed, since her son attends the same school she did, and bullying warrants significant attention in the school today and is taken seriously by administrators. Regardless, according to her recollection, she was not a bully, she was merely protecting her sister and herself from the threats in school.

For Susan, ditching caused her not to graduate on time, but her disposition as a fighter is what she remembered most from High School. Despite engaging in violent behavior, she did not report being punished harshly for her actions. However, the distractions caused by having to protect her sister and herself were enough to crowd out other high school experiences.

Generally positive experiences in elementary school and challenging times in middle school ended with a truant and negative high school experience for many students. In this study, some students who entered high school regardless did so whether or not they graduated from middle school or junior high. Once in high school, they seemed to enjoy the social atmosphere but eschewed the academics. Reflecting on their high school experience, none of the students mentioned having fun in class. While most people had neutral experiences with their teachers, there were instances of complex, and often, negative relationships with adults in school. Overall, students did not have significant relationships with their teachers. At the most positive end of the spectrum was a teacher who tried to intervene with the students – in the case of Susan, a teacher pulled her aside, discussed her grades, and tried to keep her engaged. The most negative was in

Sam’s story. A teacher teased her that she would be pregnant if she continued going the way that she was going. The teacher, sadly, was correct. Sam eventually did become pregnant and left school.

High school was nearly a universally similar experience for students. For students educated in the United States, high schools were large, consolidated experiences. These large high schools brought together several different neighborhoods, finally culminating the last consolidation of neighborhoods into a larger school. What high school was notable was for the social atmosphere, not academics.

4.2 Reasons students left school

Student	Grade Dropped Out	Reason
Betty	High School	Disinterested/Parental Support
Charlie	10 th Grade	Personal Problems
Igor	12 th Grade	Aged Out
Jen A.	9 th Grade	Disinterested
Jen B.	10 th Grade	Had Job
Jove	n/a (educated in Nicaragua)	War
Laura	n/a (unclear due to tenure at Juvenile Facility)	No follow-up with independent classes
Luke	Halfway through 12 th Grade	Asked to leave
Mack	11 th Grade	Ditch and party
Nate	Halfway through 12 th Grade	Classmates
Sam	11 th Grade	Pregnant
Susan	12 th Grade	Disinterested

Institutionally, high school was not about education, but more about building a community. Igor kept attending class after he had turned eighteen, so long after that, according to him, his school had to dismiss due to aging out of school. Eventually, students would prioritize their social life over school, and they started to “ditch” with

friends regularly. Once truancy became standard, it appears that alternative social spaces outside of school emerged. Some students were having an exceptionally fun time, in particular, Jen B. who socialized at the laundromat while being entertained by her friend who would serenade them with singing while they were ditching class. There may have been a situation where these alternative social spaces became the default place for students to congregate over school. From the perspective of many of these students, it is difficult to speculate what actions administrators and teachers could have done to keep the students in class.

In middle school, administrator warnings may have worked to keep some students in school. Jen B. had been told that she would not graduate middle school and worked day and night to graduate. However, by the time the students entered high school, the warnings or premonitions were not as persuasive. Sam spoke about her homeroom teacher, a person she credited for helping her while she was in school. Her story:

He was really cool. He would tell us this and that. He would speak to us really honestly. He would tell me, you are going to get married soon, because of the lifestyle I lead. You are going to get married because of how your parents are. I was brought up really old-fashioned, and it was my escape route, getting pregnant.

Something about his honesty and how he paid attention to the students made her think that he supported her. However, his marriage premonition for Sam was one that did not bode well for high school or college success. She was in high school, and found a solution to escape: becoming pregnant with her boyfriend. Sam was the only female participant who left school in this study because she was pregnant. She started to become

tired in class and reported that the teachers would “call her out” because she would fall asleep in class. Her exhaustion and being picked out became a headache to her, so she just left school. She admitted she never told the teachers about her pregnancy.

Another student had interesting interactions with a person she credited with helping her while she was in high school. Once Laura was in high school, she was enrolled in a large high school in Los Angeles. She remembered a security guard who tried to help her stay out of trouble while on campus. Mostly, she remembered him as a kind, sociable figure, someone she felt comfortable having a conversation with about topics like asking how his weekend was. She observed that he also tipped her off to stop engaging in behavior that was against school policy. Although she credited him with being a positive influence while she was there, probably helping her stay out big trouble, she did end up calling him a ‘crutch’ to her bad behavior. While at the high school, she eventually would be arrested on campus for possession of marijuana.

When students became engaged in drug abuse, their participation in school decreased dramatically. Accordingly, they began ditching school more frequently with their friends who also abused drugs. Marijuana was the most frequently discussed drug but only Igor, Luke, Laura and Betty admitted using it. Due to the nature of this study being about their educational career and not trying to delve too much into the illicit world of drug use, I did not follow-up on where they were purchasing their drugs. What became clear was that they were accessing it and abusing it while in high school. It was also unclear how some of the participants could afford it, but the community and friendship groups that are associated with some drug use probably help to distribute the financial burden for this age group.

Leaving School

For the most part, students left in three groups, after 9th grade, at around 10th grade and then in their senior year. The first two groups of students can be called early leavers and those leaving in twelfth grade, late leavers. Early leavers are characterized with not sticking through the classes, basically succumbing to their peer groups very much earlier than late leavers, and trying to find alternative ways to finish school. Late leavers came very close to finishing school. Their act of leaving was often more defiant, like Nate who left half way into his senior year and characterized high school as being negative because people were “fake.” Or students had been asked to leave, in the case of Igor who was aged out or Luke whose high school principal brought him into an office around his eighteenth birthday and asked him to leave.

Students may have left school, but what they did after school often varied. They were often busy immediately after they left school. Laura continued on with independent study. Despite her still being in the school system, she was completely in charge of her progress, and this made it a dramatically different experience from previous high school. She eventually dropped out of independent study. For Betty and Luke, they became caregivers to their siblings after leaving school.

One phenomenon that emerged was a number of students who left school and entered the workforce. For Betty, Charlie, Jen B. and Sam, they all had jobs at the time of their dropping out. Some of these jobs kept them on after they dropped out of school. Not all students had jobs when they dropped out, but the ones who did felt comfortable with dropping out and their ability to gain and maintain employment. They reflected that they could leave school because they already had employment guaranteed after school and

being hired at a job did not seem so difficult. Despite not having enough cases to definitely say having a job makes a student more likely to drop out, given these students – who were at the time of their dropping out “at-risk” students – employment did make it easier for them to make the decision to leave school.

Some early leavers had tried a myriad of ways to finish school, none particularly worked for them. There are a few alternatives to get their diploma when they drop out or are kicked out of school. First, there are Adult Occupational Centers and Adult Schools. These offer a more self-directed curriculum that often left distracted students without interaction and with little accountability. These options did not work for these students, since they found themselves, years later, at the GED preparation classes at the community college.

Late leavers also tried options and also did not complete them, although they had little work to do complete their education. Susan was very disappointed in her not graduating, especially in relation to her friends and family:

I made it to the 12th grade, but with low, well my credits, low credits, because I wasn't going to classes, so um, my friends graduated and I didn't and that was disappointing, it was a disappointment to my dad because all my sisters, my brother, had all graduated and I didn't.

Sam, who left school after she became pregnant, never learned about options open to her like continuation school.

Expulsion was less common than the student becoming distracted and leaving school on their own accord. Luke was one of a couple that reported being kicked out of school, and he felt the situation was “sketchy”. He was the youngest participant in the

study, recently out of high school, and he remembered his experience vividly. He spent years trying to find a high school that fit his needs and while he was at his last school, the moment he turned eighteen he was called in the principal's office. Once there, they forced him leave. He felt that there was something strange about it. He concluded he was being kicked out because of his age. Whatever the circumstances were, he felt like collateral damage in yet another educational situation where he was being judged unfairly – something that occurred constantly in his educational career. Igor was also “kicked out” of school because reported that he aged out of his special education high school. Although he could stay there past eighteen, he had finally hit the age and still had not graduated. The school offered him a “certificate of completion” but he refused because it was not a diploma. Despite this example, students in this study were generally not asked to leave but left under their own accord.

Friends and peer groups were big factors to a student “ditching class”. Ditching often caused students to be more likely to drop out, as they would miss large amounts of school time, which cost them attendance credit as well as leaving them at a deficit when it came to class material. Falling in with the wrong crowd could have hurt their chances of finishing school. These negative influences may have distracted students; however, they had already reached a point where they no longer cared about going to school or anything educational. No matter how dysfunctional friends were, the student made the decision to drop out of school. In Susan's case, she was one of the only friends in her social group who did not to graduate – indicating that even in large, urban high schools, that there can be groups of friends who could be a positive support for graduation. Susan chose not to graduate with them, and left due to her own volition. She was not pregnant,

she did not have a job, she may have had more work to do to graduate, but, regardless, she chose not to graduate or put the work in at that time to conclude the degree.

Conclusion

What makes these students different from their peers today is that they have not finished their high school education. A vital question remains: what made them different from their classmates while they were in school? This study did not focus on their peers who graduated, however, based on this study there are a few factors that could contribute to their final decision to drop out. They include distractions caused by family life, drug abuse, pregnancy, jobs, and peer pressure. Students may have been asked to leave, but those students had extraordinary circumstances that led to their expulsion.

What they could control was their attendance in high school. Although they today they see themselves as irresponsible or immature when they dropped out, they did not do something about their situation at the time. At the time of the study, they reflected that they were not passive about their leaving school. They actively chose not to go back to school and made this decision regardless of what their family or teachers felt about them. These students were reflecting on their past experiences, that were often times disappointing to them and they were not proud their actions today. The twelve students may have related reasons why they left and why they returned. These points notwithstanding, both sets of decisions were highly personal and done with their best intentions in mind. Leaving school, to them, was logical and easy to do. However, at the time of this study, they were all returning to school, something that would be hard work

in order to reconcile their educational careers and recover some lost time for their lives and careers.

Chapter Five

Returning to School and the GED Process

Introduction

This chapter will review the data focused on returning to school and the process of attaining the GED for the twelve students interviewed in this study. Chapter Four provided an understanding of the reasons why students left school and Chapter Six reviews what students planned to do once they are GED-certified. This chapter includes an analysis of the reasons students reported for why they returned to school, how they remained motivated and how they prepared for the exams. This chapter starts with two contrasting narratives. The first is Susan's story. She highlights her strategy for finding work without a high school equivalency and her apprehension about returning to school. The act of returning can be humbling, as Susan's narrative demonstrates, but it was also exciting for her to progress. The second account is about Igor's religious transformation. Through finding faith, he redefined himself and began to engage in positive behaviors. The GED, for him, was one of the ways he could demonstrate constructive change in his life.

Susan's Second Chance

Susan, a mother of two boys aged twenty-six and sixteen, decided to return to school so she could apply for local government jobs in Los Angeles County. She needed her high school equivalency to apply for these positions. Susan did not previously have a problem being hired for jobs without a diploma. On job applications, she would falsely

claim she had graduated from high school. “I’ve been lucky,” she said “because in the years that I worked that I put ‘yes,’ and they don’t ask for it, except for [a healthcare system], but I wasn’t working there, they were just in the process of hiring me.” The industries that hired her were related to distribution, customer service, pension, and health care services. She held her last job for five years, where she worked customer service and data entry for pension and health care services company. She had even held supervisory roles in the past. However, Susan eventually recognized she had to attain her GED to make her next career move.

Susan wanted to attain her GED for many years. She tried before to prepare for the battery in the 1980s, but did not succeed because she was distracted by work. Six months before our conversation in the Fall of 2010, she had been laid off from her job and decided to go back to school. “It’s important to get your GED right away. I’ve waited all this time because I’ve always been working.” She wanted to come back to take classes at the community college, but when talking with someone at the college, they mentioned that she should try to receive her equivalency before she enrolled in credit classes. They also told her that there were free GED classes on campus. “You know, they are free classes, um, they are here, close by where I live and now I won’t stop coming. I come all the time.”

There were a few circumstances that facilitated and prompted her return. First, she was laid off and did not have the work distractions that had kept her from taking the GED when she started previously. Also, she had a friend who received her GED and proceeded to try to attain an Associate’s degree. Having this friend succeed proved to Susan that pursuing the GED was a worthwhile exercise for her. Her friend also pointed out another

advantage of returning at Susan's age: her kids were grown. Susan admitted "it's not as hard when I had little kids, but you know, they are grown".

Although factors had lined up in her favor, Susan was still nervous about returning to school. She did not have to learn a new language or deal with cognitive issues – as evidenced by her ability to achieve in a variety of real-world workplace experiences. Although she reported that registering for class was the most difficult part of the process for her to do. She felt that she was going to be surrounded by "youngsters". In her words – students that "are barely out of high school". The thought that she would be the oldest person in the school made her uncomfortable at first.

Her insecurities started to lift after a visit to campus. She could not find her assigned classroom and asked for directions from an older woman who Susan described as being in her sixties. According to Susan: "She said 'oh, it's right here,' and she says, 'oh, I'll walk you to your class.' I said, 'oh, are you a teacher?' She said 'no, I am a student.'" This interaction caused Susan to realize that she was not alone – and in fact, she was hardly the oldest student on campus. "As I walk around the school, I notice I'm not the oldest one in school. There are different ages, and um, I see people with disabilities and they are here. That even motivated me because I see that some are, with their own disabilities and they are coming to school and older people have their jobs and come after school or they come here first and they go back to work. And I said 'oh no, I have to stick with it.'"

The story does not end with Susan simply meeting a mysterious woman in her sixties who inspired her to stay at school. After the first week, Susan felt unmotivated. She found the first day "overwhelming". Returning to math was difficult and she

admitted, “math has always been my horror subject”. After her experience during the first week, she was considering dropping out and finding a new job. Despite these initial challenges, she kept going to class. In our interview several weeks after the semester had started, I asked her what her motivation was on Sunday, immediately prior to her second week of classes:

Sunday, I was thinking, I’m not going back. Then, Monday, I just got up and I got dressed and I came to class and I found parking, here close by, because I come through here, I can’t give up. I can’t give up. My sons were so excited that I was coming back to school. What am I going to tell them? When I say, oh, I’m not going anymore? What’s that telling them? Give up whenever things get hard? That’s what I’m thinking, giving up when things get hard. And I said, "I’m going to continue on.

Susan said that her main reason for returning was being hired by city or the county. However, when reading about the motivation that kept her from dropping out of the GED preparation class, the reason was that she did not want to disappoint her sons. The interaction between what she did and her sons’ feelings was strong enough for her to continue going to school – despite her best reasons for staying away.

Susan demonstrates that the process was not just hard because of the classroom – which it was – but because of what it felt like to internalize her own issues about being an adult student. Despite being an adult, the fear, embarrassment and stigma were strong enough to almost have Susan stop coming to school altogether. The challenge in the lives of returning adult students is convincing themselves that the benefits – rational or emotional – outweigh emotional distractions.

Igor's Religious Transformation

Igor had left school without a “certificate of completion”, despite being offered one when he aged-out of his special education high school. He was placed in this school due to behavioral incidents at his first high school, although he had been diagnosed with a hyperactivity disorder earlier in his life. At the school he was placed in, he did not ditch, “...I still did all the stuff I needed to do, well I didn't do everything cause, I had perfect attendance, I would still go school...I would go to school and I wouldn't do any of the work.” Igor admitted he would go to school under the influence of marijuana in addition to not doing any of the work. When they asked him to leave, the school told him that they would certify Igor's completion. “They were going to give me a Certificate of Completion, but I didn't want that and I didn't take it.” Igor almost finished – having passed the English section of the California High School Exit Exam, but failing the math.

Igor was a first generation immigrant – his mother was from Mexico and his father from the United States. His mother received degrees in Mexico, “but she can't use them over here” Igor said. None of his siblings had graduated high school. Most of them left school in the ninth grade, far earlier than he did.

Igor participated or attended church his whole life. As a child, he became a World Ranger, which he described as “Christian boy scout”. He met one of the most influential friends in his life at that time. When they were older, that friend and Igor would smoke marijuana together. However, his friend changed when he became more religious:

So I would still hang out with [my friend] and he was kind of like setting a good example for me. At that time, he was getting more closer to God. And that's when he would like, set the example for me. I would see like how he was. His life, and it would make me think like, this guy he is still smoking with me but, yet his life, is different from mine, so I want that life in my life too.

This did not immediately lead Igor to become more religious. First, his friend persuaded him to attend community college to take a class called Healthy Living. "I was taking that for a while and I was doing pretty good and it was hard for me to be in school because I hadn't been in school for a while." While attending the course, Igor felt there might be repercussions from his drug usage. "Like smoking weed was taking a toll on me, I was getting weird, like I would get panic attacks...weird panic attacks, like they weren't panic attacks to the point where they could tell, because they couldn't tell and like, like me, I would start stuttering to people." After a falling out with his friends – including the friend who suggested he attend the class – he left school again. He also continued to smoke weed, "the weed started making me dumb and making me slow".

Igor reconnected with his friend after a brief hiatus. "[My friend] said something about church, because he, like I said, he was more spiritual than me...at that time he told my friends, that if he had a church, would they go to his church?" When reflecting on this experience, Igor admits that he thought this was a sign. "I guess that God was speaking to me in my life, like what are you doing with your life? Are you just wasting your life? You know what's beyond this, what are you going to do with your future?"

Soon after his reflective experience with his friend and God, Igor's father made him leave the house. Igor did attempt to stop using marijuana and keep out of trouble.

Igor's father tried to intervene. "So, my Dad wanted me to go to a [rehab center] and I didn't want to go because I didn't know anything about it." After a tour of the facility, he wanted to go. Not necessarily because he would be able to attend classes or rehabilitate, but "there are girls here and there are probably someone who smokes here and I don't really care about school. I'll be away from home and that's all I thought." The center had a religious foundation and he started in a program called "Discipleship" where Igor was able to reconnect with the morals and values that were taught to him as a child. He started attending classes on the Bible. However, the longer he attended, the more he felt like he did not want to be there.

I was there for a while and um, I kinda saw that I wanted to leave, that I didn't want to stay there. Because they told me that you didn't have to stay, you could leave anytime you wanted to, I couldn't go anywhere, I just had to stay there and go to church and study the Bible and that's it, I couldn't talk to anybody else, unless, only the ones who were in the ministry with you, you couldn't talk to anybody else, you couldn't look at the girls because that was a part of it, too. I was ok with that, I meant it's cool, and like I just didn't want to be there anymore.

It's like I'm locked up, but it's like I have freedom, but I don't.

Despite being a religious environment, Igor felt that the people in the center were not reflecting his brand of Christianity. He felt that they were being hypocritical and, therefore, not Christians as he was raised. He wanted to leave. When he finally departed the center, he attended church outside of the institution. "I went to church for the first time when I was out there, and I called my Dad and he asked if I'm going to change my life, and I said, 'yes, I'm going to stop doing all the things that I do and I'm going to

listen to what you tell me and I'm going to change.” He continued to attend church and had realizations that he was hearing God through his preacher. “So, when God is talking through him to talk to me, God was saying what are you doing with you life? Why are you wasting it? I can help you, you know? ... I'm the one who can help you. And then, and then it (was) kind of, I was like, ok God. So, I stopped hanging out with my homies, stopped smoking weed, I started staying at home, started looking for a job, started doing these things.”

Igor returned to school because of God. “I know that God wanted me to come back to school and to be a productive person, I know God didn't make me a dumb person, I know he gave me a brain to succeed.” Eventually, he started to visit the community college to discover what classes he could take. He was referred to finish his GED. He was taking the courses in addition to art classes on the credit side of the college.

This section describes the recent past and present for GED students. The analysis in this section focuses on reasons for returning to the classroom for the twelve students. Some students were in the classroom to improve their economic condition, like Susan's example. Other students were improving their lives with religious undertones, like Igor. As GED students reflected on their experience, the theme emerged that returning and staying in the classroom are two distinct emotional and rational areas for students. Students described rational decisions and choices they made to return to the classroom. These included economic, religious, recovery, relationships, and health reasons. These were not mutually exclusive, and primary and secondary reason to return will be

reviewed. The findings in this study demonstrate that the reasons why people returned to school contrast with the motivations for students to continue progressing through the GED process. Motivations are more emotional and deal with personal improvement, being a role model to their children, setting a personal goal, classroom dynamics and religion. Also relating to the current task-at-hand for these students at the time of their interviews, preparation methods in class and out of class will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

This research was conducted during the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent collapse of the housing market across the country. California was hit hard in 2010, when some of these interviews were conducted, unemployment averaged annually to 12.4% in California as compared to the 8.9% national rate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Despite the strong evidence that students would be returning to school to better their economic conditions, more sophisticated and personal themes emerged including religious, recovery, relationships and health reasons.

For students who had previously left school, to keep coming to class was a difficult task. It took enormous amount of energy and intrinsic motivation to continue preparing for the GED. Proving that they could finish what they started and be in control of their economic lives and careers manifested differently in each student. Some wanted to personally improve, and others wanted to be a good role model to their children. Some students set personal goals and others had found God. Finally, some kept returning to class because they figured if their classmates could finish the GED so could they.

Reasons to return

Exploring the reasons why students came back provides context for the decision to engage in a life-changing educational process. Despite situations being highly individualized, there were some commonalities that emerged. In this study, five themes arose as reasons that people decide to attain a GED: economic, religious, recovery, relationships, and health. These themes represent the primary reasons, but some of these reemerge, as secondary reasons that help support students to go back to school. However, the supporting reasons were not the strongest to motivate them to start the GED process. These reasons simply complemented the situation at hand. Table 5.1 outlines the primary reasons, how many students were associated with them, and who they were. Not one primary reason outnumbered any other, however, economic, religious motivations, and relationships encouraged many students to return to the classroom. Economic reasons led the secondary reasons. Students were looking to start careers after they received their GED. This hope and other aspirations will be reviewed in detail in Chapter Six.

Table 5.1 Primary Reasons Students Returned to GED

Primary Reasons	Number of Students	Name
Economic	3	Susan, Charlie and Jen B.
Religious	3	Igor, Luke and Nate
Recovery	1	Betty
Relationships	3	Laura, Sam and Jen A.
Health	2	Mack and Jove

Table 5.2 Secondary Reasons Students Returned to GED

Secondary Reasons	Number of Students	Name
Economic	9	Everyone but Susan, Charlie and Jen B.
Religious	0	
Recovery	3	Igor, Luke and Nate
Relationships	0	
Health	0	
Other	0	

Participants whose primary reason to return was economic were previously laid off, were chronically unemployed, or had plateaued in their career. For those who attributed their return to their current financial situations, losing their job provided the timing and push for them to go to school. For the chronically unemployed, the most common pairing was with religious reasons. All respondents had experienced a certain amount of plateauing in their career and the GED was the major way for them to remedy the situation. However, the impetus for almost all of the students was something else for them to return to the classroom. Only for one student was his reason to return purely career-driven.

Religious reasons were common among the male segment of this study. Fifty percent of the male sample attributed God or finding God as the reason they were continuing their education. Although their religious transformations were causing them to change their lives, there were other confounding issues that they were dealing with at the

same time. These men also had substance abuse issues, and were chronically unemployed. Their religion was the primary reason to return to the classroom, however, the subjects they were dealing with very similar issues to other classmates, like recovery or relationship issues, but did not credit those for their return to the school.

Overcoming substance abuse addiction is a significant life event – and for one student in this study was the primary reason she had returned to school. Recovery caused her to reevaluate her life and strengthen her convictions to better herself. This theme was also very strong for the men who had religious transformations. However, they saw their recovery as hastened through their finding God and not something they did themselves.

Two women were experiencing break-ups that were upending their lives. Breaking up of relationships brought them into the classroom to re-event themselves. Proving to their former partner that they could change and wanted to better themselves was a powerful reason for them to return. Other issues they were experiencing included substance abuse and poor financial situations.

Two men returned to school due to their health. Both had lost their ability to drive, which caused them to be sedentary. One had a lifetime of epilepsy and recently had surgery, which motivated him to finish his schooling. The second had been diagnosed with a disease that left him looking for a new career. Both decided to return to the classroom.

In this section, we will review the data pertaining to the economic, religious, recovery, relationships, and health reasons that people have for returning to attain their GED. The section highlights the narratives of the exceptional students define each of these reasons.

Economic

All of the students were in the classroom to change their lives, most to gain a new career, but for others to prove they could finish what they had started. As explored in the next chapter, the students' hope after certification was to transition from jobs to careers. A job is a temporary placement, whereas a career has permanent connotations. For only three students was their economic condition a primary reason to return to the classroom. Despite every interview revealing some sort of career situation that students were hoping would improve with education, they attributed other reasons as leading them back to the classroom. Economic reasons were the most popular secondary reason students re-started school.

Susan and Charlie were the two students who made their economic justification explicit. What separated them from the rest of the cohort was the singular notion that they were in the class to improve their economic condition. For Susan, she had been laid off and needed more education to find a new job with the local government. Charlie was trying to start a "new career", in his words. Finding a new career is not unique; however, he did not elaborate and could offer no other reason to return other than his desire to leave of his current line of work.

The job status of students varied. Table 5.3 highlights each of the students' job status at the time of the interview. Each had a desire to start a career once GED-certified. At the time they were preparing for the exam, most were not working in addition to being a student. Most were full-time students.

Table 5.3 Job Status of Students

Job Status	Number	Student(s)
Full-time work	2	Charlie and Jen B.
Part-time work	-	n/a
Disability	2	Mack and Jove
Chronically Unemployed	2	Igor, Luke
Laid Off/Unemployed	1	Susan
Stay-at-home Mother and	2	Laura and Betty
Full-time Student	5	Laura, Betty, Susan, Mack and Jove

Susan’s narrative details her desire to return to the classroom after being laid off from work. She found herself in a position where she could not progress any farther in her career without her GED and given that she had been laid off and had time to complete her equivalency, she decided to come back to school. Without being laid off, she would not have had the time to finish her education.

In contrast, Charlie worked at the same time they were preparing for the test. He would go to school first and then complete a full shift at a distribution center.

...I get out of here at 12:30 p.m. more or less and I start my shift at 3:00 p.m. I get out of there at 12:00 or 1:00 a.m. depending on how much work. Go get five hours of sleep. I don’t have a lot of time. Luckily, it’s Monday through Thursday. It’s tiring.

He wanted to leave his job and he believed he needed a new career to do so. The GED for him was “maybe the first step for me to start something else, to start a new career...”

Charlie stood out as the only male who did not have health or religious reasons to return to school.

It was rare in the classroom for students to be working at the same time they were taking classes. Charlie, as previously mentioned, and Jen B. were the only two students

demonstrating a full-time work and school schedule. Jen B. also returned to the classroom due to “money issues”. Her preparation was tempered by her job: “I try to come to school every day because I come four days a week. I try to come every day, but I do have a full time job, and it’s like horrible. I never seem to have enough time to sleep and time to finish work.” She had started the GED process many years prior and the schedule was difficult for her to maintain. She was one of the students interviewed for this study who was taking classes primarily at night. Economic reasons proved to be very important as a foundation for students to return to the classroom, but only in a few instances are finances the primary reason for students to return to the classroom. Economic reasons alone may not be the most persuasive reasons for students to become certified.

Religious

Finding religion was a significant reason that led men to return to the classroom. The interview guide, being a combination of a topical and oral history instrument, served as a good vehicle for these students to share “their testimony”. The “testimony” is the account how they formed a personal relationship with God. Of the six male interviews, Luke, Igor, and Nate all credited the re-evaluation of their faith as the reason they were changing their lives. A significant part of personal improvement was attaining a GED. They had personal paths to the classroom; however they had all either done drugs or fell in with a bad crowd at some point in their lives that limited their success in a traditional academic environment.

Three men discussed parts of their personal journey to finding God in their lives. As stated earlier in this chapter, Igor had entered a rehab facility with a religious orientation. Luke had found God with his father, and bonded with him. And Nate, like Igor, was in a rehab facility where he found God. Each attributed the “higher power” of God to helping them make a change to their lives. This was so significant that Nate wanted to pursue a career in which he could “pay back God” for leading him down a better path. He wanted to be a photographer who traveled around the world to raise awareness about people’s lives and struggles. Outside of these very specific cases of God leading men back to the classroom, other students admitted religious connotations to their education. Learning about what books or materials people were reading in interviews revealed that Jove read the Bible in Spanish.

Religious reasons to return to the classroom are very important for motivated male GED students. In the interviews with women, they did not cite a relationship with God as the reasons to return. Women were forthcoming with their reasons when they were related to recovery, relationships or economics. The men who spoke about their relationship with God also had real issues with recovery, relationships, and their economic condition. However, instead of citing those reasons as the important ones to their returning they cited God as the crux of the issue. It is important to note that God could be used as a distraction for them to compartmentalize real issues that they are facing due to the fact they do not have their GED or issues in their lives. Despite this compartmentalization, if faith brought them to the classroom, it seems that religion may be one path to changing the educational outcomes for people who do not have their high school equivalency.

Recovery

In reviewing the religious reasons that students returned to the classroom, the theme of recovery emerged. Igor, Luke and Nate referred to God before recovery. Unlike the men, Betty credited her recovery as the impetus for her life change. Betty had been in an abusive relationship where her partner ended up in jail. With related financial pressure and dealing with domestic violence, she found herself both on welfare and in recovery. She recently was granted custody of her kids. She credited the change with: “I guess all the bad experiences I had to go through. You know, I think if I hadn’t dropped out of school, if I hadn’t dealt with domestic violence, if I wasn’t an addict at one point, then I think I wouldn’t be the person I am today.” She was the only participant who admitted affiliation with CALWORKS. It is difficult to speculate if other students were participating in the program and is possible they hid the point. She took her time preparing very seriously because she was on assistance. She respected the idea that she was paid to go to school, was taking the work seriously and trying to complete the process and do it honestly.

Relationships

Another relationship-related theme emerged for women in this study. This was disruption at home: either with breaking up with their husband or boyfriend or trouble with custody of their children. The GED offered them stability and a signal that they had changed to their significant others. They wanted to be responsible for their kids,

especially as single mothers. Laura and Sam both had this reason emerge as their primary reason for returning.

Laura had recently separated with her husband. She decided to take the GED because “[her] relationship had ended over it...” When asked if she was looking for a change, she answered “Yeah, absolutely.” This major life change caused her to decide to come back: “My daughter’s father and I haven’t had much to talk about recently and he wanted me to better myself, and I did it more really in wanting to save my family.”

Sam had a more complicated family relationship. Sam did not provide too much detail, but she had recently started attending classes because her boyfriend was already coming to them. According to her account, her children were her motivation to come back to attain the GED. She said that she currently did not have her children with her, but did not specify why this was the case. If she could become a medical assistant then she surmised she could make enough money to “help her in the long run”. Also, she wanted to be a good example for her children – “Show [my oldest son] that just because he’s doing bad now, show him that you are able to do it, doesn’t matter where you are in your life”.

Other students had been affected by people in their lives telling them to return to obtain their GED. Jen. A.’s husband told her to return to school and she did. Igor mentioned that his father had suggested returning before he enrolled. They did not elaborate on the importance of these relationships to their returning, but they did mention that this had happened.

Either relationships with partners or children fueled Laura and Sam’s decisions to return to the classroom. The GED gives them the certification that they have tried to

change their lives. The personal aspect that they are working hard to change their lives for other people makes the act unselfish.

Health

Two older Latino men had recent health issues arise that led them to return to the classroom. Mack, the older Latino man, had been diagnosed with epilepsy when he was fourteen years old. Jove, the father of one and immigrant from Nicaragua, had recently been diagnosed with diabetes. For both men, their driver licenses were revoked and they took this opportunity as one to finish their secondary school education.

For Mack, epilepsy was something he had lived with for most of his life. He was in school when he was diagnosed and he admitted that it changed his life. “Schooling all the way down to my work environment,” he said, “there are certain jobs I applied for that I couldn’t get.” Because of these repercussions of the disease, Mack believed that it was causing him more and more depression. “That would bring my depression lower and lower and lower, um, and ... I can’t do this to myself no longer. I either (get) a new doctor or get brain surgery.” Eventually he found both, and after brain surgery, Mack felt “back to normal or semi-normal”.

He returned to school after his career in culinary arts was put on hold due to his diagnosis. He did not go into much detail about what this meant, but while he was wrestling with epilepsy, he also suffered depression. Now, following the surgery, he was healthy again. At the time, Mack was on disability, he was advised to attain his GED so his existing culinary credits could be counted towards a degree. This was actually a common theme amongst other students. Nate had completed a course of study, but

without the GED the credits did not certify him. For Mack, he decided that he would attain his GED “so he could return to culinary”.

Jove was not diagnosed with diabetes at an early age. He did, however, have an accident when he was eighteen months old where he fell out of a window. “When I came to this country, I wanted to make sure that my head was ok, so I saw inside of my head.” He did not attribute the accident with any cognitive issues. Years later, when he was established in his big-rig trucking career, he found that he could no longer be hired at jobs without a GED even with his qualifications. At that time, he was diagnosed with diabetes and they revoked his professional and eventually his regular license. “That’s why I took the chance and came here to continue my education.” He came because he had the time due to his illness, but also to start his career in the medical profession.

Other reasons

There are other extrinsic motivations to go to a GED class. Although I did not interview any of these types of students, they should be mentioned. In some cases, the GED can be prescribed for criminal or probationary sentences. These students on probation could have been in classroom, but, if they were, they not part of my interview set. I did not ask who was on probation in the discussion guide and I did not ask the instructors to clarify who was in the class with this case, so it would also be difficult to determine who is on probation from class. Also absent from my interviews are students who have special needs because they did not give consent to observation or to be interviewed.

Due to the nature of the IRB and the study, students who had already gained their high school diplomas and were in the class for remediation were not included in classroom observations or in the interviews. They were in the classroom, regardless. The classes are also used for remediation in subjects like English, writing, and math for students in the community college.

Another reason to be certified with a GED is if an international student is trying to have a certification in the United States for their education. It may not always be sufficient for student from another country tries to use their high school diploma as an educational certification. They take a GED to add to their resume. None of the students interviewed in this study were privy to this circumstance; therefore this condition is not represented here.

Summary

The previous section outlined the varied reasons the subject students cited for their desire to return to the classroom. Although the specific reasons were distinct, their desire to change an aspect of their life was consistent. Economic and rational reasons to return are a strong undercurrent, but it seems that these reasons alone do not motivate a student to start the process. The motivations are more emotional and the subjects consistently related strongly to the goal of finishing what they have started and permanently changing their lives. Economic reality may have given them the time to finish, but they would not finish if there were not another reason to do so. With the reasons to start more clearly identified, the following section will explore the motivation to stay through the complete GED program.

Motivations to Stay in School

All twelve participants had left secondary school because they were not motivated to attend any longer. For this group of students, and the larger population of students who leave school without becoming certified or completing their degree, learning what motivates them to stay in the preparation classroom is a rich area to study. This analysis goes over the themes that emerged in this study to encourage these students stay in the classroom. These themes were personal improvement, being a role model to their children, setting a personal goal, classroom dynamics and religion. Table 5.4 outlines the motivation for each student, their specific reasons, and their estimated time to completion of the GED. Of the motivations to return, when someone had specifically set a personal goal, their estimated time for taking the test was quicker than any of the other motivations to stay in the classroom. Those who were completing because they wanted to better themselves had the longest timeline to complete the GED. Two students had distinct reasons, and those will be reviewed in the following section.

Table 5.4 Types of Motivations to Keep Taking Class by Estimated Time to GED

Student	Motivation	Self-Reported Estimated Testing Date or Percentage Completed
Personal Improvement		
Mack	Desire of knowledge	In the next 12 months
Role Model to Children		
Susan	Being a role model to her kids	1-2 months
Nate	Being a role model for his daughter	Unspecified
Sam*	Kids	6 months
Personal Goal		
Jen B.	Personal goal	4-5 months
Charlie	Personal goal	1 month
Classroom Dynamics		
Betty	Classmates	8-9 months
Jove	Continue his education	70% done (taking practice exams)
Sam*	Better herself	6 months
Other		
Igor	God	9 months
Luke	Unclear	45% done
Laura	Unclear	3-6 months
Jen A.	Unclear	Unspecified

* two motivations

Personal Improvement

Mack and Jen A. had concluded that they returned to the classroom for personal improvement. By desiring to be more knowledgeable, Mack and Jen A. were trying to improve themselves through education. Although students all had plans to improve their situation in the workforce, Mack and Jen A. were exceptional because of their desire to better themselves academically by obtaining a GED. For Mack, he had a lifetime of learning experiences through his travels around the country. “Everyone has their own experience in life,” he believed “their own experience, their own wisdom to use their brain whatever they want to.” He was motivated to return to class every day because:

“knowledge, I believe that knowledge is power.” Mack exhibited the characteristics of being a lifelong learner, as he seemed perpetually excited about encountering new people and places. For him, class was an extension of his own life ethos and the motivation he needed right now was to gain more knowledge. Jen A.’s reported that she returned to the classroom because “I want to better myself, I want to get better jobs than what I had”. Personal improvement drove her return, and it may have also fueled her motivations. She said that “they are strong motivations, really strong, I push myself...I don’t miss one day”. She reported that her personal strength to return was demonstrated by her attendance to class.

Being a Good Role Model to Children

For three participants, being a good role model for their children was a strong emotional motivator for GED students to stay in the classroom. The recognition that – in the long run - their actions could affect the behavior of their children helped to make these students stay in the classroom. Susan’s story was the most explicit about how the thought of letting her children down made her physically return to the classroom:

Then, Monday, I just got up and I got dressed and I came to class and I found parking, here close by, because I come through here, I can’t give up. I can’t give up. My sons were so excited that I was coming back to school. What am I going to tell them?

The thought of even letting her sons down at that pivotal time was enough to keep her in the classroom.

Nate mentioned that his daughter was one of the motivations for him to return and gain the GED. “My motivations? To lead my daughter in a good act. Maybe she’d want to help people, be a role model to her.” He had approached the GED through his religious transformation and the motivation for him was to lead his daughter in a better life than he had lead. “Because I want her to think that if I did it, if I made the wrong choices, there is a consequence, and that I came back and did it. I want her to be successful without the consequences.”

Sam had fairly distinct reasons apart from Betty and Nate that related to her children. She wanted to be a good role model to her children; however, she had recently lost custody of them. Although she wanted to be a good role model, they were not in her immediate care. She said that they were her motivation because:

Because right now, I don’t have them with me. I went to get my medical assistance, and to be able to make more money will probably help me in the long run. You know, my kids, to prove to my oldest son, where there is a will, there is a way. Whatever life throws you there is a way, y’know, you could do bad but then you can always look back and realize, no you do need to study, you do need to go back, be accomplished for him. Show him that just because he’s doing bad now, show him that you are able to do it, it doesn’t matter where you are at in your life.

Sam was a unique case, because she went directly from this reason to mentioning her motivation to eventually become a nurse. She had multiple reasons to stay in the classroom – including the teachers, which is discussed in the class section of this analysis.

Personal Goals

There were two personal goal-driven people in this study: Charlie and Jen B. Their motivation to stay in the classroom was not purely emotional; it was to achieve goals they had set for themselves. They were both were working full-time jobs and had set out to complete the GED while they worked. However, Charlie was going through the GED process much quicker than Jen B. had over the course of the study. This was Charlie's first try at attending GED preparation classes and he was confident to finish. Jen B., on the other hand, had started a few years prior and had consistently been taking the classes over a few semesters. At the time of the study, both had resolute goals to finish the process and move on with their careers. Both Charlie and Jen B. had estimated that they would be taking the GED in the quickest amount of time of any of the other motivations mentioned in this section. This may have been a function of interviewing them at the end of their GED process, or that setting a precise completion goal helps make the testing more immediate and urgent.

Interestingly, both Charlie and Jen B. wanted to enter criminal justice after they finished their GED. Charlie was interested in joining the police force and Jen B. was going to complete an academic degree – either a certificate or “I’ll really get into it and try to get my A.A., my bachelors or something in [criminal justice.]”.

Classroom Experience

Betty, Jove, and Sam were staying motivated due to factors in the classroom. Many students believed that the teachers were creating caring classrooms, and they noticed a difference between the preparation classroom and the ones they had

remembered before they left school. Some students were motivated to keep returning to class because of the environment created in class.

For Betty, her classmates were an inspiration for her to continue. This meant that the atmosphere and the fact that everyone was working together made her want to come back each day. Jove had the least amount of education due to the unstable nature of his childhood in Nicaragua. Returning to school this time was positive. “To see not only for my age, to see older people coming to study, that’s why there is some, for my part, hope to continue my education, to get what I want to become. Yea, that’s why I keep coming.” There was an aspect of freedom, an idea that Jove could become something after he was done, in his motivation. For Jove, seeing a classroom with other non-traditional students was a motivation for him to keep returning.

Sam felt that returning to the classroom was “hard” for her. Since she had returned to school, she reported that “my grammar has definitely improved...my grammar, my spelling, being able to write an email or something, with more adult words, not so much with “I” so, so it has helped me”. Despite her improvement, she still characterized the experience as difficult. Despite the challenge, she kept returning to class because of herself and the teachers:

I keep coming because of myself. But right here, right now, I think the teachers. Because they also help me. I know it’s hard class, but at the same time, I know they try to make it simple and easy for us to understand. Not because we’re stupid, but to make it easier, because we have a short time we have with them, with work, it just makes it easier.

Sam was unique because she had two reasons to stay in the classroom: the teachers and her children. It was unclear which one was strongest, but the motivation of her children fueled her to return to the classroom and the teachers helped facilitate her staying.

Religion

Only one student from the religious group admitted that not only was God a motivator for returning, but also for staying in the classroom. Igor said “God. I had no motivation before.” However, Luke’s reasons for staying in the class were unclear, so he may have felt that his relationship with God was the bond keeping him in class—but he did not mention any specific motivation during our interview.

Summary

The concept separating reasons to return to the classroom from motivations to stay in the classroom emerged after the interviews had been conducted. These themes emerged as distinct and required additional elaboration in this section. Reasons to return are highly personal and tend to be situational: an event takes place that encourages the students to open the door. What kept GED students returning to the classroom proved to be a rich area to explore. Despite not having the depth of analysis in this area, motivations to stay in the classroom emerged as being extremely important to the GED process. The reasons of personal betterment, being a good role model, personal goals and factors in the class could be observed as highly emotional. However, these motivations are also easier to control from an external point of view. By making students set personal

goals, interact with their peers, and show how they are bettering themselves could all be ways to encourage unmotivated students to turn the tide in the classroom and complete the course of their studies, despite the possibility of external pressures.

Preparation for the GED

For some students, this GED class was not the first time they had re-entered the classroom. Several had tried other ways to prepare for the exam, including other classes. Those students, highlighted in Table 5.5, reported that the current class they were in was the most successful they had tried. Students believed the classroom experience was better than previous experiences, but each student had different reasons for why this was so.

Table 5.5 Known GED Preparation Prior to Current Class

Student	Enrolled in Another Class(es)	Number of Classes	Type of Class
Jove	Yes	2	Adult School (self-directed) (2)
Laura	Yes	2	Continuation and Adult School
Luke	Yes	1	Self-Directed
Sam	Yes	2	Adult School (self-directed) (2)
Susan	Yes	1	Night School

Five students had tried classes prior to attending this course. In Luke and Laura’s case they had to attend because their options had run out in the traditional secondary schools and they were prescribed to go to preparation classes by an educational authority. In each case it was unclear if it was a counselor, case officer, or social worker, but they said they had to go to continuation school. For other students, they had voluntarily tried to take

classes and they did not successfully complete the program. For Susan, she believed that time in her life was too busy for her to finish the classes. She had tried nearly 30 years ago in the 1980s when she had young children and was working. Her experience then could be why she believes that her taking the class at the time of the interview was possible because her kids are grown. Sam had started and stopped several times because the self-directed nature of the classes she tried they did not give her an adequate foundation for her to take the GED. And finally, Jove had taken the test before but did not mention classroom preparation. He had passed sections of it, but did not qualify for the GED.

The lack of accountability for the students kept them from completing these courses. They preferred the interaction with the classroom, but I also inferred just by having a classroom to return to they were staying more “on-top” of their studies. Even if this meant attending and participating in class, they were actively engaging with material and learning.

For the seven other students, this was their first exposure to a GED preparation class. Many had been trained on the job (Susan and Jove, in particular) and taken certificate programs at a for-profit career school (Nate). However, many participants had not returned to a traditional classroom for many years. This class represented a return to school and subject matter. How they found out about the classroom environment, what the classroom physically looked like, what the philosophy of the teacher was, what types of classwork, and how the was in-class experience are all integral to understanding the GED process. This next section reviews the details of these students’ experiences.

Finding Out About the Class

Most students found the classroom through word of mouth either from co-workers or friends. Table 5.7 highlights how students found out about the class. For Charlie and Susan, the person providing the information about the class was either taking the class themselves, or previously finished the class. This interaction seemed to make them feel as if “if they can do it, I can do it.” Some students had come to the class through campus counseling. Often this was the case if they were trying to enter the credit-side of the community college and a counselor suggested that they finish their GED prior to starting a more advanced course of instruction. Two, Luke and Betty, had found out about the classes through a social service office working with them. For Betty, it was through her rehabilitation procedure and for Luke, it was through an employment service. Students found the classroom without reliance on marketing, although the word of mouth helped recruit the most students.

Table 5.7 Method of finding out about the class

Student	Method of Finding Out about Class
Betty	Department of Rehabilitation
Charlie	Word of Mouth (Co-Worker)
Igor	Word of Mouth (Friend) Campus Counseling
Jen A.	N/A
Jen B.	N/A
Jove	N/A
Laura	Word of Mouth (Co-worker) Proximity
Luke	Worksource (similar to a social service)
Mack	Campus Counseling
Nate	N/A
Sam	Word of Mouth (Boyfriend)
Susan	Word of Mouth (Friend)

Classroom Experiences

Returning to the classroom was not always the easiest for the students. They had been out for a number of years and that made them apprehensive about the school environment. For Sam, it was “hard” to return to class. It was learning that caused her difficulty.

Interviewer: What’s been so hard about it?

Sam: Being so long out of school for so long, things change. And it’s just hard because the older you are the it’s hard for it to stick in your head. The less time you have for it to stick in your head. With kids, family, work, you have less time, it’s definitely harder.

For Nate, he also answered that it had been “difficult”. It wasn’t the class or in his words “the work” that was hard. It was what he was dealing with outside of class. He said:

Interviewer: Why had it been difficult?

Nate: The work is easy, but the difficult part is outside of school because of my living situation and my, I’m not in a stable place right now, I’m transitioning from different place and different place, spending nights with friends. There might be some good positive friends who have helped me lately, but sometimes it’s spending a night in my car or coming to school in the morning. Something could end that day, I can do it, it’s just a season that I’m in.

These two reasons highlight two potential problems with retention. Although these two students had strong reasons and goals to finish their GED, they were also being challenged with factors that could cause them to leave the program in the future.

Significantly, the class is not required for them to take the test, so students could arrive at a point where they no longer can attend class and still take the test. These students are now adults, and no longer children who rely on their parents for basic living situations; they have to deal with very adult problems like childcare or finding themselves a place to sleep for the night. This additional stress could confound their hopes of preparation for the GED.

The students in the classroom may not have actively joined group but a division did emerge. In the class, there were groups of motivated and unmotivated students. We do not necessarily have unmotivated students' perspectives, but the classroom was not a necessarily social place for motivated students. Cliques were not apparently forming from my observations or interviews, but students were exhibiting individual behaviors that caused them to be quite similar. As Nate described the class:

Interviewer: What do you think are some things that are similar between this and school?

Nate: Similar, that you always have, not to put anyone down, but you have some people there who are just there to waste people's time. And I kind of learned that and not to go that route.

Interviewer: Has that affected your experience?

Nate: Sometimes. Sometimes I see that it affects when people are trying to concentrate.

Interviewer: Interesting. There are some people that are wasting time, what does that like, that if you had to describe that or how you can identify they have lost their motivation.

Nate: They come in late. They see people reading, and they'll wait ten minutes until they realize oh you have to get a book. They'll talk in class,

Interviewer: but not about schoolwork?

Nate: Yeah, they'll talk about the basketball game or they won't do the reading activity

[...]

Interviewer: What about the motivated students?

Nate: They get into discussions, they participate with the teacher, we try to help each other out.

Given my observations and this account from an interview, I would agree that I saw these types of behaviors. Nate's description matched my observations. However, there were instances where students were talking too much with classmates or being vocal with the instructor were not automatically negative classroom behavior. In the class, although it was a social situation, the classroom was not exclusively social place, especially for the motivated students. I found that some of the students I had interviewed openly rejected any socializing in class. They did not want to have the classroom become a social place or a place where they made friends. Betty found herself receiving offers or propositions by male students. She ignored them. She was in class to learn and could not have these distractions.

Coursework

When dropouts return to school, they have to return to completing assigned coursework in addition to participating in the classroom environment. Students in this

study had two different reactions to the difficulty of content of this coursework. Some felt returning to school was easier than expected, and others felt that school was difficult. A few students felt that their academic skills were even better than they assumed they would be, and these students were encouraged by this realization. Knowing how students felt about the coursework in the preparation classes helps to understand their preparation level, and potential out-of-school skill growth or aptitude. The scope of this study cannot exactly assess these three areas, but will provide an introduction to how students felt about returning to the coursework and not just the classroom.

Jove's experience in the classroom was illustrative of the students' reaction to coursework. He was the only student who had spent most of his life abroad, and he had also learned English as an adult in the United States. Jove said "I progress. I think, in that particular, I progress a lot because I have to keep writing and see where I can make my mistakes or fix my mistakes by keep writing". He reported he had difficulty with brainstorming in class, which was an activity that started the essay-writing process. By being in class, he realized the correct way of brainstorming – instead of picking all of the concepts, he realized that you just had to "...chose just few of them or just two of them to write your essay". He was relieved when he figured out how to perform a fundamental task in class. Jove reported that once he improved something in class "[turning it around] feels great, you pass".

Other students experienced this kind of relief after being in class. Betty expected that returning to studying was going to be difficult. "You know in the beginning I was like, oh my god, I'm going to fail this whole thing, you know?" she admitted, "but once I started doing the work, or whatever was required of me, I'm going to try my best". This

would eventually lead her to an attitude of trying to be as well prepared as possible for the GED. “The last module, they were like you should take it already. I didn’t think that, I thought I was going to be here forever, like. You know because I haven’t been to school, you know, I guess I was setting, cutting myself short”. Luke had a similar experience to Betty. “I’m doing good,” he reported, “I really see [a] difference, I see a difference from me back then to right now”. He had received a perfect score on an essay in class, a four out of four points, and said, “I was like, what the heck? Like I didn’t think I can write good”. Jen B. did not feel that the coursework was difficult and this was a relief, “...I thought I hadn’t been in school for something like fifteen years. I was like, ok cool”. Charlie, to his surprise, found his first writing assessment to be positive, as did Luke. “Yeah, I think I’ve improved. We did our first essay and we rewrote our essay, I got it back with the highest score you could get, which was a four,” Charlie reported, “...Write an essay, they gave me the highest grade. Obviously, for those many years, doing good in writing, it’s great.”

Many of the students found the coursework achievable; however, some admitted that it was hard to return to school. Sam described how difficult it was for her. She said that it had been “Hard...hard. Being so long out of school for so long, things change. And it’s just hard because the older you are, the, it’s hard for it to stick in your head.” It was not just the course material, but the combination of academic work and life made it particularly difficult for her, “the less time you have for it to stick in your head with kids, family, work, you have less time, it’s definitely harder.” Sam could not easily retain coursework because of distractions in her life as an adult. Jen A. agreed that it was difficult to return. “What’s the difference, I guess it’s the same, but now that I’m older

and I haven't been in school for years, it seems hard, I'm not used to it, it's like starting all over. It's hard." Sam and Jen A. felt that it was difficult to return, but Laura felt that it was easier, but still somewhat challenging. Laura felt "It's easy. I don't apply myself here because it's so easy." Even for Laura, she felt that the essay class was difficult. "The essay class is challenging. It shows me that I'm not as smart as I thought I was." Her initial assessment may have indicated more confidence than she was actually willing to admit. Although she believed that the classes were easy, she still had to learn essay-writing skills.

Only a few students expressed having a form of anxiety in the classroom. Nate felt his schools were "fine" but found that "I just get nervous when it is time to take a quiz or test". While he felt his in-class performance was going well, "I do good in projects and in class, but when it gets time for a test, it's like a whole different thing". His solution was "...more studying. So when it happens, I can be sure that I have this thing in the bag". The classes were not graded and students could take the course as many times as possible. Even in an ungraded class, Nate was taking the coursework seriously enough to be suffering – and trying to overcome – his testing anxiety. Similarly, Jen B. had anxiety with homework, "So, English we've taken the pre-test and I did good on the test, but when it comes to doing the homework, I just stress out, it's hard when he tells us to write stuff. Like he says, write a page on a story. It gets hard for me". She wondered, "But then it's like 'I don't know why you aren't learning, but on the test you do good.' He asks me 'are you guessing?' and I'm like I'm not guessing because that's not good". Jen B. could not directly diagnose her issue, but she did reflect that she could not just perform well because she was guessing, and that homework must be different for her.

Jove had admitted to having a fear of public speaking. The classroom helped him to break out a bit from this fear. “Probably it is because both of the teachers keeping asking questions or asking to motivate you to speak, to don’t stay quiet and struggle by yourself to breaking that wall”. Jove did participate in class often, and this answer helped provide perspective about what class participation meant to him.

Many students had strategies for coping with parts of the class that were particularly hard for them. Betty coped with writing by “...like usually, when I write an essay, I try to write it the most simple way that I can just to make sure that I’m not making mistakes”. When Jove encountered issues with math, he applied the approach expressed by his Language Arts teacher to this other challenge. “You have to keep doing to learn it, and I took those steps by using the philosophy of the English teacher with the math teacher and it keeps going into me and I don’t get frustrated, if you get frustrated you have to leave your book for a moment and start, start it later and continue”. The Language Arts teacher had created a foundation where he taught his students that mastery takes time and this process is punctuated by small steps towards continual improvement. Although it was not discussed in math, Jove used this advice to help him cope with the material in the other class.

In terms of making progress in classes, some students felt a relationship with becoming educated and their command of grammar, language, or speed of mathematics. Sam felt that she would know the actual class material once she used correct English. “I think for me, once they stop saying your spelling and grammar is horrible [laughs] or be able to calculate something faster without a calculator, you know nowadays without a calculator is impossible”. Betty felt returning to school was “fun” and “making a

difference in my life”. She also said, “also, I’ve learned new ways, the ways that we speak out on the streets, like ‘gonna’, that’s not a word you know [laughs] like I’m ‘gonna’ take a shower? I’m like what the hell is that? It’s like oh shit, that’s not a word? Y’know I didn’t even know and at home, you know, when you cut words short but sometimes it’s not properly cut off, you know...” For both Betty and Sam, they felt that language was a key to show that they were becoming educated. Class was a revelation to Betty, as she was learning concepts that changed the way she communicated and conceptualized language.

The experiences of these students indicate there were broadly two types of reactions to returning to the coursework. The first was that the coursework was difficult and returning was a serious challenge. Given these findings, it is hard to determine whether it was forgetting course material learned earlier in their lives, or that the new material was substantially difficult for them to learn. The second group of students received indicators that were more positive than they had expected after being away from school for so long. It was difficult to ascertain if these students actually had developed their skills outside of school, or they had a higher aptitude than other students in the class. There was another type of students, which were not a subject of this analysis, who did not report any issues positive or negative about coursework. The coursework did not play as prominent role in the students’ story of returning to school as expected, instead students focused on their motivations to stay in class and their goal of taking the exam. Coursework was a necessary part of the process, but students were more focused on completing the test and not as focused on the day-to-day grind of class.

Differences and Similarities to Previous School Experiences

The students were very positive in regards to the GED class and regarded the teachers as caring. When asked what made the teachers caring, they would respond with they are patient, take their time, and we can ask them questions. Something I noticed in the classroom was the high level of praise the teacher gave in relation to the level of progress the class was making. Table 5.8 outlines the praise offered by the teacher in one class period in the spring. I counted at least seven interactions with the teacher offering words of encouragement to the class.

In Jove’s case, he clearly acknowledged that he was shy. He thought that this class was allowing him to break out because “probably it is because both of the teachers keep asking questions or asking to motivate you to speak, to don’t stay quiet and struggle by yourself to breaking that wall.” The interaction in a safe environment was helping him improve his language skills and move beyond his shyness. These teachers provided a caring environment for students like Jove who had entered lacking confidence in his abilities.

Table 5.8 Types of praise by Language Arts Teacher as Responses to Students

1.	“Good question”
2.	“That’s right, that’s a good question.”
3.	“You know what, that’s a good one.”
4.	“Sounds good to me”
5.	“I’m glad”
6.	“Good, why?”
7.	“Good news you know that.”

Other Preparation Techniques

Outside of class, some were spending as few as two hours and others were spending significant portions of their studying outside of class. Although there is not an expected amount of time to study, they were doing significant preparation work for the classes on their own. For the majority of students, they were relying on the class as their primary mode of preparation. Jen B. had a tutor that was helping her as well. She was the only student with an outside tutor helping her prepare for the exam. The other methods students were using to prepare were doing the homework, reviewing the notes, and reading. They would be assigned work and then would have to complete it later.

Conclusion

In this section, reasons for returning to school, motivations to stay in class and the preparation class environment were reviewed. To recap the reasons for returning to school, each was personal to every student but a few themes emerged. Students returned due to economic, religious, recovery, relationships, and health reasons. However, these reasons were not mutually exclusive. Students had active and passive reasons to return. For the most part, the primary reason was emotional, with only a couple of students admitting they were attending because of economic reasons alone. The passive reasons for the other ten students were all economic. Students may return to school due to emotional reasons, but they all believe there will be an economic reward for them when they are certified and this is a significant reason for them to obtain their GED.

Motivations for these students once they elected to start the program were also highly variable and personal to the students. Money was not a motivator for them, in fact

rational or economic incentives did not keep people returning to the classroom. Instead, personal betterment, being a good role model, personal goals and factors in the class were helping them continue in the class.

The GED classroom itself was very similar to a traditional classroom. However, the teachers themselves had created a caring, interactive and goal-setting environment. Due to these factors, students found themselves in a “different” type of class than they had remembered. This shows that a classroom may not have to appear different or teach content in a new way, but the teacher’s caring demeanor can help students enjoy their class, which may contribute to a student’s resilience throughout the GED program. For most students, either coursework was not as difficult as students had expected or it was hard when compounded with issues outside of school. Testing anxiety may affect some of students as they go through this process, perhaps because the stakes are high for them to pass the GED.

Understanding these three factors, why students return, why they come back every day and how the class functions, can help recruit dropouts to return to the GED classroom. This also helps understand what can motivate people who are experiencing a social stigma and their desire to overcome it. This analysis is helpful in understanding the reality of these students and how to help them make the transition from dropout to GED-credentialed person.

Chapter Six

Goals and Workforce Aspirations after GED Credentialed

Introduction

This study has reviewed the early school experiences for GED students and their experiences while preparing for the battery of exams. The third area of analysis focuses on students' hopes and aspirations after they have taken, and presumably passed, the tests. This chapter builds on one of Houle's (1961) models of adult students: the goal-oriented student discussed in the literature review. Few of the students in this study actually fit the exact model of Houle's (1961) goal-oriented student, Charlie was the closest, but each student who participated planned on using the degree to help them advance in the workplace. These students hope that this degree can help them achieve something – not just a new career and abandoning piece-meal work – but actually overcome something more serious problems in their lives. This feeling was something that they aspired to do after they completed the battery. Goals and aspirations after students finished their education are vital areas to explore when understanding reasons why people follow through with the GED process.

In testing the efficacy of the GED, an equalization of their status as compared to high school graduates in their age cohort is often the goal that determines 'success' for the GED (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane, et. al, 1995). These studies repeatedly show that the GED falls between those who never credential and a high school graduate in terms of wages earned (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane, et. al, 1995). Many factors could be related to why this measure is so low for GED students – without

controlling for groups of people where finding a steady paycheck is elusive, difficult, or impossible (such as institutionalized populations), those on disability, those who are unemployed, or on working welfare, it is difficult to measure the true average ‘wage’ of a GED-credentialed cohort. They are far too diverse than other populations, which have taken traditional means to enter the workforce. In this analysis, a focus on the personal goals and aspirations will help to understand if there is a mismatch between what society expects the outcomes of the GED to be and what students hope to do with their credential.

The narrative introducing this chapter returns to Charlie, the student whose goal was to change his career. Charlie was educated in Oregon and through a series of choices found himself out of high school. As a dropout, his father took him out of the state of flux he was in Oregon to work in Mexico. After a couple of years, he was back in the United States and eventually living in California. In his narrative, we explore what he hoped the GED would help gain from a workforce perspective.

Economic Outcome Narrative

Charlie returned to school because he was stuck in a dead-end job. “I thought school was just a waste of time and that I was going to end up having a good job out of a miracle or something.” His attitude toward employment soon changed. “Later I found out, as I grew older and matured more, you know, I didn’t want to get stuck at a job doing something I don’t want to do. So, that’s why I’m coming back to school.”

Middle school was exciting for Charlie. He found school interesting and also was active outside of school with boxing. Soon after starting middle school, he lost interest in

school and his extracurricular activities. Although family had caused some of the distractions, he had fallen in with a “group of friends who were not helping out a lot either. We were on the same boat, not really caring so much about the future.” He felt that his parents were disappointed in him for not staying in school. “It was something that I did, and basically they told me, well, in life you either have to study or work. You can’t just live on the street, so the message was clear, I had to start working.”

For Charlie, it was easy for to find and be hired by his first job. “Actually to be honest, a cousin of mine was working out of a company. And he got me an application and I filled it out and they hired me and I began work.” He bounced around a few jobs, until his father returned from Mexico to visit him. “After three years, my dad came back and he knew that I was up to no good, so kind of came back and convinced me to go with him.” Charlie went to Mexico with his father and worked there for almost two years. “I think that it helped a lot.”

After his time in Mexico, then moving around the United States, and starting his own family that included two children, “I don’t think about myself only, I have to think about everybody, everybody the best I can. I have to set a good example for my kids.” Part of setting that good example was his returning to school.

Charlie went back to school because of his job. “Maybe the first step for me to start something else, to start new career”. He wanted to be a police officer and “I know that I need at least my GED.” He worked in a distribution center where he was the lead person. “I help train, I help supervise.” He was coming to all six classes at the community college for preparation as he continued to work every day during the week. “And, I guess, the most important thing of it is that I want to, I have the will of wanting to do it. Unlike

before when you went to school is because you have to go to school, right now, I want to, I want to pass my GED test, I want to achieve my goal.”

How GED students’ success has been measured does not grasp the full picture of what GED students are trying to achieve. Relegated to low wage industries like trucking, customer service, and retail, GED students have held a series of jobs without a great deal of long-term potential. Many of the students who had held jobs were looking for education to lead them in to a more concrete career. Those who did not have consistent work were chronically unemployed due to either disability (Jove and Mack) or substance abuse (Luke, Igor, Betty, and Nate). However, even among the chronically unemployed, at times they found work, and at other times they were either laid off or had to leave due to personal situations. The GED is a way for all students to enter a higher level in the workforce by either entering a new field or to go back to school to find an area of study that could help them build a career. These students want to pass the tests and start something new, which does not fit the model that educational researchers use measure GED outcomes, where they are measured against high school graduates in their age cohort. The mismatch in evaluation leads a whole population tasked to complete a goal that is incongruous – those who left school cannot go back in time to finish it to catch up with their compatriots. Instead, GED students have decided to start from scratch and transition careers as adults.

This chapter reviews what students believe the GED will do for them in the future. Goals are the intentions of attaining a GED – start a new career or enrollment in

the credit side of the college. Goals do not have to be mutually exclusive; some students will enroll in the credit side of an academic institution to be able to gain a new career. Hopes are the emotions concerning the potential that could come from the completion of the process. This could include changing ones' life, or gaining a feeling of accomplishment, and these could relate to how a GED can potentially change their lives. The last section of this chapter will review the transformation the students believe they had undergone from high school to the time they were interviewed during their GED process.

Goals

Students had a progression of several personal goals to achieve during and after their GED process. Goals are the concrete career objectives students plan on achieving. Accordingly, an intermediate goal for students was taking and, hopefully, passing the GED. After completing the GED, students wished either to continue their education or immediately enter a new career. All students were using the GED to help them to their next step or goal, whether that was to explore a career they were already interested in that did not need higher education or to go to the credit side of the college and explore subjects that could lead to a career.

Before the discussion regarding career goals of these students, a review of their current and past employment situations helps to build the context of their desires for their future. What was remarkable is that nearly everyone in this study admitted that it had been easy to find a job and to move positions until very recently. I asked how they could be hired in the without a high school education. In the aggregate, the experience was to

send their resume around or work contacts in their professional network. When asked if finding employment was difficult, Mack said, “No, not at all, it’s all in your mindset...I surprised myself moving from career to career, the only thing that kept stopping me was my epilepsy”. Although, for some students, it had never been easy. Charlie reported that it was difficult to find jobs. “Yeah, it was hard”, he reported, “Because, I mean especially at the age without school [being a high school dropout]. I mean you will find jobs out there, but nothing really important because all the good paying jobs, obviously jobs that require education, they aren’t going to hire someone first of all who didn’t finish school and secondly doesn’t have any experience in anything.” Igor, who was chronically unemployed, was closer to the age of dropping out. His experiences were difficult. He said:

I guess it’s been hard, because like I said, I don’t like to lie. So, my brothers would tell me to put that I did graduate, but I didn’t because I don’t like to like about it, so I just put no. Because some places, they don’t check, but some do. It depends on the place. But, I mean, I could admit that have put on some of them, on some applications I did graduate, but it’s hard because, the economy I guess.

Susan also admitted that on applications, “In my applications I always put that I do have a diploma,” although this did not make her feel better. “I didn’t feel good about it, but they never ask for it”. She finally did apply for a position that checked and she found herself in a situation that she needed to complete the GED in order to move on with her career:

Even though everything else was fine, and that's when I said, oh my goodness, I have to get my GED or my diploma, I have to. But I've always had good jobs, good jobs ...one company I was there for 8 years, and then after that they moved to chino so I came back to LA area, and I've never had a problem getting a job.

Despite years of attaining jobs, including moving into supervisory roles, Susan found that she needed to attain a GED to move to the next point of her career. Jen A. reported that it was not difficult to be hired. After staying with her first job for four years, "After that, it's always been kind of easy. It's always, I hadn't always bothered with it. I never needed a diploma and go ... these great jobs." Industries that hired these students in the past included customer service; including cashier and waitress, warehouses, transportation/logistics, gas stations, print shops, and administrative assistance work that included office manager work and filing.

For the type of work available for these students, there may have been extenuating circumstances that kept them from finding work. Jove and Mack were both on disability. This had given them the time to go back to school and finish their GED. Mack's epilepsy prevented him from holding regular employment. Nate also had an unspecified injury that kept him from finding a job:

I've been looking for work. It makes it really difficult to find work because of an injury I had. I had to, I had surgery because of that injury, and so a lot of people back away from me because of that injury.

The type of work available for men without high school diplomas can tend to be physical and rely on driving. Jove had been in trucking prior to losing his license due to diabetes. A disability could significantly hurt their ability to find work, causing them to either drop

out of the workforce or necessitating education to find other careers. Mack, Jove, and Nate decided to continue with their education.

Jobs that are available for high school dropouts are undesirable not only because of the type of work or lack of on-the-job advancement but also due to inflexible schedules. The lack of schedule flexibility negatively affected the women in this study. Two women had to quit their jobs due to schedules interfering with their childcare. Betty had a job where the shift started at 4:30 a.m. and this interfered with her ability to drop off her child to school. She did not have any immediate options, so she left the job. Laura, the former honors math student, was working at a gas station. The shifts were eight hours long and she was not given a break at all during this time. When her daughter needed to be dropped off at school, she tried to work out a schedule that left her without a lunch break so she could have time in the morning to drop of her child. Her employer refused the revised schedule and so she left the job.

Students were attempting to start a career instead of continuing with the jobs that were available to them. Besides the jobs being undesirable due to their circumstances, scheduling, and lack of advancement, at the time of this study many of the students admitted that they observed common industries that used to hire people without a high school education were no longer hiring the same workforce. The demand for educated workers has increased steadily since these students left school. At one point, they could find jobs in these industries but they were no longer able to do so. Sam opined about the current situation: "...nowadays you want to clean McDonald's or Burger King, everyone expects a GED. Everybody. Now it doesn't matter what job you get, unless you have

your own, everyone expects a GED.” Betty also noted that the workforce was demanding further education:

Hmm...looking at life hard, hard life, life’s hard problems, with no education.

Right now, they are only hiring people with education, people with education are the only ones who have jobs, anything else is laid off, you are lucky to find one or two days of work for the whole week.

Students did not speculate “why” the demand had stopped – and this was not the scope of this study; however, being pushed to desire a career was an element most students possessed. The students included in this study were interested in moving beyond their current economic reality and improve their marketability in the workforce.

Table 6.1 includes students’ plans after they attained the GED, and is split into two major categories: start a career without mediating education or continue their education. Nearly all of the students, more than a majority, had decided to continue their educations. These students were either going to explore career options while enrolled in the credit side of the college or they had already chosen the career they wanted and needed education to enter a specific industry. These industries included health care, the arts, and criminal justice. Despite Susan not desiring to go to college for her career, she still was thinking about going to college eventually. Only Charlie explicitly said—and believed—he would not be returning for any further education.

Table 6.1 Students' plans after finish GED.

Plans after attaining GED	Number of Students	Gender of Students (Female/Male)	Selected Quote
Be hired at a better job/start a career [but, no mediating education]	1	0/1	"Start the next step, of course, my career, the career I want to get." Charlie
Continue education	11	6/5	"Come back to school, full-time." Jen A.

Table 6.2 Student Voices: Next Step

Student	After attaining a GED
Betty	"To go to school."
Charlie	"Start the next step of course, my career, the career I want to get."
Igor	"I'm thinking of making art my major, because I'm into art, or maybe taking art and some other classes. But, I just want to get the GED out of the way, so I can be able to take those classes."
Jen A.	"I'm looking at corrections...yeah what I'm doing now is I come here and from here I try to leave early because I take other classes...yeah here at [the community college]."
Jen B.	"Um, to continue school....I want a career, like I say, study criminal justice."
Jove	"Because I always wanted to go to medical school. To be a medical assistant. That's my purpose here. To finish my GED and continue with the assistant."
Laura	"I have to take medical terminology, I might have to take anatomy. But eventually, what classes I'll need to take to become a stenographer....ultrasound tech."
Luke	"To get a good steady job."
Nate	"Start taking classes....whatever is necessary for me to get my AA in photography. So, I would have to talk to counselors, and take whatever classes they would say that I would have to take to make that happen."
Sam	"Enroll in the other side of [the community college]. Be able to take full agenda, take my reading class, so I can focus on my school, school for my nursing."
Susan	"I can apply for the city because city job I can apply for a state job, because I know the department of motor vehicles, that's a state job, they keep on sending me emails, like job leads, because I signed up to get job leads whenever, but I can't sign up because I don't have my high school diploma. It stops me from that, I hope to do that, but not only stop there, but continue getting other certificates of other stuff."

When reflecting on why students had decided to continue their education, two hypotheses emerge. The first is that students had entered school with their specific goal in mind and understood that their new career required education. Students who had revealed their career preference, like Laura and Jove, knew that they needed to continue their education—they had entered school knowing they needed to go on to gain access to their new career. The second hypothesis is that students gained momentum while they were in the classroom and realized they could go on with their education. That in this way, the GED preparation was cultivating confidence in their ability to educate themselves further. As Jen B. admitted after our conversation turned to a reflection of her education and then how her education was now, she said “I think that it’s getting better, yea.” Momentum could have built after years of inspiration: Jove’s renewed energy for education started when he took a class at a skills center a year before coming back to the GED classroom. The teacher was an 87-year-old Russian immigrant. When asked if this teacher was an inspiration Jove said: “Kind of. Yea, because he always said, keep studying, no matter what, keep studying...” Building momentum was important to how Jove defined being a good teacher: “Good teacher is the one, maybe he believe in you that you can go.”

Most of the students recognized the need for mediating education before they started their new careers. Most were exploring the same community college that they were taking their GED preparation classes. However, some were also looking to explore for-profit training college opportunities, which was especially popular for students preparing to become health care technicians. Jove and Laura were thinking about going into private training colleges. Jove did not mention why he was planning to study at a training college, but Laura thought it would help her gain national certification. The

ability to work throughout the country was very important for her. Some of the students had decided what careers they were exploring so they knew what course of study they were going to undertake; however, a few students were interested in exploring different courses of studies to see what was interesting to them.

Tables 6.3 and 6.4 outline the industries students were going to pursue following the completion of the GED curriculum. Seven of the students were exploring the two most popular careers: health care and criminal justice. These careers require intervening levels of education. For these careers, the GED was not only a gateway certificate to the workforce, but also a credential to enter higher or career education. They had to attain GED before they could enroll in the credit side of the college or a training program at another educational institution (i.e. a for-profit college or a private training college). In this way, the GED preparation classroom was not only preparing them to be ready for the exam, it was also preparing them for further schooling. What was striking about some of the students who were planning on going on to higher education is that they were having a transformative experience with the education. Betty had decided that she really was going to tackle education during this post-recovery time of her life. At this point of her life, she was ready to engage in education and was very interested in completing what she had started. She had gone from someone who had left school before graduation to an aspiring health care worker, and Betty even considered becoming a drug counselor in her own right.

Table 6.3 Student's Industry of Choice

Student	Previous Jobs	Desired Industry	Career	Future Education
Betty	Filing in Financial Sector, Flea Market	Health Care (Social Work)	Nurse (Drug Counseling)	Yes
Charlie	Cleaned houses, cook/chef at retirement home, painting, construction, transportation, distribution center	Criminal Justice	Police Officer (Helicopter Pilot)	No
Igor	Unclear (did study auto body)	Still Choosing		Yes CC (AA)
Jen A.	Transportation and Armed Truck Driver	Criminal Justice	Corrections	Yes CC
Jen B.	Customer services, collections, receptionist, clerical work	Criminal Justice	Unspecified	Yes CC (AA)
Jove	Gas Station and Transportation	Health Care	Unspecified	Yes For-Profit College
Laura	Gas Station and Pharmacy	Health Care	Ultrasound Tech	Yes For-Profit College
Luke	Car wash, waste management	Still Choosing (Leaning Art)	(Photographer)	Yes
Mack	Graphic Design, Culinary	Culinary Arts	Unspecified	Yes CC
Nate	unclear	Art	Photographer	Yes CC (AA)
Sam	Volunteer at hospital, restaurant, cashier, waitress, administrative assistant, hotel operator, sales, magazine	Health Care (Social Work)	Nurse (Social Worker)	Yes CC (Nursing)
Susan	Customer Service and Data Entry (...) Second Choice	Government	Clerical	Yes

Table 6.4 Summary of Industries

Student	Industry
Health Care	4
Criminal Justice	3
Still Choosing	2
Culinary	1
Art	1
Government	1

Healthcare was the industry the most students believed they would enter following their GED. Four students identified their desire to work, in some capacity, in healthcare. These ranged from being a physician’s assistant, nurse, social worker, or a radiologist. Those who chose health care were interested in helping others and having a stable career. For example, Jove enjoyed caring for people and felt that he had wanted to work in the field for a while. Betty wanted to help people as well; however, she needed to have her criminal record expunged to pursue certain areas of nursing. As previously stated, she was also interested in exploring drug counseling, which was also subject to the status of her criminal records. Laura believed that health care provided flexibility. She wanted to be mobile and felt that she could be licensed nationally as an ultrasound tech. These students recognized that education is a foundation for health care industries. Despite the public community college having a robust nursing program, students were equally split between continuing there or attending a for-profit training school. Both Jove and Laura found advantages in going to a career college. Laura believed this is how she could be nationally-certified, a credential that was very important to her.

Criminal justice was the second most popular career for the students in this study. Charlie wanted to enter the police force and Jen A. and Jen B. were interested in working

in the field. Jen A. was interested in corrections because her sister worked in the field. Charlie wanted to be a good role model and always felt that he wanted to do something that gave back to the community – something he felt he could achieve by becoming a police officer. For Jen B., she was interested in criminal justice-themed television shows and she was planning to start a career in the field. For Jen A. and Jen B., they were going to continue with their education while pursuing studies in the criminal justice field. For Charlie, he was done with school after his GED. Although he admitted he did not particularly like staying in the classroom, I found him a responsive and smart student while in class. During our interview I also found out that his current position required him to train employees at the distribution center – when I called him a “teacher” he said “yeah, in a way.” Despite his experience and observed aptitude, he was going to leave higher education.

Igor and Luke, incidentally two young men who had reentered school due to a religious experience, were still in the process of choosing their career. Luke and Igor were both curious about what the credit-bearing side of the community college could offer them. Luke had developed somewhat of a direction. He was thinking of following his father into photography. Incidentally, his father had not had an extensive education – if any—in the arts before he became a professional and somewhat successful photographer. Igor did not have a clear direction of what he was going to study on the credit side of the college. He was taking a credit-bearing class and he had enrolled, but not finished, classes before.

There were a few special fields that some students were pursuing. One was culinary arts, which Mack had already nearly completed his certification in the field and

needed the GED to make it official. He found the field very interesting – despite the fact his general career choice was limited due to his legal history. For those pursuing the arts, staying at the public-community college was appealing to them. Nate, who had been a graffiti artist, was planning to study photography – although he had already completed a course of health care study through a for-profit career school. He wanted to explore photography and wanted to travel the world taking portraits of people. Nate believed that “after my GED, I’ll have a job, but my careers starts after I start with college”. Despite Nate being the only student who explicitly said he wanted to go into the arts, several students had experience and exposure to the field already. Nate and Mack had prior artistic backgrounds – Mack had artwork in the gallery at the community college at one point and Nate was part of a graffiti art group. Luke had exposure to photography through working with his father – and as mentioned before, was considering pursuing the arts as a career. Finally, and separate from the previous examples, Susan was going to apply to jobs to either city or county jobs. She needed a GED to qualify for these jobs. She mentioned continuing on with her education, but it was not necessarily in career terms.

The prevalence of students pursuing the top two careers—health care and criminal justice—leads to speculation to why these students had a predilection to enter them. It is possible that students had built an interest in these careers due to their personal experiences in these fields, personal talents or desires. Betty’s own recovery process led her to a professional interest in health care or possibly being a drug recovery counselor herself. Jove admitted that he cared about people and had built an interest in health care. However, there may be a case that external factors motivated their job choice. In Los Angeles’ metropolitan area, consistently the second-highest population in the country,

there can be high labor demand for both health care and criminal justice professionals. These careers could have garnered popular attention due to the consistently high demand for people to enter these careers. Networking could also have played a role in introducing people to these careers. Laura's professional contacts had led her to health care and Jen A.'s sister was working in correction. Networking had been very successful for them when they had been looking for jobs pre-GED preparation, so is not surprising students decided to enter careers of people they knew.

Hopes

Hopes are vital to understanding the students' specific motivations to achieve their goals and to understand how they expected the GED to transform them upon completion. The GED students were investing a significant portion of their time to prepare and study for the exam. In this study, "hopes" were operationalized by defining what students believed the GED would do for them after they were credentialed. In this study, the self-described hopes were not discussed in the terms of "success" that would be common for assessing the GED including the size of their paycheck or increase in their wages (Cameron and Heckman, 1993; Murnane, et. al, 1995). Hopes were more personal – the GED being used to transform students from who they were to who they wanted to become. Being an adult student who was starting their career at the same time that high school graduates were added a great deal of complexity to the GED process. Furthermore, this discrepancy complicates evaluating the success these GED students have demonstrated. Trying to complete their secondary education credential was already an indication of overcoming whatever had held them back previously. To be as simplistic

to say the GED itself was an indication of success glosses over what the GED represents to these students. The GED is not active – it cannot cause the success or failure of the person – the person can choose to use or not use the credential to help them.

Students overwhelmingly wanted to be hired at a better job or start a career. They expressed the desire to be in a career that they enjoy – being happy in their career was more explicitly important to them than to make more money. As Nate described, the difference between a job and a career is “A job, you have to wait and be patient to move ahead. Probably you can only get to a certain point, but a career, you can always grow and move faster”. This has two implications for their labor market outcome. As adult students, they would be entering the labor market mid-way through their life and competing with young graduates who would have longer career trajectories and simultaneously be experientially behind colleagues their age. Their experiences from their previous jobs would be unlikely to transfer to the new career; however, it is possible that some of the skills they developed on the job, like Jove’s learning English, would be useful. This setback would be amplified in the traditional measures of GED efficacy: these students were still pursuing a career change since GED-credentialed persons are compared to their age cohort. Happiness and fulfillment on the job is more important for students than measuring up to their age cohort.

The GED, serving as this second-chance credential, does its job of helping students achieve career transitions. It signals to higher education institutions and certain careers that a GED-credentialed person is ready to enter the workforce. Students indicated that they were ready to work towards those careers they wanted to explore and

improve their working conditions. We have already analyzed this transition in terms of goals in this section, and now we will review reasons this matters to students.

Hope for a Career

Students were interested in leaving behind jobs and to start careers. I asked them about the jobs they had before they returned to school in order to understand what industries hired high school dropouts and, also, to understand the career transitions students were going to undertake once they received their GED. The contrast between the two stages of their work life was that a job was not permanent as well as something they were paid to do but received no fulfillment whereas a career signifies something more permanent than a job. For Laura, she said, “I have had plenty of jobs and none of them have been rewarding at all”. A career becomes part of a person’s identity, not that you simply a reality of economic conditions. A person could move up for their career, whereas a job is a position that people transition in and out of many times through their lives without advancement. There is nothing permanent or emotional about a job.

For the majority of students, they assumed that a GED would help them have better work situations. The GED acts as a signal that a person has completed a certain level of education. Betty said that it shows that a person has been “graded on that” showing that a person has gone through a certification process. Another aspect of the GED is in creating opportunities for students. Jove said that the GED “open[s] the door” for his career. Igor was the only student who registered apprehension to the GED in regards to being hired at a good job. He had observed that his friend who became

credentialed was not having any luck in the labor market. When he thought about his own prospects, he did not know if he was going to have better odds finding meaningful work.

Mobility plays a key role in the desirability of careers over short-term jobs. Laura described the difference between the two as:

Career: "I can go anywhere in the world with a career and work."

Job: "With a job, I'm limited to where I can work."

For Laura, travel was important for her to share with her daughter so that her daughter could see the world:

Interviewer: You want to make sure you can travel if you want to? Why is that?

Laura: I don't have any family, it would be...see new places...take my daughter to new places. I never went anywhere and I feel that I would have been a lot more well-rounded. And I want her to have those experiences early on.

Perspective and what Laura refers to as being "well-rounded" was echoed by another young parent. When Nate moved to Seattle, it caused to him to have a major change in his perception of the world. Traveling was something he wanted to share with his daughter:

Interviewer: What does that perspective add to somebody? Seeing the world, seeing how other people live?

Nate: It will be helpful for her to be grateful, to see the opportunity that she has here.

By having a career, and education, these parents could offer their children more than economic security. New perspectives and different scenery were seen as beneficial for their children's development.

Transformations

Reviewing the goals of these students in their careers indicates a desire to have a more permanent and stable career. Establishing workforce goals is one aspect of their transformative process, the other is how people may have changed, or be in the process of changing, while participating in the GED process. This examination must start with students and how they have changed since high school, and then delve into some changes the GED process has caused for certain students. In order to understand the next steps for these students, it is important to understand how these students have changed. Table 6.5 describes the answers from questions that related to how the student had changed since high school. Sam was the only student who did not believe she had changed since they had dropped out. She believed that her situation had become different, but the basics such as her dislike of homework and her enjoyment of school had not changed. Other students had a perspective that the situations in their lives had caused them to change. Betty and Jen A.'s motherhood had helped them to change their perspectives and attitudes. For Betty, she felt as though she had "humbled herself". Laura described herself as learning to "listen". Igor also discussed how his lack of ability to listen had cost him earlier in life: "You know, I've always, I always was like, like when there was someone trying to help me, I, but didn't care, I would listen, try to get their help".

Words that students used to describe their transformation from their high school days to the time of the interview, which was conducted during their GED process, included responsible, respect, living better, mature – mentioned by three students, listening, and one student attributed his change to God. For the “mature” students, they linked the concept with various ideas of “growing older”. Aging and growing older implicitly added new perspectives – as in Susan’s comparison between herself and the younger students in class. In her answer, she added the feedback of one of her sons, “Then, I think I told my son that they just talk and talk and my son says ‘Mom you were like that too’”. Reflecting on this, she defined the difference between herself as a younger person and the young people in her class as “maturity”. In the discussion of adulthood in Chapter Two of this study, adulthood could be described as a fixed age, but also contains subjective social measures. Responsible, respectful and attentive are among some of the possible aspects that could be used to describe an adult.

Conclusion

The students in this study were among the most motivated in the class. To volunteer for the study and given their answers, they had achievable, if not ambitious, plans after they became GED-credentialed. For most students, Igor and Luke being the exceptions, they had moderate success in finding jobs. For Susan, Sam, Mack and Charlie, they even found themselves in supervisory roles without graduating from college. Susan had not told most of her employers that she did not have a diploma, but depriving them of the specific signal that graduating school shows them did not change her on-the-job performance. The workforce where they had lived, mostly California,

absorbed them and their skills. However, as indicated by their interviews, the job market was changing and they found it necessary to become credentialed.

Higher education was, for these students, most often included amongst their stated goals. How much the GED process created momentum for these students or their previous desire to continue was not tested in this study, however, there may be a relationship between restarting the education process and the motivation to keep going. This finding should be of interest to educational policy makers who are looking for ways to motivate the workforce. Could beginning with adult basic education help prime students to continue higher education?

The students hoped to start a career over a job. The types of industries students were choosing to work in had more concrete career paths than the ones they had been working in previously. Careers like customer service or transportation do not have clear paths for advancement, in contrast with careers like health care or criminal justice, which has a stable and potential career path for these students.

These students also demonstrated a transformation from where they had been when they dropped out of high school to where they had progressed during their GED process. Students noted their attitudes had changed – due to their maturity. Over the time they had left school to today, they had exhibited a greater amount of responsibility, attentiveness and maturity. By engaging with the GED process, they were further showing how they were ready to take responsibility and control over the education and career. The GED itself was a signal of maturity and a process that was helping them further their careers.

Chapter Seven

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

Introduction

The previous chapters reviewed students' reasons for leaving school, returning to take the GED, and their plans with what to do after they passed the GED. To conclude this study, this section will review key findings from the previous sections and introduce some further material not discussed in the descriptive reporting chapters. Although each of the twelve students had unique, personal stories at each stage, patterns emerged in their experiences from the decision to leave school being related to a precipitous drop in enthusiasm or to returning to start a career as a goal. Their common bond was the GED process and the desire to gain their high school equivalency.

The GED, as a credential, faces criticism from economists because data indicates that it is not equivalent to a high school diploma (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane, et al., 1995). Rumberger reports (2011) that the development of “noncognitive skills” could be an additional reason that the GED credential does not match the outcomes of a high school diploma. He reports:

“It is widely acknowledged that schooling helps to develop cognitive skills in reading, math, and other areas that directly contribute to higher earnings. But increasingly economists have come to realize that noncognitive skills and abilities – perseverance, motivation, self-esteem, and self-control, among others also contribute to higher earnings” (Rumberger, 2011).

While Rumberger (2011) and others speculate what high school could be adding to students' lives, the GED process could be showing how dropouts gained these skills in alternate venues or that even their limited time in school imbued some of these characteristics on them (Tyler, 2003; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Murnane, et al., 1995). This study does show that these GED students were exhibiting some of the listed noncognitive skills and abilities. That school can teach these to students can be discussed elsewhere, but this study shows that students developed motivation, self-esteem and perseverance.

The literature suggests that students lacked perseverance and motivation, but this study suggests more issues than just missing these attributes contributed to students' decreased commitment to their education, their school, and their classmates. At the time they dropped out, they no longer wanted to be a part of the educational system and allowed distractions take precedence in their lives. This alone does demonstrate a lack of perseverance and motivation. Without school they were still able to start careers, families, and the process of gaining a high school equivalency. Although some students demonstrated low levels of self-esteem for schooling, many demonstrated it in believing they could find a job and be hired without completing high school. Reality soured few of the students, and their self-esteem was bruised. Indeed, many returned to school with a goal to finish, something they believed they could do. Although their self-esteem was not always focused on their education, they were confident in other ways – including believing they could tackle the workforce without a high school degree.

Returning to the GED process showed motivation, but following through with it demonstrated perseverance. Students in this study were motivated to find a mode of

preparation, in this case, by taking a class. By taking and continuing to attend the class, students showed self-control. At the time of this study, students had considerably more responsibilities than when they dropped out of school. Some students were balancing work, family, and school and could only focus on studies when they had time. Others had to do all of this in addition to recovering from substance abuse addictions. To manage this regiment took motivation, perseverance, and self-control in order to follow through with the process.

This chapter reviews key findings from the descriptive reporting as it relates to noncognitive skills suggested in the literature that are thought to be developed in school. Other discussions will focus on additional points of interest, including how one of the test preparation classrooms contributed to students' motivation. After this analysis, a discussion of the limitations of the study, implications for future research, and conclusion of the study will follow.

Lessons from Dropping Out

Dropping out of high school is not usually the product of one event. Even for students who experienced expulsion or pregnancy, both events that could warrant immediate withdrawal from school, their dropping out was the product of a precipitous decline in their school performance. This progression started with distractions in their home, then joining negative peer groups, and truancy. Eventually, these would lead to students dropping out of school. This precipitous decline will be discussed to help understand how unmotivated in secondary school and, somehow, turn in to motivated GED students.

Once some of the participants left school, they were absorbed by their local labor markets. This absorption made their decision to leave more rational than irrational – they were able to find jobs that gave them an income, whereas being a student did not offer any money. Some students were able to keep the same job they worked at when they dropped out that they were working at while they were in high school. For these students, this study did not determine how much of a distraction the workplace could have been for them to cause them to drop out of school entirely; however, given their experiences, having a job could be detrimental to students who are on the verge of leaving school. By showing these at-risk students they could make money without an education, employment offered them an excuse to leave school, which they were becoming less committed to attending at the time. Even when students dropped out of school without an immediate job prospect, many of them students reflected that they did not have low self-esteem regarding being hired. Until recently many of the students in this study did not, for the most part, have a problem being hired. This indicates that the local labor market where these students lived, particularly Los Angeles, absorbed these dropouts.

When they dropped out, students indicated a level of confidence in themselves and apathy towards schooling, both youthful emotions that they later recanted as adults. These participants took responsibility for their dropping out. On the whole, students did not feel that their teachers themselves pushed them out of school; therefore, the classroom environment is of less importance to retention than it is another aspect of their distracted lives. In the next section, we will review three main findings: students' precipitous decline in school, absorption in their local labor markets and taking responsibility for their dropping out.

Precipitous Decline

For the most part, students enjoyed their early educational career. They largely reported that elementary school was a ‘good time’ and shared positive class experiences about that time during the interview. Aspects like small class size and caring teachers made their elementary years more positive than middle or high school. Instead, middle and high school was seen as negative. Larger schools, impersonal classes, the bad crowd defined this time. The decision to drop out of school was not a snap judgment. Students’ enthusiasm for school had been waning before they made their decision. Instead of an impulsive decision, leaving school was often the result of a precipitous drop in enthusiasm towards a commitment to schooling.

Charlie and Laura’s history provided an understanding to how debilitating the precipitous drop in enthusiasm could be for students. Both students had the greatest potential to succeed, from a conventional standpoint, in the group. Charlie and Laura had the most impressive pre-dropout resumes. Charlie was an amateur boxer who spent time training outside of school, and Laura was a gifted math student who was placed in honors math and science at the beginning of middle school. The end of their high school careers began with factors that were inside their homes. While they were demonstrating their growing promise in school, both students had parental distractions. Charlie’s parents were not communicative and may have been on the verge of separating, and Laura’s parents abused drugs and abandoned her. She was left to be raised her extended family, and her conditions were not dramatically improved as they partied and abused drugs and alcohol. Both alluded that negative at-home conditions affected them in school.

The most difficult part to define of the dropout process is the moment students decided school was no longer advantageous for them. It was clear there was a lag in the time between participating in positive activities before students began to disengage from school entirely. First, Laura and Charlie joined social groups engaging in negative activities. These friends could even be called ‘the bad crowd’. Laura’s group was abusing drugs, which was a behavior already natural to her due to her family’s history. It was less clear what Charlie’s friends did, but he did mention that for a while, he played in the school band, but his friends poked fun at him about his participation. Eventually, he gave into the peer pressure and he quit. However, meeting and “hanging out” with the bad crowd did not make these students immediately drop out. In fact, these groups formed in school probably required peers to continue attending school to perpetuate. In middle and high school, consolidated neighborhoods populated the public high schools. School provided a centralized location for friends to socialize and congregate. Meeting with friends could be a reason why some students remained in school, in addition to residual desire to continue school and learn. Laura and Charlie stayed in school for some time after they joined the bad crowd. From an honors student in math and science in seventh grade to nearly a dropout the next year, Laura’s decline happened quickly. For Laura, it was not the subject material that caused her to drop out instead she stopped caring about school. She still attended school; however, she stopped putting in any effort – a situation similar to Charlie.

Laura and Charlie started ditching class, which is a key step to dropping out of school altogether. Once truancy or “ditching” started, it was a matter of time that their declining class credits and loss of class time caused major issues with their progress in

school. In Los Angeles, school credits accrued with class attendance, but Charlie may have been subject to a different class credit policy since he attended school in Oregon. Despite a protracted record of truancy, some students in this study would try to finish and pass that year. They often lacked the “credits” to do so and had to either pack entire year into the last part of the school year or take summer school. This instability often demobilized students, as if they were burnt out before the next year. Dropping out due to truancy or lack of credits took longer than students who engaged in illegal activities in school. Laura was caught with marijuana on campus, and she was sentenced to Juvenile Hall as a result. Once a student had been expelled or disciplined in such away, they were placed in a different educational system than the mainstream schooling. With neighborhood public high schools no longer an option, students who disciplinary issues attended adult schools that often relied on self-directed studies. Luke and Laura both found themselves in this situation and they quickly dropped out due to lack of support and supervision in the environment. Success in adult school relies on students who can manage their time and themselves, and students may have been motivated and possessed self-esteem, but they not enjoy no feel cared for in these schools.

The first step to leaving school, according to the findings of this study, is disengagement punctuated by distractions for students. These initial student distractions seldom had to do with school, but mainly emerged from homes. The formation of a negative peer group based on illicit or negative activities often followed. School as an educational entity decreases in importance, but its ability to bring together many people from different neighborhoods became more significant to students. At this point, students stayed in school, but started to demonstrate dramatically less effort in their progress.

Truancy usually follows the new peer group formation. Students admitted to “ditch” class. They were still congregating with students, but engaging in very different types of activities than they would be in school. The tendency to “ditch” remained consistent whether the student was older – Mack and Susan – or younger – Luke. Truancy greatly affected the students’ progress in class because losing attendance credits by missing class can lead to failing a year. Being left behind or having a class-credit deficit that becomes too large to overcome is a large reason that students become disillusioned and chose to leave school. Another way students left school was by dismissal due to bad behavior or perceived bad behavior.

Absorption by the Local Labor Market

Related to the job market, students’ self-esteem did not seem to be lacking. When asked if they had issues with finding employment, many times they did not acknowledge having problems until more recently in their careers. Their process of gaining employment was mainstream, in that they would send out resumes and apply for open positions. From there, they would be able to gain employment. In this study, certain students had been promoted based on their abilities. They had acquired positions of leadership through their job performance. Susan, Mack, and Charlie all held supervisory positions. Although, Susan also had a tendency not to tell employers that she had not graduated from high school, her demonstrated abilities helped to cover up the situation. However, Mack and Charlie built an entire career without a diploma and held supervisory roles.

At the time that other students were still engaged in school, they were collecting in the workforce, not leaving potential wages and jobs on the table by focusing on their education. For Jen B. and Sam, they had jobs when they dropped out and these jobs hired them when they dropped out. The rewards from the labor market went beyond the students who continued working at their jobs. The students who participated in this study did not have a problem gaining employment in the Los Angeles area. Beyond Los Angeles, Charlie found employment where he dropped out in Oregon and Mack moved to the Milwaukee area for a job.

Taking responsibility

Reflecting on their educational careers, GED students blamed themselves for not finishing school. Only one of the participants mentioned that the school was the reason they left, and the rest of admitted it was entirely their decision to leave school. Taking responsibility for dropping out was the difference between them now and in the past. The main point of difference for most students mentioned was maturity. They did reflect that person they were at the time they dropped out – whether it was many years prior or more recently – was a different person than they were today.

Maturity may have been a reason that these students were different today than when they dropped out, but it also marks a character trait that brought them back into the classroom. Once the students took responsibility for their situation – lacking a high school diploma – they were able to being the process to complete their GED. A trait that Rumburger (2011) speculates could be missing from the dropout includes “self-control”. Students at the time of their dropping out also had a degree of self-control, just not in a

socially acceptable way. Many of students were willfully truant from school and instead explored the job market, or spent time with friends. A few even kept their jobs after dropping out. The ability to do this indicates a degree of self-control, even did not happen in school or with academic matters.

One disconfirming narrative of a school becoming involved in a students' dismissal was with Luke. Institutional issues did creep into Luke's expulsion. He felt strongly that his school had dropped him once he turned eighteen. After being brought in to his principal's office, he was expelled from the school at the time he was legally emancipated. This action felt very below the board because at the time he could not think of any reason other to let him go other than that they did not like him. However, Luke did acknowledge that he had issues with school and always struggled to do well in school. Other than Luke, students did not have much to say about school contributing to their dismissal. Even in cases of behavior requiring discipline, behavior requiring discipline, Laura's case for example, students acknowledged the contributions of their behavior toward expulsion.

Lessons from Returning

Rumburger (2011) points out that GED test takers may not have developed motivation in school like high school graduates have. During the course of this study, these students were motivated to undergo this process. Not only were they motivated, but also they exhibit diversity in motivations. From economic to personal, the students covered in this study show that motivational deficiency can be overcome and may be overstated. The GED process requires constant motivation to start, continue, and finish.

Assuming that high school dropouts will continue to lack motivation in the workplace or in life and not just in educational settings is painting a large brush stroke over the many diverse people undertaking the GED. Having reviewed a spectrum of motivations this section is going to review the striking finding of the importance of religious transformation as a motivation to continue for young men.

Related to the motivation to go back to school is the motivation to continue. This section highlights some findings from one of the Language Arts classrooms. As mentioned in this study, the teacher framed his class with the guiding philosophy of mastery, and let students know that small steps are often required for continued improvement. This teacher agreed to participate in this study, and the in-class experiences with this guiding philosophy are reviewed in this section. In the next section, we will review two main findings from returning to school: motivations, in particular, religious transformations and adding motivation in the classroom.

Motivated Students and Religious Transformations

One of the most prominent reasons for male students in this study to become motivated was the religious transformation. As a researcher, one thing I had not anticipated was a strong connection between religion and a motivation to re-enter school. In Dowdy (2003), one of the vignettes was related to a woman who had returned to school through becoming more active in her church, including teaching classes. Even with clues that religion would be a significant factor, including Dowdy (2003), I did not enter the field with this as a major feature or expectation of this study. Upon entering the field, this motivation was prominent enough to warrant analysis.

After having gone through the study, religion as a transformative experience was validated by a few interviews with GED students. Of the students I interviewed, Igor, Luke, and, to a certain extent, Nate, shared their ‘testimonial’ with me. Those who shared their religious transformation were all male. The interview itself was an easy vehicle for them to share their ‘testimonial’. When asking questions to review their transition from dropping out to today, they would introduce their religious transformation and foreshadow a more personal story was on its way. Inevitably, the story would follow soon enough. The women in this study did not seem to have a similar religious transformation as Igor, Luke, or Nate did.

The religion that these men had become transformed by was Christian, and, through their stories, appeared to be evangelical. The religious transformation was about making the whole person a better one, and meant living up to your potential. With God in their lives, they felt that it was their responsibility to continue their education, and it was their responsibility to be a better person. This was an external force supporting and pushing them to explore education. They wanted to make something of themselves for their edification and to serve God better.

Adding Motivation in the Classroom

Some students acknowledged that the class and their classmates kept them motivated in the process. Certain students in this study took a class with one of the Language Arts teacher who introduced them to the concept of “Kaizen” or what he described as “small steps to mastery”. The students, for the most part, related to this philosophy positively. Those who did not were primarily Christian felt they did not need

an additional philosophy in their lives. However, some students appreciated the foundations in this perspective, and, when paired with GED preparation classes, helped to put the GED process in perspective and to help students cope with both the small victories and failures along the way. When I was taking classes in the Fall 2010, on the large whiteboard on the left side of the classroom, this Language Arts teacher had written:

Kaizen: small steps for continual improvement

What small step can I make today?

By the spring of 2011, he added:

Read 5 minutes

Reading is the key that opens doors in your life

Take it easy

The words had not been erased in the months that I had begun to observe the class. By presenting this philosophy to students, he offered a new perspective to the GED process and how working towards goals may take time and this helped to enhance perseverance in the students. This was prevalent for Jove when he shared that he coped with math course material by applying the “Kaizen” philosophy to that course work as well.

The teacher not only introduced a new orientating philosophy, but also were the students receptive to hard work. Students attempted to persevere in this program, and for those who took his class, a guiding philosophy that had goal posts along the way to credentialing helped them. Motivated students were not as engaged with their classmates as I would have expected. From their interviews, it became clear that students were in class to achieve their goals focused on themselves as opposed to socializing with other

students. These students were in the classroom to learn. These motivated students may have been reacting to their previous educational experience. Maturity and focusing on their education were often combined.

Lessons for the Future

Students planned ambitiously after they attained their GED – an attribute that they may not be commonly associated with them. They were planning to begin a career and leave behind the jobs of their past. Although not the main motivation for them to test, career motivations were a common reward and goal for students once they finished the GED. After a lifetime of jobs, often dead-end ones, students recognized the value of education and having control over their careers. The future for many of these students was full of goals of continuing their educations.

GED test takers are in a unique position because by definition. They will most likely be untraditional students for the rest of their educational careers. In the literature, they are often compared to the high school graduates in their age cohort; however, methodological issues arise when this comparison is made. High school graduates have an advantage of an immediate, positive signal to employees, whereas, a dropout does not have this. High school graduates may have a higher wage due to their being promoted faster or on the job longer, and they may not switch their careers after many years. GED test takers may, and often plan to, change careers once they have finished their credential. Since they may start a career older in age than their high school counterparts, they receive the starting wage in those careers later in age. They will always be at a disadvantage as compared to co-workers in their age cohort until they ‘catch-up’ in their careers. For the

GED students in this study, their future was planned to be bright. In addition to reviewing this, a discussion on the problematic comparison between GED students and other students in their age cohort will be discussed.

Economic Future for GED Students

In Cameron and Heckman's (1993) article the "Nonequivalence of High School Equivalents" statistical evidence is used to discuss how equivalencies, like the GED, do not match up with a high school diploma. While this project was not comparing the GED process to the full-fledged high school experience, there is plenty to note about the ability of the GED to help students transition out of jobs and into careers presumably with an economic benefit. Students did not want to work at the types of jobs they had been and wanted to move on to more serious and challenging work. The reality is the equivalency will allow many of the students involved in this study to continue their education. Policy makers and educational researchers are comparing them to a time that cannot be replicated for dropouts as they simply cannot go back in time to get their diploma.

GED students complete their secondary school education either soon after they dropped out or many years later. In the meantime, students in this study had periods where they worked, were unemployed, entered rehab, found God, became parents, traveled, and lived through other events that American adults can go through in the course of their lives. Once they decided to finish their high school education, they initiated the end of one very important life event: secondary school. An event that many commemorate with pageantry and ceremony, these students instead planned to test. This

should not diminish their achievement – as the credential can bring them many additional career opportunities and a sense of accomplishment.

While these students could move out of the dropout category educationally, it does not give them the opportunity to leave their age cohort. Within any adult age group, the GED-credentialed group can only grow as the cohort ages, and the high school dropout category can only shrink. When people jump from educational categories, they have similar opportunities to increase their value in the workforce – even an adult, non-traditional college graduate can start a new career at any age. The non-traditional students of any level will be joining a group where people have been working in their job or career for a number of years before that person was able – or credentialed – to do so. Due to this, they start at a massive wage disadvantage as compared to co-workers in their cohort.

In discussing this disadvantage, let us speculate the career trajectory for someone leaving high school who starts a career in the health sciences. For a person who is starting in this field career, such as becoming a nurse, they could have started their curriculum as early as high school. Certain high schools may have a vocational program in the health sciences. Even if a person does not have this opportunity, with a high school diploma, they may apply to nursing programs, including to a program at the community college where this study took place. After a few years of education, practical training, and licensing, nurses can enter the workforce. They could be in their early twenties and starting their career. In some ways, these students were closer to recent high school graduates who were starting these careers right after high school.

As Jove starts his career, economic and educational policy researchers will pull cohort data from GED-credentialed people – even as defined in their particular industries

– and see that GED-credentialed people may make more than high school dropouts, but less than those who have graduated with a high school diploma (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). This would be mathematically correct, but missing an explanation. The GED-credentialed cohort will have a disproportionately higher number of people in career-transition than most any other cohort besides recent college graduates. Being in the GED-credentialed demographic group signals career transition as this group is non-traditional secondary school students – always. This group is always in flux, with a large number of people who are gaining their credential and transitioning their careers at any age.

GED students starting their careers later in life being compared to their age cohort without controlling for some of these issues may indicate a lower average wage or economic benefit of the GED may be possible if some of these issues were mediated. For instance, could a GED person with a nursing degree, with years of work experience, be comparable to a recent graduate of a community college nursing program who followed a more traditional path? Given datasets available, gaining this data may be more difficult, however, it does beg to question about how GED or educational cohorts could be measured. The function of the GED depressing wages may be overstated in comparison to the general process of career transitioning. Given the ability of the GED to grant a secondary school credential to populations in need, demeaning its ability to change the lives of credentialed-persons and make real economic gains without nuanced wage and economic data could be dangerous. There may be real substantive and curricular issues with the process; however, what the concept of a “secondary school credential” implies is a career transitioning process, which will always include wage depression.

Limitations

Before we move to future directions of research, an evaluation of the limitations of this study need to be discussed. First, after sitting with interview transcripts, diary entries, and in-class field notes, I came to the conclusion that the objective would be better met to focus the analysis on the students' experiences rather than an exposition of my own class experiences or a heavy in-class focus. The goal of this project was not to analyze the effectiveness of the teacher, but to understand what the process felt like for students who went through the GED process. I feel my in-class experiences were vital to my understanding the students' preparation experiences and my development as a GED student like my own classmates. Discussion of what happens in the process was much easier to explore when I had participated in the test preparation process. With this being said, focusing on the students' experience is not the limitation of this study, rather the lack of integration between the auto-ethnography and in-class experience with the interview analysis was a sacrifice I had to make to meet the objective of this study.

The interview guide was a basic semi-structured guide. I realized there were several questions I could have easily asked and resolved issues that would have enhanced portions of the analysis. At the time, I felt that it was too invasive to go into too much personal detail about the student and rely on their self-reported age, mother or fatherhood, and ethnicity should it come up in the conversation. In the future, I would have included a demographic questionnaire for students to reconcile this data. For future researchers, I would highly suggest this tactic as it is less invasive and will help your analysis immensely.

Given my objective to study this moment in time for the students in the class, I did not intend or plan to keep in contact with them after they had started to take the exam. In the future, the design of this study could be replicated with a more consistent longitudinal element to see if these students achieved their goals. This may help researchers understand the relationship between the students' lives and the effectiveness of certain preparation approaches.

A limitation of this study is that I had to rely on a convenience sample to populate the interviews. This left out a population of Asian and Asian American students who had taken the class, not to mention those who were being forced to take the class. No students participated in a formal interview, although one did conduct an impromptu, informal interview that I did not include in the analysis. These two populations did not seem enthusiastic to discuss their experiences. Overcoming this limitation is difficult – as my sampling method required voluntary participation. Perhaps more time in the field would help this hurdle, however if a study was to focus on either of these populations, there may be the need for an alternative design, at the very least incorporating other sampling methods.

Implications for Future Research

There are two directions that this research could progress in respect to this study. I believe that repeating the auto-ethnographic and interview design would work well with also an additional longitudinal interview design where a researcher does repeated visits with participants. Another direction could include exploring the attitudes, perceptions and

life histories of the parents of these GED students to learn the reasons they believe their children did not graduate.

The first direction suggested direction for research to move into would to more effectively cover the outcomes of students in a design similar to the one used in this study. This study added some further description of the GED process, but additional detail to what happens after students leave the classroom, during the testing, and after credentialing would help add more detail. I believe that continuing qualitative explorations is effective in defining and exploring the GED process. Adding a longitudinal element would require students to volunteer for multiple interviews, so I would suggest recruiting more than a dozen students to account for students who may leave the study either by leaving the GED process or losing contact. Active participation in the field site would still help add context to the process the study participants would be going through during the interview study. Including class observations and personal insights on the process can help maintain a continuous feeling to the study, rather than a punctuated meeting on a timeline.

While analyzing students' reflection on their parents' engagement during their schooling, the second area for future research emerged. Many students felt that the lack of support from their parents contributed to their progress in school; however, without parental feedback in the study, it was difficult to assess the full picture of what happened to the student at that time. Analyzing the generational perspective would help understand some of the parents' issues had during that time of their lives. Although students' reported certain impressions from their life, parents could provide additional insight to family life. To explore this, I would suggest a design where the student and parent are

interviewed individually about the student's educational career and family context at that time.

In addition to these two directions, I do feel that the auto-ethnographic portion of this study was extremely valuable to understanding the GED process. There is also value to augmenting the canon with more reflective studies on the GED process. Although not a developed direction for the research, teaching GED test takers the skills to evaluate, reflect and analyze their experiences through the process could provide more detail about the process to document it for the literature.

Dissertation in Summary

These non-traditional adult students were mainstream in most aspects of their lives. They had many years in the workforce, and some had traveled the country. By no exaggeration, these are people who are a part of the lives of Southern Californians, whether they are riding on the bus, serving in a restaurant, or walking by in a supermarket. Students in this study shared a background of leaving school before graduation and that they were all motivated enough to return to ameliorate their lack of credential. Reviewing the past, present, and future plans of these students, it is striking how much value the GED process provides to correct past mistakes, provide a foundation for future plans, and enrich communities with a more educated, motivated workforce.

Even though they dropped out of high school, these students' actual adolescent experiences were not extraordinary. Many believed that they had grown up since high school, but they were not mature at that time. What potentially could have made them different was that these students lacked a support network, while other high school

students may have had a strong foundation that would have adjudicated their misbehavior. It appears this network was beyond the control of simply family life. Although some of the students felt that their parents were not as engaged as they could have been, however, some of the same students admitted their parents were supportive of their schooling. Susan's case was most vivid example of this. She compared her parents to her friends' parents and determined that they were not as engaged with her education. However, she admitted that her father was disappointed with her when she did not graduate from high school. Susan, like many students, felt her parents had not been engaged in their education, but she mentioned in her recollection that her own father was connected enough to communicate disappointment. There may be other factors involved with the safety net for these at-risk students. The GED, with its ability to credential students to expand job opportunities and their educational careers, may be an important part of the safety net that these students did have access to, despite limitations they may have had at home. The GED helped these students move on from their past and provided them great value in the process.

At the time of this study, working without a high school diploma recently became an issue for many of these students despite having successful job histories. In a situation where there is not a way to gain a credential as an adult, these students would have potentially become disillusioned, never challenged themselves, nor furthered their education. The GED, as the mainstream high school equivalency, gave these students the chance to gain their credential and move on from their past. It also offered them an opportunity to return to the classroom. Many of these students were considering to continue their education after returning to the classroom. Schooling was becoming

something that they wanted to continue, although lacking education and motivation to further their educational development had defined them before they engaged in this process. The ability of the GED to redefine education gave students the ability to reclaim this part of their lives as their own. This shows the worth of the GED as an educational process.

Many students admitted that they wanted to continue their education after they received their GED. Their lack of credential had previously defined them negatively, however, now education would define them positively. This does not just benefit the students themselves, but the communities where they live. These previously undereducated workers had the ability to gain an equivalency, and potentially become even more educated and, therefore, provide more value to a competitive labor market. The GED provides this service, which benefits both the individual and the community.

The three areas of the descriptive analysis, past, current, and future, all show the GED's redemptive power for adult students in the United States. There is great personal value that the GED offers to test takers who are looking to gain more education. The value of high school equivalencies is not their ability to empower people, but includes its ability to help the community have a larger educated workforce. Dropouts who have gained maturity should not have to live without fulfilling to their potential or follow their dreams of furthering their education. The GED, as an educational process, is worth it as both a personal redemptive process and a way to help communities to educate their workforce.

Conclusion

In this study, a dozen GED test preparation students shared their early school, dropping out experiences, reasons and motivations for returning, and goals for after they acquire their high school equivalency. The objective of this study was to define better the GED process in an urban environment. By listening to the life story of the students, observing the classroom and taking the classes, the GED process as a redemptive experience for some of the students who engage in the process has come into sharper focus.

The value of this study to the GED research landscape is directly related to the choice of the objectives and methods used to study the subject. Switching the orientation of the study to learn more about the process in a qualitative method made the focus of the study more personal and, therefore, helpful for definition of a social phenomenon. Analyzing each student's experience as their personal story and then taking the students together started to build a description outside of the outcomes discussion. By focusing on the process – in hopes of describing it better – removed the stress on what makes the GED either more or less useful than a high school diploma. These students were not being simplistic in their decisions, they were faced with complex family lives and peer group interactions that caused them to be apathetic and, for the most part, students took responsibility for their actions. This is a study that shows that school cannot be studied solely in a vacuum or removing the variables that define one's lives. The interactions of the life outside of school and that in school is highly complex and complicated when there is not an attempt for children to separate their personal and school lives. Being

mired by the pressure of the real world can immobilize students. These ones decided to fight the momentum and return.

In conclusion, this study is about the how pivotal this second chance to ameliorate the status of high school dropouts in this country. It is not simply about the certification, it is about the personal redemption of the dropout to prove to themselves and their families that they have matured and overcome their situation. Whether or not the GED at its inception after World War Two was intended to function in this manner does not make this consequence less important to our society. It exists – intended or unintended – and helps continue offering Americans a way to pick themselves up should they want to explore it. Diminishing the accomplishment as a “less-than” credential does more to hurt these Americans to signal to employers that they continue to have done something wrong. This one study cannot generalize the motivations and experience of all GED studies, it is simply out of its scope; however, defining the experience as more than a data point helps to understand the importance of having this second chance.

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