

BEING A (GOOD) STUDENT: CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY BY ADULT BASIC
EDUCATION PARTICIPANTS TRANSITIONING TO COLLEGE

A Dissertation Presented

by

MINA REDDY

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ABSTRACT

BEING A (GOOD) STUDENT: CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY BY ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PARTICIPANTS TRANSITIONING TO COLLEGE

December 2012

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This study examines the perceptions of identity of a category of students that has rarely been studied in the context of higher education. These are adults who have participated in GED preparation or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs. A college education is increasingly necessary for individual economic success and a higher quality of life, and a college-educated workforce is a major element in national economic competitiveness. Rates of college enrollment and persistence of ABE students, however, are low. The study seeks to determine how ABE students and graduates conceive of their identity as students: to what extent they identify as students at all; what they believe are the characteristics of a good student; and how their conceptions of being a student are influenced by prior and

current educational experiences. The purpose of the study is to improve understanding of how to assist ABE students in making a successful transition to the college classroom.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight ABE students and six graduates from three ABE programs. Participants represented a diversity of ages, educational backgrounds, employment situations, and nationalities. Following a grounded theory method, data analysis was concurrent with data collection. Three themes emerged from the analysis: participants' perception of themselves as being on a journey; the importance of respect; and the connection participants made between the qualities of a good student and those of a good worker.

The grounded theory developed from these themes presents two aspects of identity as a college student: a striver identity and an academic identity. The ABE participants in the study tended to identify as strivers, with the attendant benefits in the area of motivation. To reach their long-term educational and career goals, however, ABE students must also develop an academic identity, which includes an explicit understanding of cognitive and metacognitive skills and learning strategies. The study concludes with recommendations for practice, policy, and research.

DEDICATION

to my parents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my heartfelt appreciation to my study participants, who shared with me their experiences, thoughts, hopes, dreams, and frustrations. Each had a distinct story and personality, and all were very generous in giving me a window into their lives and their ideas. Many of them also wished me well with my own educational journey.

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Finally, I thank my parents, who imparted in me a love of learning. Their continuing intellectual curiosity is an inspiration. I was also lucky to have my sons and daughter-in-law living nearby so that they could join me in celebrating every achievement along my doctoral journey with a wonderful dinner.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are several reasons why I want to go to college. My first reason to go to college is, the more you know, the more you are worth. College is my opportunity to improve my life by having more opportunity to get better jobs. Secondly, I want to be professional. I am sick of working at menial tasks and being paid marginal wages. Another reason I want to go to college is, college will enhance my reasoning. It will broaden my view towards the society, politics, and global issues. College also elevates my confidence; as a result, I will be a more important person. Therefore, college is a path that will bring my dreams to reality.

The above quote is a journal entry written by a low-income immigrant from Ethiopia while he was participating in an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program in the United States in 2008. To this student, higher education meant a chance to move from unskilled to professional work. It meant a chance to change his identity—to become a person who not only earns more money, but who thinks in a different, deeper way, who increases his self-respect, and who earns respect from others. Many low-income adults, whether they are immigrants or U.S. natives, are looking for an opportunity to progress economically, socially, and intellectually. Like the student quoted above, many of them also perceive

the need for postsecondary education to reach their goals (Reder, 2007; Tolbert-Bynum, 2007). Adults, however, have greater difficulty than those under the age of 25 in completing degrees in a timely way, suggesting that systems are not effectively in place to support adult college students (Kazis et al., 2007). In addition to their delayed enrollment in college, many adult undergraduates study part-time and exhibit intermittent patterns of enrollment. According to a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor (Kazis et al., 2007) which synthesized the research on difficulties for adult learners in higher education and strategies to improve their success, policies and institutional practices which are not supportive of working adults include delivery systems, financial aid, and accountability measures:

Traditional higher education programs and policies—created in an era when the 18- to 22-year-old, dependent, full-time student coming right out of high school was seen as the core market for higher education—are not well designed for the needs of adult learners, most of whom are ‘employees who study’ rather than ‘students who work.’ (p.1)

This assertion raises the question of identity of adult college students who, according to the report cited, are primarily workers, not students. My study explores the question of adult student identities and the implications that arise from them.

Meanwhile, the interest of individual adults in higher education occurs within a national context in which a strong message is being conveyed through policy reports, economic studies, and governmental and nongovernmental agencies that a college education is necessary for both individual economic success and national economic

competitiveness (College Board, 2008; Comings, Sum & Uvin, 2000; Hodge, 2007; Jenkins, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007; Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007; Osterman, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In a speech to Congress on February 24, 2009, for example, President Barack Obama (2009) asked all Americans to commit to education beyond high school. Although these messages are primarily aimed at youth, some policymakers acknowledge the need for adults to obtain more education in order to achieve the nation's educational and economic goals (College Board, 2008; Executive Office of the President, 2009; Jenkins, 2008; Nelson, 2010).

Some of those adults in need of further education are currently enrolled in Adult Basic Education programs (Strawn, 2007). ABE refers to the system of education that serves persons aged 16 and older and officially withdrawn from school who are in need of basic literacy and numeracy, high school equivalency preparation, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (see Appendix A). In order to be eligible for these services, participants must have a level of educational functioning in English literacy and/or numeracy below that expected of a high school graduate. ABE providers include local education systems, community colleges, correctional facilities, and community-based organizations (Gerhard, 2007). Primarily funded by federal Workforce Investment Act funds and state and local match, the ABE system enrolls 2.5 million students per year (National Commission, 2008). Due in large part to very limited funding, this number is far lower than the number of adults who could benefit, representing only 6% of lower-skilled adults (Strawn, 2007). ABE students present a diverse profile, with a wide range of ages, life histories, educational histories, and racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds.

Although ABE programs are not required to collect income data, it can be inferred that most ABE students are low-income because their educational functioning levels preclude them from most jobs above entry-level.

Postsecondary education is important for economic progress, quality of life, and intergenerational effects on the achievement of children. In recognition of this reality, the ABE system is gradually shifting from a focus on basic life skills, survival English, and General Educational Development (GED) attainment to an increasing emphasis on transitioning students to next steps after program completion (Alamprese, 2004; U. S. Department of Education, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Education, which oversees ABE on the federal level, states on its website that, “the role of adult basic education (ABE), as a bridge to further education and training, is central to the ...vision for adult education and is an emerging view in the field” (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.). This emerging focus on transitions from ABE to college, however, is not accompanied with sufficient knowledge about how to best support adult learners in preparing to be successful college students. Without that support, ABE graduates face many obstacles to earning the postsecondary credential they need to accomplish their goals (Prince & Jenkins, 2005). These obstacles are not only external factors such as finances, but also include the effects of adults’ prior educational experiences and their conceptions of themselves as students.

Problem Statement

Despite the United States ideals of social mobility and second chances, there are not adequate systems to prepare low-income adults, such as current and potential ABE learners, for success in college (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Pusser et al., 2007). Yet lack of a postsecondary education limits career opportunities, quality of life, and the school success of one's children. As a publication funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education put it:

Our nation is at a crossroads. With a committed and informed approach, we can help realize the vast educational potential of America's adult learners and thus substantially benefit individuals, families, communities and the national economy.

If we ignore the problem, we will further limit our adult citizens and erode the vitality of our essential institutions. (Pusser et al., 2007, p.1)

The problem my study addresses is that adult learners from ABE programs are often inadequately prepared for a successful transition to college. There are several aspects to college readiness, including academic preparation (cognitive and metacognitive development as well as content knowledge); knowledge of college structures, processes, and culture; and an assumption of the student role (Conley, 2009). In many cases the first in their families to attend higher education (at least in the U.S.), ABE students may not understand what it means to be a successful college student. The prior educational experiences of ABE students, who generally did not complete high school following a traditional trajectory or whose high school education was outside the U.S., are not likely to have prepared them well for the role of student in a U.S. higher

education setting (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Kasworm, 2003b, 2008). Mastery of the student role includes understanding faculty expectations and how to meet them. Students need to learn both explicit content and, implicitly, how to demonstrate that knowledge in ways that meet the expectations of instructors (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Collier and Morgan (2008) associated this process with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which involves learning the cultural codes and practices of the dominant class.

While mastering the role of student is necessary for success in college (Collier & Morgan, 2008), this is particularly challenging for adults who have been out of school for a number of years and are heavily invested in other roles, including work and family responsibilities. In addition, adults often study part-time and do not participate in campus life outside of their classes (Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003b). They do not change from the role of worker and/or parent to the role of student; rather, they add one more role to their lives when they enroll in school (Kasworm, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007). Unlike younger students, who may regard work as a way to help pay for expenses while in college, adults are often self-supporting workers who may be taking college courses to improve their position in the labor market (Kazis et al, 2007). Their student identity may not be the most salient; instead, they may have a primary allegiance to their role as workers, and this may impede their progress in higher education (Chartrand, 1990; Kazis et al., 2007). Adults' identities as students and their conceptions of the learning process are important factors in their transition to and persistence in college. If they feel marginalized or lack confidence in themselves as learners, their academic success is jeopardized (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986).

Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) found adult students did not necessarily see themselves as learners and that their frame of reference tended to be their educational experience as children. They tended not to be reflective about themselves as learners. They were focused on the attainment of the degree and not on the process of reaching it through learning and their roles as students. Kasworm (2005), however, found that community college students held a mental construct of the ideal college student and used it to evaluate their own behaviors. To Harkins (2009), “students’ mental model of being a student is the lens that informs their values, beliefs, practices, and goals and helps them make sense of their role as a student” (pp.15-16). Without an effective mental model of being a student, adult students struggle in college (Harkins, 2009). Adults, including those transitioning from ABE, who have not developed a student identity, may not feel they belong on a college campus and may not be committed to their continued presence in that environment (Harrison, 2000). Adults’ multiplicity of roles makes it more difficult for them to enter into the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which they would develop their identity as college students.

Therefore, examining the mental models and academic understandings of a segment of the adult learner population—those coming out of ABE programs and transitioning to college—is increasingly important. There has been very limited research from the perspectives of these learners. With a few exceptions (Gerhard, 2007), most studies focus either on policy questions such as finances or institutional structures (Duke & Strawn, 2008; Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007) or on a more general adult population (Hardin, 2008; Harrison, 2000; Kasworm, 2003a, 2003b,

2005; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Although external obstacles are highly significant to adults' ability to obtain postsecondary credentials, it is also important to investigate internal factors including adults' identity as students.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to improve understanding of how to assist ABE students in making a successful transition to the college classroom. More specifically, this study focuses on how ABE participants and graduates make meaning about their identity as students. An analysis of their conceptions of student identity and their related approaches to learning leads to greater clarity about both barriers to and potential for the success of adult learners in higher education. While ABE students may be as young as 16, for the purposes of this study, participants were limited to those who were aged 25 and older and would be considered adults in higher education.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following primary research question: How do ABE students and graduates conceive of their identity as students? Sub-questions included the following:

1. To what extent do ABE students and graduates identify themselves as students?
2. How do ABE students and graduates describe the characteristics of a good student?

3. To what extent do ABE students' and graduates' conceptualizations of a good student correspond to their images of themselves in an educational environment?
4. How do prior and current educational experiences influence ABE students' and graduates' conceptions of being a student?

Significance of the Study

Given the compelling reasons, both for individuals and for society, for adults to earn degrees, the number of students aged 25 and older enrolled in degree-granting institutions increased steadily from 1980 to 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). In 2010, adults aged 25 and older comprised 30% of all undergraduate college students and 35% of all two-year college students, and they constituted a majority of part-time undergraduate students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Meanwhile, the potential ABE population includes 25 million workers aged 18 to 64 without a high school diploma and—with an expanded mission as proposed by Reder (2007)—many of the 52 million adults who have no postsecondary education and would benefit from a transition to college program (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). Increasing concerns about the educational attainment of the U.S. population compared to that of other countries (Ewell, 2008; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008), low college completion rates, and increasing income inequality (Levine, 2012) means that attention must be paid to all sectors of the population when looking at higher education policy and practice. National goals for an educated population cannot be

achieved without addressing higher education for adults (College Board, 2008; Executive Office of the President, 2009; Jenkins, 2008; Nelson, 2010).

The available evidence indicates that rates of transition and of degree completion of the ABE population are very low (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). The most recent data from the National Reporting System, which aggregates the outcomes of ABE programs receiving federal funds, show that an average of 45,000 program graduates enter postsecondary education or training each year. For program year 2007-2008, the number advancing to postsecondary education within six months of leaving ABE programs represented only 2% of ABE enrollees (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). A study in the Washington State community and technical college system found that only 13% of students from their non-credit ESL programs and 30% of students from their ABE/GED classes went on to college courses within five years (Prince & Jenkins, 2005). Looking at the entire U.S. adult population rather than a cohort (using data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy of 2003 and the National Household Survey of 2005), Reder (2007) found that only 27% of GED holders have postsecondary experience and 11% have a college degree, with over two thirds being associate degrees. In comparison, 70% of those with regular high school diplomas have postsecondary experience, and two thirds of those have college degrees, the majority being bachelors or postgraduate degrees (Reder, 2007).

Information on persistence and degree attainment by adults in general also indicates that they face barriers to timely progress through postsecondary education, although some researchers point out that a longer timeframe or an individual rather than

institutional level of analysis would produce better data (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Bailey & Morest, 2006; Kazis et al., 2007; Reder, 2007). Analyzing data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2007) found that while 40% of younger first-time community college students (aged 17 to 20 on entry) did not earn a credential or transfer after six years, the figure was 60% for adult students (aged 25 to 65). Similarly, according to Kazis et al. (2007), six years after beginning postsecondary education, 62% of adult learners who were working full-time and studying part-time had not completed a degree or certificate and were no longer enrolled; this compares to 39% of all working students. Three years after enrolling in a community college, almost half of nontraditional students had not earned a degree and had left school; for traditional students, this rate was only about 20% (Kazis et al., 2007). The adult population, therefore, needs special attention.

Despite the large proportion of the student population in higher education that is over the age of 25, most education policy and programming is based on the pipeline model of students going directly from high school to college. This study contributes to understanding a group of students that has rarely been researched—those who are transitioning from ABE to college—by hearing directly from them about their experiences, what it means to them to be a student, and how they see themselves in an educational environment. As interest in ABE-to-college transitions grows (Alamprese, 2004; U. S. Department of Education, n.d.), there is a need to understand the implications of adult student identity and approaches to learning in order to plan and provide effective transitions programming. This understanding contributes to informed decisions about the

structure, content, and pedagogy of transition to college programs for adults within both the ABE and higher education contexts as well as college orientation programs for an adult population. It will help educators in both ABE and higher education avoid taking for granted or misconstruing adult student conceptions or behaviors in the classroom (Cox, 2009). It provides information for ABE teachers to reflect on their curriculum and instruction as they prepare students to transition to higher education. College faculty can gain insight into how to better communicate with the adult students in their classrooms. By starting from knowledge about adults' prior learning experiences and conceptions of being a good student, faculty and institutions can incorporate means of explicitly teaching learning strategies and college expectations to prepare adults for what they will encounter. A better understanding of the factors that support or impede the ability of low-income adults, specifically current and potential ABE students, to persist in college and earn credentials will lead to improved knowledge on which policymakers, government and philanthropic funders, and educational administrators will base transition policies and programs, chart pathways for adult students, and design faculty and staff development activities.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Efforts are beginning on the policy level to encourage changes in Adult Basic Education (ABE) program structures, curricula, and partnerships to facilitate students' transitions to college. The field of ABE, however, has suffered from marginalization and limited public funding, particularly funding for research. As a result, very little research has been conducted about the transition from ABE to college (Gittleman, 2005). Given this limitation, most of the studies in this literature review are not specifically about ABE students or graduates. Rather, I expanded the review to include studies on the broader topic of adult experiences and outcomes in college, with a focus on low-income adults, since ABE students are generally included in that category. These studies were selected to shed light on issues faced by the ABE population as well as others in similar demographics.

Three major areas of literature are reviewed. The first section provides contextual information to understand the factors impelling adult participation in higher education. It presents arguments about the importance of postsecondary education for adults, their families, and society. The second presents research on barriers to adult student success in earning postsecondary credentials. These barriers include the complex elements of adult lives and the ways that higher education institutional structures create obstacles for

adults. The third section turns to studies of adult learners' attitudes, motivations, and understanding of academic learning.

Importance of Higher Education for Adults

Higher education for adults is important on both the individual and societal levels. Public policy reports, generally funded by federal or state government or private foundations, focus on the economic argument for promoting adult participation in higher education (Jenkins, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007). There are, however, other arguments for the importance of greater participation in postsecondary education. These include informed civic participation, health literacy, and positive outcomes for children. A brief summary of studies on the value of higher education for adults is presented below.

Economic importance of postsecondary education.

A high school diploma is increasingly inadequate for economic self-sufficiency (Comings et al., 2000; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Osterman, 2008). The Current Population Survey of 2008, for example, reports that median earnings for a person aged 25 and older with a high school diploma or GED were only \$27,963, while a bachelor's degree holder earned \$48,097 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The gap in earnings between levels of educational attainment has continued to rise since the 1970s (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004).

On the national level, the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based service economy, globalization of the labor force, and trends in uses of technology and

management practices have resulted in demand for workers with higher levels of education. Policymakers are concerned about the mismatch between the skills of workers and available jobs, which increasingly require postsecondary education. Since two thirds of the labor force in 2020 will consist of people who are already over the age of 18 today, economic growth and productivity depend on the development of adults as well as young people (College Board, 2008; Duke & Strawn, 2008; Jenkins, 2008). Among these adults are immigrants who have contributed significantly to labor force growth in recent years (Jenkins, 2008). Meanwhile, the United States is not keeping pace with advances in degree completion of other nations. Although the U.S. is second among the 30 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the percentage of adults aged 35 to 64 with an associate's degree or higher, it dropped from first to 10th place over the past 10 years in the statistic for younger adults aged 25 to 34 (Ewell, 2008; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). This means that the U.S. will continue to lose ground internationally unless attention is paid to higher education access and degree completion of both youth and adults.

In addition, employers are increasingly looking for workers who can think critically, solve problems, and perform complex tasks (Executive Office of the President, 2009; Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). Levy and Murnane (2004) categorized jobs as rules-based or problem-solving. While rules-based functions can be taken over by automation or outsourcing, the nation needs human workers to solve problems, make judgments, and perform complex communication. Wage differentials are based on the level of reasoning, complexity, and communication in a job. With the decline in blue-collar and clerical

rules-based jobs in the U.S., the high school diploma has lost value (Executive Office of the President, 2009; Levy & Murnane, 2004). According to Levy and Murnane (2004), schools in low-income neighborhoods have traditionally educated students for rules-based jobs, while skills for problem-solving were restricted to students seen as heading for competitive colleges or universities. Economic changes are leading to greater income gaps. Short-term training is insufficient to move an adult out of the unstable low-wage labor market (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Prince & Jenkins, 2005).

Quality of life.

Economic rationales are not the only arguments for participation in higher education. Life in the contemporary United States demands the ability to deal with complex information and transactions, whether related to finances, health, or civic participation (Comings et al., 2000; Kegan, 1994; Kirsch et al., 2007). As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) pointed out, the impacts of college, especially of earning a bachelor's degree, go beyond direct economic effects to other associated benefits. Since people with a college education tend to have relatively high earnings, this gives them opportunities to purchase goods and services, such as books, travel, and medical care, that lead to other long-term positive outcomes. Compared to people with a high school education or less, those with college degrees generally have jobs that are more cognitively demanding, leading to continued intellectual development. They also benefit from greater social interaction on the job (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). They are more likely to engage in civic participation (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). On a societal level, widening

educational and income inequality undermines not only a dynamic economy, but also a healthy democracy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Jenkins, 2008).

Intergenerational effects of parents' higher education.

When a parent earns a college degree, this leads to positive outcomes for the next generation. Attewell and Lavin's (2007) longitudinal study of women students provides an extensive and detailed analysis of the effects of parents' education on children in low-income households. After a series of controls related to mothers' education, race, and household income, they found that a mother's earning a baccalaureate (B.A.) degree was a statistically significant predictor of positive educational outcomes for her children, ranging from early vocabulary to college attendance. The researchers found significant differences, regardless of socioeconomic status or race, between the amount of cultural activities mothers with or without a bachelor's degree engaged in with their children. The greater educational success of children with educated mothers was partly caused by the amount of "cultural parenting." A mother's going to college was also associated with greater social capital, that is, personal networks of support, which in turn was associated with positive child behavioral outcomes. Jones-DeWeever and Gault's (2006) study of the effects of higher education on welfare recipients and their children in California resulted in similar findings about children's aspirations and outcomes and mothers' involvement with children. The benefits of higher education extended beyond the individuals to their children, other family members, and friends, who benefited from their example and through the information that they were able to share. In short, those who

earn a degree not only gain the opportunity to earn higher wages, but they also have positive effects on others in their families and communities (Kegan, 1994; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008).

Barriers to Adult Participation in Higher Education

This section presents an overview of the structural factors most often cited in research and policy reports as impediments to adult progress in higher education. These include the complexity of adults' lives and how those intersect with the structural realities of colleges. Some researchers have categorized barriers to adult participation as dispositional, situational, and institutional (Cross, 1981; Hardin, 2008). Situational factors are related to the pressures of adults' multiple roles, logistical problems, and economic limitations. Institutional factors are related to college structures: policies, procedures, bureaucratic obstacles, schedules, and lack of clear information. Dispositional factors, addressed in the third section of this literature review, are concerned with students' attitudes (Cross, 1981; Hardin, 2008).

Situational barriers.

Situational barriers to adult participation in higher education include role conflicts and role overload (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1991), including lack of time; family issues, such as the need for childcare or lack of support from relatives; work issues; logistical issues, such as transportation; and financial limitations. Financial issues are highly significant when adults make decisions about enrolling in or persisting in

college; one barrier, for instance, is limited access to financial aid for part-time students. Adult students are faced not only with the direct costs of college, but with the opportunity costs of lost wages (Matus-Grossman, Gooden, Wavelet, Diaz, & Seupersad, 2002). Adults of lower socioeconomic status (SES) are less likely than those of middle or higher SES to participate in educational programs, and they are more likely to have situational barriers to enrollment in education (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Low-income adults are also less likely to be given encouragement or pressure at the workplace to enroll. They may not, for example, be able to arrange a flexible schedule at work (Cross, 1981).

Some researchers have pointed to the value of social networks for dealing with situational barriers. These informal networks provide reciprocal material assistance, information sharing, and role models. In particular, researchers have highlighted the role of social networks for immigrants (Domínguez, 2011; Menjívar, 2000). Support provided by these networks, however, is constrained by the resources available in the context in which network members live (Domínguez, 2011; Menjívar, 2000).

Because of situational barriers, adults may take a long time to make their way through higher education programs. They may face life crises (such as threat of eviction, family issues, or the need to work more hours) and have to take time off from college (Matus-Grossman et al., 2002). The need to take remedial education courses may also lengthen the college career. According to dominant persistence models for undergraduates, such as Tinto's (1993) engagement model, adults should not be successful in college because they exhibit many risk factors. They are often part-time,

live off campus, do not participate in college activities, do not interact with faculty or other students much outside of class, and have “episodic” enrollment (Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003b). Those adults who have interrupted their enrollment, however, often describe themselves as taking time off, not as dropping out (Matus-Grossman et al., 2002), indicating the need for a longer timeframe than the usual three to six years to evaluate adult postsecondary outcomes.

Institutional barriers.

Institutional barriers for adult students encompass difficulties in moving from an ABE program to a college—often a community college, as this type of institution is more accessible due to cost, convenience, and open enrollment—and challenges faced by adult students once they are enrolled in college (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). When researchers and policymakers discuss institutional barriers faced by adult students, they often tie them to adults’ situational realities. Adult students face challenges related to transitions between levels of education, scheduling, course delivery, vocational connections, and support services (Gerhard, 2007; Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008; Jenkins, 2008).

Jacobs and Tolbert-Bynum (2008) found that the structures of community colleges are designed for younger students, in part because faculty and staff are influenced by models of student engagement based on research on traditional-age students in four-year institutions. These structures, that is, schedules, calendars, and programs, do not meet the needs of adults, who generally have external responsibilities.

The researchers also theorized that community colleges do not embrace the ABE mission because ABE does not provide colleges recognition or prestige in the world of higher education. In addition, a focus on working with younger students is likely to gain community colleges more political support (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). These factors may be even more salient in universities, particularly research universities, where admissions outreach, messages from faculty and staff, and calendars are usually aimed at a traditional youth population (Harrison, 2000; Kasworm, 2010).

Educational transitions.

Progress from one level of education to another can be challenging for adult students. Lack of connection between ABE programs and community colleges, which are generally the first step in higher education for ABE graduates, complicates the progress of those ABE students who aspire to a college education (Jenkins, 2008). ABE programs, even when located within a community college, are essentially separate from other college activities and services. In addition, there is a mismatch between ABE and higher education curricula and organizational cultures, even when these programs are provided at the same institution (Gerhard, 2007; Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). The GED, which is the focus of upper-level ABE instruction, was not designed to measure college readiness (Gerhard, 2007). In most states, ABE that occurs outside of the community college context is even more disconnected from college programs (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008).

Further, there is some evidence to indicate that ABE students who pursue a college education often move from their GED program to developmental (or remedial) education; one study reported that 85% of GED graduates entering postsecondary education tested into remedial education (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). In fact, 60% of all community college students, over one third of whom are adults, take at least one remedial course, and those who test into college level courses may still have academic challenges (Bailey, 2009). Adding to the difficulty of preparing ABE students for college, there is no consensus on what it means to be college-ready, there are different placement tests and different cutoff points, even within the same state, and there is only a weak relationship between assessments and subsequent educational performance (Bailey, 2009; Duke & Strawn, 2008; Parker, 2007). Further, developmental or remedial education may be structurally separate from college-level programs, impeding effective communication to aid in transition (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008; Jenkins, 2008).

A publication from the Community College Bridge to Opportunity Initiative (Jenkins, 2008), aimed at state policy changes to improve education and employment outcomes for undereducated and low-income adults, criticized community colleges' lack of attention to students' earning of credentials and the lack of alignment between ABE, remedial, occupational, and academic programs. The authors reported that adults were more likely than younger students to enroll in occupational and technical programs and more likely to earn occupational certificates. According to the report, however, few students who earn occupational certificates go on to earn a degree, thereby limiting their

opportunities for advancement on the job. The authors pointed to the importance of focusing on key transition points in the educational journey.

Another structural issue is the transferability of credits from one educational level or one institution to another. Students are often faced with uncertainty or disappointment when seeking to transfer credits from a technical program to an academic one or from a community college to a four-year college (Jenkins, 2008). Further, pathways from developmental education to college-level courses and from vocational programs to academic programs are not sufficiently transparent or efficient (Jenkins, 2008). Articulation agreements among institutions within a state or region and career pathways models with built-in agreements are ways to overcome these obstacles (Jenkins, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007).

Schedules and delivery modes.

If adults generally consider themselves workers first and students only secondarily (Kazis, 2007), traditional higher education schedules may not suit them well. For example, when Matus-Grossman et al. (2002) conducted focus groups on issues of college access and retention with current, former, and potential adult community college students who were low-wage workers or unemployed, participants reported patterns of discontinuous study and difficulties juggling school, work, and family. Flexible scheduling is one solution to adults' limited time availability (Kazis et al., 2007; Matus-Grossman et al., 2002). Flexible scheduling can include evening or weekend classes, classes that meet just once a week, self-paced, hybrid, or online classes, flexible entry and

re-entry points, accelerated courses, and modular instruction (Kazis et al., 2007; Pusser et al., 2007). For-profit institutions have attempted, with some success, to seize the adult market by emphasizing flexibility of scheduling with many opportunities to start a program, shorter courses, and distance learning (Kazis et al., 2007).

Flexible scheduling is concordant with the principles of “andragogy,” a term used by Malcolm Knowles, an early adult education theorist, to distinguish adult education from “pedagogy,” which he defined as the teaching of children (Cross, 1981).

Andragogy implies a view of the adult learner as autonomous and self-directed; it is an individualistic conception. Knowles believed that as people mature, they increase their desire for self-direction (Cross, 1981). Although the principles of andragogy are still widely cited in the education literature, they have come in for criticism. Brookfield (1986, 2005), for example, critiqued andragogy for being instrumental and behaviorist.

He claimed it does not necessarily work for low-income adult learners whose prior educational experiences have not fostered self-reflection or awareness of choices.

Similarly, from the perspective of developmental psychology, Kegan (1994) critiqued the conventional wisdom in adult education that the adult is a “self-directed learner,” when many have not yet reached a developmental level that would allow them to take responsibility for their learning.

In fact, in Gerhard’s (2007) study of ABE students transitioning to college, students complained about individualized lab classes in math, feeling they were less effective than direct instruction. In addition, from a practical viewpoint, although distance learning tends to be more popular with adult students than with younger ones,

the digital divide presents a barrier for low-income adults. They need access to a computer, printer, and the Internet and, although these are available on campus, students who work often lack time to spend on campus (Kruger, 2000; Matus-Grossman et al., 2002).

Vocational connections.

On the assumption that adults go to college primarily to improve their position in the labor market, policy papers commonly recommend increasing direct connections to vocations (Jenkins, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007). Policymakers, researchers, and college administrators have recently advanced instructional approaches to promote the vocational success of adult learners, primarily in the community college setting. These approaches include career pathways and integrated learning (Duke & Strawn, 2008; Perin, 2001). Adult students are described as needing short-term payoffs from school to avoid discouragement, while at the same time making long-term plans for continued advancement up a career ladder. They benefit from structures in which each step builds clearly on previous ones (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). They also accelerate their learning when they can take college-level courses simultaneously with developmental courses and when developmental education is integrated into vocational courses and programs, contextualizing it with occupational skills (Bailey, 2009; Kazis et al., 2007).

One form of integration in ABE or the community college is the linking of academic and occupational content, with the goal of improving motivation and addressing basic skills needs in an applied context (Grubb & Associates, 1999; Perin,

2001). An example of an integrated program that bridges the gap between ABE and college is Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST), administered by community and technical colleges in Washington State (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2005). The program aims to help ABE students to progress faster into college-level programs in order to improve their career outcomes. It links ABE or ESL classes with occupational training classes; instructors plan the curriculum and lessons together, with the skills teacher supporting the content and skills needed for the occupational class. An internal research report on the program provided summary data on enrollments and achievements in the 24 colleges with I-BEST programs, comparing basic skills students in regular programs (ABE, GED, and ESL) with those in integrated programs. Students in I-BEST demonstrated greater educational gains on standardized tests and were far more likely than other basic skills students who enrolled simultaneously in college courses that were not part of an integrated model to earn 15 or more college credits and to earn a certificate within a year (Washington State Board, 2005). Since students were not randomly assigned, however, questions remain about motivation, initial skill levels, and other individual characteristics that might have influenced the results (Washington State Board, 2005).

The concept of career pathways is one way to bring together both short- and long-term vocational possibilities, in theory avoiding reinforcement of the social stratification of low-income adult populations (Karp, 2008). There has been a recurring debate about the vocationalization and stratification of higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 2001; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). A purely vocational, short-term program

may not prepare students for jobs that are more complex than the rules-based jobs categorized by Levy and Murnane (2004). The career pathways model assumes that people will go to school over a long period of time, while steadily moving to positions of greater skill, responsibility, and pay in the workplace. At each point in their education, there will be opportunities for certificates or degrees. Pathways are created according to local labor needs. Students develop academic as well as technical skills at each point, possibly through contextualized curricula, and course credits are transferable from vocational to academic courses of study (Duke & Strawn, 2008; Karp, 2008). This is a kind of pipeline model, but with multiple entry and exit points and the need to pay attention to each transition, including from developmental education to college-level courses, from certificate or non-credit to associate's programs, and from associate's to bachelor's programs. Karp (2008), however, reported that there is a lack of rigorous evidence supporting the career pathways strategy, and it is difficult to make labor market projections over the long term.

Support services.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their situational barriers, adults tend to make little use of many support services on campus, such as counseling, orientation, advising, or health services. The services they access tend to be those most closely connected to their classwork, primarily tutoring and library services (Kasworm, 2003b). These choices may reflect both their constricted time and their prior connections with off-campus services (Kasworm, 2003b). They may also reflect adults' lack of knowledge about services—due

either to a lack of social capital, that is, access to helpful social networks (Ojo, 2009; Putnam, 2000) or to their feeling that the services are not useful for them (Karp, O’Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Matus-Grossman et al., 2002). Although colleges provide special programs for low-income or minority students (often regardless of age), those populations often do not know about them, as Karp, O’Gara, and Hughes (2008) demonstrated in a qualitative study at two community colleges. Further, the welfare recipients interviewed in another study did not feel advisors helped them sufficiently with figuring out the best path to a major (Matus-Grossman et al., 2002). Similarly, in a focus group of low-income adults, participants felt counseling and advising services at colleges were not helpful (Cook & King, 2004). Adult students may need supports on campus that are designed specifically to meet their needs (Matus-Grossman et al., 2002; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1991). Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1991), for example, recommended setting up an “entry education center” for adults in order to bring together admissions, advising, financial aid, and support services in one location and for staff to acknowledge their role in orienting adults to becoming successful students. They believed adults need a separate orientation that incorporates adult development theory, career exploration, learning styles assessment, life skills, academic culture, institutional resources, and educational planning. In addition, Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1991) recommended an “adult learner support center,” a place for adult students to meet informally and study together. It is important, according to the authors, for adults to feel that they *matter* to the institution. If the college recognizes that there are differences between adult and younger students and provides space, services,

and mentors specifically for adults, adult students will understand that they are important to the college (Schlossberg et al., 1991). Further, once adult students understand the norms and policies of the institution, they may develop the confidence to advocate for changes that benefit their peers as well as themselves (Calcagno et al., 2007).

Summary of situational and institutional barriers.

In summary, adults, particularly low-income adults such as those coming from ABE programs, face many barriers to their success in higher education. They are dealing with pressures related to work and family not faced by most younger students. College structures are not often designed for the realities of their lives, which include multiple roles and responsibilities, time constraints, and often the need to interrupt their studies. Many adults have to pass the hurdle of remedial education before entering college-level classes. As a result, it may take them much longer than expected to progress through college. The part-time and intermittent nature of adults' higher education participation may also make it particularly challenging for them to integrate and make sense of their learning (Zwerling & London, 1992).

Adult Student Identities and Approaches to Learning

This final section of the literature review turns to research on adults' identities, motivations, and perceptions as learners. Adults' identities as students and their understanding of learning and teaching are important factors in their transition to and persistence in college (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986). These include dispositional, or

attitudinal, factors affecting adult learning. Those affecting adult enrollment and persistence in college include, for example, lacking self-confidence, coping skills, and/or energy; not liking school; having anxiety about school; feeling too old; not believing schooling will provide positive outcomes; having identity conflicts with the student role; and not wanting to appear ambitious (Cross, 1981; Hardin, 2008; Harrison, 2000). Two faculty members with 13 years of experience working in a public college designed for adults summarized adult students' concerns in this way:

College entry signals transition in adult lives.... At the same time, they may be negotiating transitions related to self, job, or family. These transitions...are accompanied by uncertainties and risks as well as opportunities. In addition, new adult students lack confidence in their ability to study and learn. They are uncertain about expectations for college-level work. They do not understand the aims and purposes of liberal education. They lack information about the structure of colleges and universities and the organization of knowledge into disciplines. Their academic skills may be rusty or inadequate. They are strangers in this new world. They do not feel they belong. They feel marginal. (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986, p. 638)

To provide further understanding of adults' identities as students, the following section reviews theories of situated learning and reproduction of social inequality; the concept of intersectionality; qualitative studies of students' doubts and anxieties; mental models and conceptions of learning; and quantitative studies of motivation and psychological functioning comparing adults and younger students. Although the subjects

of the studies reviewed below are not necessarily ABE learners, most are adult learners and/or community college students, and the theories, research approaches, and findings are relevant to this study.

Situated learning.

Using the model of apprenticeship, Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the concept of situated learning. They defined learning as a social practice rather than as the acquisition of content knowledge. According to Lave and Wenger, learning thus implies the development of an identity:

As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. In this view, learning only partly...implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings ... are part of broader systems of relations ... [which] arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities.... The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities. (p. 53)

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) used the term “legitimate peripheral participation” for the process through which learners develop a new identity in a

community of practice. Adult students who have developed identities as parents, workers, and members of community organizations, for example, may have left behind a student identity associated with a childhood phase of life (Harrison, 2000). As adults, their experience as students is often part-time and may be episodic. To be successful as college students, they may need to redefine the meaning of being a student and develop a new student identity in their new social setting (Harrison, 2000).

O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) found Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice a useful theoretical framework for a qualitative study of the experiences of 17 members of a cohort of adult students in a transition to higher education program at a British university. They identified the students as being on the periphery of participation due to the position of the transitional course within the university structure. Students learned academic practices best by engaging with them rather than being told about them. They developed an understanding that a university student needed to be an independent learner, in contrast with the expectations they had experienced in high school. They began to develop a new vocabulary and to negotiate meaning with peers through study groups. There was variation among the study participants in the level of belonging they felt in the higher education community. While some felt they belonged in the university, others did not, and some were in the process of belonging. Some overtly took on the identity and label of "student" while others were not comfortable doing so because of their preconceptions about what it meant to be a student, their age, or their identity as workers. The authors concluded that some adult students may continue to have a peripheral student identity while others are able to attain

full participation. They argued for change by institutions as well as by learners to support the development of full participation.

Cultural capital.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital also addressed the issue of student identity by showing how aspirations are deliberately dampened in the school system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). By arbitrarily setting up the culture of the dominant groups or classes as the legitimate one, the educational system covertly maintains class stratification. Those who are already in the dominant group learn this culture in the home, and it puts them at an advantage when they enter school. They have acquired the "habitus," that is, ways of perceiving, thinking, appreciating, and acting, which enables them to respond to the culture and language of the school. Society, however, perpetuates the myth that the dominant culture is universal and is acquired through schooling. Those who do not succeed in attaining the highest levels of schooling are assumed to be at fault, either through lack of merit or lack of motivation, and they blame themselves for their failure. Therefore, the educational system serves to maintain order and reproduce the class structure of society while appearing to be autonomous and neutral. A few working class individuals are allowed to move up the social ladder, so that the exclusion is better concealed by creating an illusion of democracy and opportunity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Although Bourdieu's analysis was based primarily on data from France in the middle of the 20th century, and the educational system he studied differs in some respects

from that of the United States, the concept of cultural capital is relevant to ABE students and their transition to college. As Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) found, adult students' frame of reference in college tended to be their educational experiences in high school and earlier. Class background and its consequences for cultural capital affect students' dispositions to meet institutional expectations and their ability to advocate for their needs (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Although, in the U.S., class is rarely acknowledged, and people are more likely to define their identity based on race, gender, or religion, family income is closely related to educational outcomes (Nesbit, 2005). Education, including adult education, is presented as a means to give people an opportunity to rise from their class position. Capitalist society, however, is characterized by structured inequality and individualism, and people may be expected to blame themselves if they are not successful in obtaining resources (Nesbit, 2005). Rivera (2008) and Nesbit (2005) described how low-income students have been led to think of themselves as inadequate or pathological and do not see how their opportunities have been constricted. Nesbit described how class affects psychology and beliefs and thereby involvement in education. He echoed Bourdieu's analysis of how education legitimates social inequality, although he expressed greater optimism than Bourdieu in the possibility that education holds for social mobility at any age, at least in the U.S. context.

In a study of immigrant students ranging in age from 18 to over 60 who participated in a community college basic writing class, Curry (2001, 2003) found that possession of cultural capital was associated with greater student classroom participation and greater persistence. In her classroom observations, more educated students also

received more affirming responses from the instructor. They possessed the vocabulary and “metaknowledge” of language learning to participate more fully. Less-educated students, in contrast, needed explicit instruction in the conventions and demands of college courses. Although the study is limited in scope since it concerned just one adjunct instructor, it supports the notion of the advantage of entering the educational environment already possessing the valued cultural capital.

Intersectionality.

Emerging from feminist and postcolonial theory, intersectionality theory looks at the complex effects of the interaction of multiple social identities including race, ethnicity, class, gender, immigration status, etc. (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1993; Jones, Kim & Skendall, 2012). Rather than seeing women as having a common experience, an intersectional approach would look at how experiences and identities are different if the woman is, for example, also black and working class or Asian and an immigrant (Warner, 2008). Identity is relational: it includes how one thinks of oneself, how one is perceived by others, and the interaction between the two perceptions (Van Herk, Smith, & Andrew, 2010). It is also contextual: different aspects of identity may be more salient in different contexts and may change over time; power relationships may also vary (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Warner, 2008).

Applying intersectionality to the educational context provides an awareness that both access to educational opportunity and expectations of educational achievement held by teachers or by students themselves differs depending on the race, class, gender, or

immigrant status of the students and the intersection of those social identities (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Age is another complicating factor in the case of adult students since they are not of traditional student age and therefore not generally expected to be enrolled in school. Intersectionality theory demands that we take into account the multifaceted nature of diversity among adult students.

Student doubts and anxieties.

Adult students may also encounter emotional pitfalls that may lead them to abandon their college dreams if they are not forewarned and given support to overcome them. These feelings of self-doubt, if not identified and addressed, may prevent adult students from persisting in college. Brookfield (1999, 2006) identified several themes from adults' descriptions of their experiences in college. Among these are "impostership," "lost innocence," and "cultural suicide." Impostership is the feeling that one does not belong in college because of a lack of ability to perform according to one's idealized image of an intellectual. Lost innocence refers to a discomfort, disillusionment, or disorientation that students experience when they find that education is about asking good questions, not about finding answers. Cultural suicide refers to the perception by peers, family members, or community members that students, particularly low-income and first-generation students, are acting superior to them or questioning their beliefs and assumptions. Qualitative studies by London, Rendón, and Zwerling (Zwerling & London, 1992), Mulready-Shick (2008) and Mulready-Shick and Parker (in press) also

described the cultural dissonance experienced by low-income and immigrant students, including adults, in educational environments.

One source of student doubt is insufficient academic preparation, which is frequently an issue for low-income adult students. Many attended poor quality high schools, were not enrolled in college-preparation courses in high school, or, in the case of immigrants, may not have experienced any formal education in the U.S. Cox (2009a) highlighted the anxiety experienced by community college students (not necessarily adults) who had negative experiences in their prior schooling, doubted their ability to succeed in college, doubted they could fit in, and were not sure college enrollment was the right decision for their future. For those who took GED classes, the focus was likely to be on passing the tests to earn a high school diploma, and not on broader or deeper learning goals (Gerhard, 2007). Adults who have been out of school for a number of years need to review or relearn basic skills, especially mathematics (Calcagno et al., 2007). Gerhard (2007) also highlighted the prevalence of learning disabilities among ABE students, their lack of understanding of how to deal with them, and their consequent inability to advocate for appropriate accommodations. In a study at two community colleges, Karp et al. (2008) found that the students they interviewed had internalized the “ideology of meritocracy” (p. 21). The students blamed themselves for failure to persist and achieve.

Students without prior experience in higher education may lack confidence that they can successfully study and learn (Kasworm, 2008; Schlossberg et al., 1991). The role of student is not taken on easily by adults who are not accustomed to the

expectations for course work or to the assessment of their competence as students (Kasworm, 2008). In addition, Kasworm (2008) showed that many adult students express concerns about being accepted in the college environment and about whether they could be successful there. Further, tensions may erupt with family and friends who are not supportive of their decision to pursue higher education. Even those adult students who are relatively confident academically and psychologically experience some doubts and challenges. Students who are undergoing an emotional crisis or a life transition find entry into higher education even more challenging and anxiety-provoking (Kasworm, 2008).

Self-doubt may hamper adult student involvement in the classroom. A number of education theorists and researchers address the issue of silence of adult learners in the classroom and the implications of their apparent non-participation (Brookfield, 2005; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Ojo, 2009). Faculty may judge how smart students are based on linguistic patterns that make low-income students feel like imposters in the academic world; this creates self-doubt and self-censorship (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Immigrant students, particularly those who came to the U.S. as adults, may be confronted with teaching methods that contrast with their experience in their home countries. They may respond with silence as they figure out the new norms (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). They may also be silenced by comments on their accents; feelings of isolation and rejection; or lack of confidence in their listening comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, or cultural interaction skills (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Ojo, 2009). The professors may then interpret that silence as a lack

of intelligence; as a result, those students get less attention and become less visible in the classroom, thereby reinforcing their self-doubt (Ojo, 2009; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Paradoxically, some methods designed to foster greater participation of all students may not have the intended effect. Brookfield (2005), for example, problematized the discussion circle, generally seen as a highly democratic classroom practice. He claimed that although it works for those who are confident in using academic discourse, those who are new to it, or are second language speakers, may experience it as humiliating. Students feel pressured to perform, but they do not know the norms or cannot express themselves with the vocabulary or style of discourse that is expected in the higher education context.

Students' understandings of teaching and learning.

Researchers often describe the classroom as the focal point for adult college students, who generally spend little time on a college campus outside of classroom hours (Donaldson, 1999; Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 2000; Kasworm, 2003b; Zwerling & London, 1992). Adults are often part-time students and often study in the evening, they tend to be commuters, and they rarely get involved in student activities on campus. Therefore, classroom activities take on an even larger role in adult students' development than in that of traditional-age students (Graham et al., 2000). Students encounter a number of different teaching philosophies and styles in the college classroom, some of which are familiar to them from their prior educational experiences and others of which they have difficulty comprehending. This lack of understanding of

instructors' goals and methods can create a barrier to nontraditional students' academic progress (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Some researchers (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Cox, 2009a, 2009b; Grubb & Cox, 2005; Harkins, 2009; Kasworm, 2003a, 2005) have investigated students' approaches to learning and, in some cases, contrasted students' understandings with those of faculty. They recommended that more research be conducted into the beliefs of students and instructors and ways to use this information to positively affect attitudes and instruction. There are indications of a large gap between college instructors' expectations and those of students, particularly low-income students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Cox, 2009a, 2009b; Matus-Grossman et al., 2002). When Collier and Morgan (2008) compared the expectations of faculty at a state university with those of traditional and first-generation students, they found significant disparities between the understandings of first-generation students and those of faculty. In their conceptual model, students' college performance depends not only on academic skills, but also on students' cultural capital as exemplified by their understanding of faculty expectations. First-generation students needed help mastering the role of college student in order to perform appropriately in different classes and contexts. They needed much more explicit explanations of workload, how to carry out an assignment, and when, how, and why to communicate with a professor than students from more educated family backgrounds. Grubb and Cox (2005) also claimed that college instructors do not know how their students think or what attitudes they hold about learning. Instructors assume that students know how to learn in whatever way they are taught; however, students may not understand the instructors' expectations.

Developing an understanding of college culture and of themselves as students is part of the transition that adult students undergo to become successful in the college environment. As Brookfield (2006) put it:

Developing a strong self-image as a learner—regarding oneself as someone able to acquire new skills, knowledge, behaviors, and insights—is a crucial psychological underpinning to learning. It tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people see themselves as learners, if this is a part of their identity, then the prospect of new learning is within their horizon of possibility. (p. 217)

From the point of view of developmental psychology, Kegan (1994) maintained that when assessing a curriculum, faculty need to ask what order of cognitive complexity it demands of the students and determine if that matches the complexity of which the student is capable. He advised adult educators to achieve a greater understanding of the developmental process needed to help students develop their minds. To Kegan, adults who enroll in higher education with vocational goals may still need, in order to succeed, the transformation of mind that liberal educators aim to promote. Adult students need to be taught the hidden curriculum—that is, epistemologies and rules of discourse—needed to master the disciplines. Moving to a higher level of consciousness means going beyond the goal of producing work to please the teacher to thinking for themselves, evaluating their own thinking, and understanding the disciplines in higher education as systems of interpretation.

In a similar vein, Cox (2009a, 2009b) uncovered the instrumental perspectives and narrow, fact-based conceptions of learning of community college students of a range

of ages. Kegan (1994) noted that while some faculty appreciate the contributions adults bring through their life experiences, others express frustration that adults are less open to new learning than younger students. Some faculty appreciate adults' motivation, but others complain about their focus on practical and vocational issues and lack of interest in larger questions.

Using a social constructivist approach, Kasworm (2003a, 2005) analyzed data from a large study including interviews of 90 adult undergraduates in varied institutions of higher education: two public universities, two community colleges, and two adult degree programs in private liberal arts colleges. In one study of adult undergraduates' meaning-making, Kasworm (2003a) categorized their understanding of academic learning into five "knowledge voices." These voices represented different attitudes toward study practices, the usefulness of academic knowledge, and the role of the instructor. The "entry voice" describes students who saw faculty as authorities; focused on being obedient, attentive, and hard-working students; understood learning as memorizing isolated bits of knowledge; and considered academic knowledge to be divorced from real-world knowledge. Students with an "outside voice" had a highly instrumental approach to gaining credentials. To them, academic knowledge was often irrelevant. They selected what was important to learn deeply based on its relevance and practiced recall strategies for the purpose of good grades as needed. Many believed their own expertise was more important than the knowledge of faculty. Those with the "cynical voice" were in college because their family members pressured them into it or they needed courses or degrees for job advancement. They did not respect the knowledge

of faculty, were frustrated when they received low grades, and did not participate in classroom activities. The classroom made them feel they were not valued and did not appear competent. Those with a “straddling voice” tried to make connections between academic knowledge and knowledge in the outside world. They felt general education was applicable to their lives. They appreciated active and collaborative learning. They appreciated faculty as facilitators and shared ideas with peers. Finally, students with an “inclusion voice” were intellectually motivated and sought knowledge both within and outside the classroom. They were critically reflective and sometimes experienced transformative learning. These learners were generally in the final years of bachelor’s-degree programs.

Kasworm’s works cited above described adults’ epistemological perspectives at one point in time, and did not indicate whether these perspectives evolve over time. She showed how adults make metacognitive decisions about how to approach learning based on how useful the knowledge is likely to be outside the academic context. The overriding concern for most adult students was applicability in their non-academic worlds. Some, however, were motivated by intellectual exploration and challenges. In these studies, Kasworm did not investigate possible reasons for the different voices based on students’ educational backgrounds.

In a separate analysis based on the community college subgroup of the larger study population specified above, Kasworm and Blowers (1994) described those students, many of whom were GED recipients and all of whom were at least 30 years old, as identifying their commitment to being a student with a work ethic. The students believed

in working hard, attending all their classes, completing all their assignments, being respectful of the teacher and the class, paying attention, taking notes, and making school a priority. Kasworm and Blowers (1994) used the term “stairstepping” to explain how students used prior experiences to interpret their student role. In a second analysis of the interviews with the community college subset, Kasworm (2005) found that those adult students held an image of the ideal college student. They contrasted the ideal student with many of the characteristics they observed among their less motivated younger classmates. According to study participants, the ideal student is serious, committed, self-motivated, engaged and confident in the classroom, has past experiences that can be of value in the classroom, attends class regularly, and carefully completes assignments. Those adults used their mental constructs of the ideal student to evaluate their own behaviors and to infer faculty expectations.

Transitions.

Educational researchers often describe adult students as people in transition (Daloz, 1999; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2005; Kegan, 1994; Rossiter, 2007; Schlossberg et al., 1991). They may enroll in an educational institution in response to a change in their lives (Cross, 1981). Once in a learning environment, they are not only acquiring knowledge, but also affecting their sense of self; they are entering a new culture. The classroom is a place where they can try out new meanings, understandings, and identities (Graham et al., 2000).

Transformative learning theory views the adult learner as a person in the process of development and a creator of individual change. The basis of Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning was a study of women returning to community colleges as adults, published in 1978. To proponents of transformative learning, the purpose of adult education is to develop more autonomous individuals who can make informed decisions, attain greater control over their lives, and lead more meaningful and authentic lives (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 2000). The core of the theory is that learning involves critical reflection on one's own assumptions and frames of reference and those of others, with the goal of arriving at a truer and more reliable understanding (Brookfield, 1986; Daloz, 1999; Mezirow, 2000).

Transformative learning theory assumes there are no fixed truths, and understanding must be contextual (Mezirow, 2000). It has been linked to stage theories of adult development, including Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental theory and Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky's (Goldberger, 1996) feminist theory of development. In these developmental theories, adults change the way they understand themselves and their world. Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental theory is based on the idea that the mind of the adult continues to develop and become more complex in order to deal with the demands of adult life. In his scheme of five orders of consciousness, adolescents attain the third order, and adults need to achieve the fourth to function well in the world. In the fourth order, people are able to examine, evaluate, and change their opinions, beliefs, and values. In Kegan's book *In Over Our Heads*, he

maintained, however, that a large proportion of adults struggle in the modern world because they have not reached the fourth level of consciousness.

In their developmental theory, Goldberger et al. (1996) categorized women into five types. Women they call “silenced” have experienced violence and do not believe they have a voice; they believe in learning only through concrete experience. “Received” knowers are characterized by dichotomous thinking, adherence to authority, and rote learning. “Subjective” knowers believe each person has her own truth; they listen to their own inner voices. “Separate” knowers question the arguments of others. Finally, “connected” knowers listen to others and try to understand how they think without judging; they are empathetic and collaborative (Belenkey & Stanton, 2000; Goldberger, 1996). Transformative learning requires an ability to reach the more complex levels of knowing.

Harrison (2000) used transformative learning theory as a conceptual framework for her doctoral dissertation on adult undergraduates’ development of an identity as students. She interviewed eight students, three of them first-time students, two re-entering college, and three transfer students. Comparing interviews conducted with the same students toward the beginning and end of a semester, she discerned a perspective transformation in their sense of identity during that time period. They were more likely to associate being a student with an active approach to learning.

Similarly, when Harkins (2009) studied adult students in a transition program for undergraduates returning to school, she identified changes in their academic self-regulation and mental models of being a student in the course of their participation in the

program. She found that their academic self-efficacy and use of cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies were low on entry to the course but increased by the end of the semester as a result of the activities in the transitions course. These activities included extensive opportunities for reflection, interaction among students, and feedback from instructors. Those who had had negative academic experiences in the past and were worried about their ability to learn were able to overcome those fears. In addition, students began to develop a self-image as an educated person. They discovered that active participation in class, something that had not been encouraged in their prior educational contexts, helped them to learn.

Although the literature is weighted heavily toward the difficulties faced by adult students, those adults who do persist in higher education may exhibit very positive characteristics and outcomes, as the studies by Harrison (2000) and Harkins (2009) indicate. Graham et al. (2000) reported that, despite adult students' lack of engagement on the college campus outside of the classroom, they exhibit as much or more academic progress as younger students. Kasworm (2003b) cited research showing that adult undergraduates have comparable or higher grades and higher levels of satisfaction with college than younger students. They may also be better at time management than younger students and tend to be more serious students, making up for their rusty skills with a greater focus on learning (Donaldson, 1999). Despite initial doubts, over time, as adult students successfully complete courses, their anxiety may diminish or disappear (Kasworm, 2008). In Kasworm's (2005) interviews with adults on their identity as college students, she found that they considered themselves serious and committed. In

comparison to younger students, they had made a deliberate choice to be students. They considered their experience to be an asset in the classroom and had good relationships with faculty. Some took on the role of mentor with younger students. Hardin (2008) described adult students as motivated and committed and often favored by faculty because of the background they bring to the classroom. Some adults are also motivated by the desire to be a role model for their children (Matus-Grossman et al., 2002). Cross (1981) described adult learners as more task-oriented than younger ones and clearer on their goals. There is no comparable research, however, that specifically examines students coming out of ABE programs, who may differ in important respects from the adults in these studies.

Several quantitative studies using self-report questionnaires also compared adult students' psychological functioning favorably with that of younger students. A study comparing 21 younger (ages 18 to 22) and 21 older (ages 35 to 44) students on measures of academic performance and psychological functioning, for example, resulted in the somewhat surprising finding that the older students, despite their greater external responsibilities, had higher GPAs and, despite their fewer social supports, were equivalent in psychological functioning to the younger group. The authors hypothesized that these findings, which contradicted earlier studies, may be attributed to the relatively older age of the women and their children and to the fact that they were in the third or fourth year of college when they were studied (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). When Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) compared older and younger undergraduate students' motivation, they found slightly higher levels of motivation overall and higher levels of

intrinsic motivation to learn among the older students. Both groups showed the same levels of extrinsic motivation to learn.

Summary of adult identities and approaches to learning.

This section on adult identities has presented a mixed picture of the adult student. Some studies emphasize the doubts and anxieties of the adult undergraduate in the higher education environment. Others demonstrate that adults have great resilience and higher motivation than many younger students. Some adult students have highly instrumental views of learning while others are committed to deep and even transformational learning. There is some indication that studies of adults who are in the final years of a bachelor's degree program paint a more positive picture of those adults' identities as students and their understanding of academic learning. It may be that these understandings evolved over time or that students who were unable to develop those understandings left higher education before advancing to that stage. It is also unclear why the students exhibited the particular approaches to education that were analyzed. Finally, the studies reviewed here generally do not give a full picture of the adults who were studied; their prior educational experiences or their demographic profiles, including whether they were former ABE students, were often not taken into account. Intersectionality theory reminds us that, when uncovering the student identity held by adult students, it is useful to situate that within the multiple identities that those adults possess.

Summary and Implications of Literature Review

This literature review has sought to increase understanding of issues in the transition to college of ABE students. Since very little research has been conducted specifically about this transition, the study examined research on adult undergraduate students in general, while focusing on low-income adults since ABE students are generally in that category. The review began with the policy message about the need for postsecondary education for economic, quality of life, and intergenerational indicators. There are two possible implications of this message. It can be taken to indicate that government and institutions should find ways to facilitate the transition to college of adults. Alternatively, it can be used implicitly or explicitly to put the blame on the individuals who are not responding successfully to that message. If they are struggling financially, they can be held responsible for their own lack of resources because they did not complete postsecondary education. Lately, there has been an increasing emphasis on individual rather than societal responsibility in the United States (Rivera, 2008). This implication can be taken even further by blaming less educated individuals for contributing to national economic decline.

In line with policy messages, the ABE system at the federal and state levels is pushing programs to raise the bar for educational achievement of their students. This is not an easy task, however, and not only because of funding limitations. Adults face situational and financial barriers that need to be addressed on the policy level within but also beyond the sphere of education. Higher education institutions are responding with steps to better serve the needs of adults, such as flexible scheduling options, distance

learning, and on-campus childcare. However helpful these accommodations are, they do not address the other barriers faced by adults coming out of ABE.

Therefore, this review included studies of dispositional and educational barriers faced by adults. Some adults have internalized messages that higher education is not for them, and they are full of doubt about their ability to succeed in that environment. For some, their prior schooling may not have been engaging or enjoyable, and they may have felt like failures. For those who are immigrants, even if they had comfortable positions in their home country, they may find themselves pushed to the bottom occupationally in the United States due to lack of English language skills or transferable credentials. When they enter higher education, adults need exceptional determination to persist over many years of study, interrupted by personal, family, work, or financial issues. This makes it more difficult for them to have a coherent academic experience. However, they bring positive elements to the classroom: their life experience, their motivation, their serious commitment, and their ability to serve as mentors to younger students. With adequate support, adults have the potential to be assets in higher education.

The third section of the literature review indicated that institutions need to do more than work on policy issues. There is a need to uncover adult students' attitudes and understandings of academic learning. Harkins (2009) has shown that a transitions program for returning undergraduates can have a powerful effect on their identity as students and their learning strategies. In order to build an effective curriculum for transition to college programs for ABE learners, however, more research into the conceptions of learning of that population is needed.

This literature review demonstrated the lack of research on the transition to college of students from ABE programs. Although there are some policy reports on the importance of this transition (Jacobs & Tolbert, 2008), there has been virtually no exploration from the perspectives of the learners themselves. Investigations of student perspectives include Kasworm's (2003a, 2005, 2008) study of adult learners' approaches to learning and conceptions of the ideal student; Cox's (2009a, 2009b) study of community college students' understanding of academic learning; Harkins's (2009) study of the mental models and academic understandings of returning undergraduates in a transition program for adults; and Harrison's (2000) study of adult undergraduates in a university. None of these researchers, however, focused specifically on the ABE population, including both native-born and immigrant students. My study is a contribution to filling these gaps.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The following chapter describes the research methodology used for this study and why this approach was appropriate for the questions I posed. Criteria and procedures for selection of sites and participants are then outlined, followed by methods for collecting and analyzing data, and means of protecting confidentiality. The chapter concludes with limitations of the study.

Research Approach and Rationale

In conducting this qualitative research, I sought to investigate the conceptions or mental models of ABE students and graduates related to being an adult student. I took a social constructionist approach. Thus, an assumption of this study was that realities are multiple and constructed (Charmaz, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I examined meaning-making by individuals, focusing on their experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. Those experiences and interpretations are subject to the contexts within which the individuals live (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Kasworm (2003a, 2003b, 2005) and Cox (2009a, 2009b) used a social constructionist approach in their works referenced in Chapter 2. They interviewed students to understand how they thought about learning and being a student. Using a similar approach, this study involved interviews of students and

analysis of their responses. The appropriate method for this type of inquiry is qualitative. Qualitative research is open-ended and generally inductive (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Qualitative researchers study natural settings and the meanings made by individuals or groups in their context (Creswell, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam, 1998). In this case, I studied how ABE students and former students construct their identity as students. The unit of analysis was the individual student.

I used a grounded theory method as presented by Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory, developed originally by Glaser and Strauss (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006), is a method that builds inductively from data to form concepts; data analysis is carried on from the start rather than as a separate phase after data collection. Charmaz (2006) described her approach to grounded theory as constructivist. She contrasted her method with what she terms the “objectivist grounded theory” (p.127) of Glaser, which has positivist elements in its assumption of an objective reality discovered by the researcher and its goal of developing theory that is independent of social context. Charmaz (2006) acknowledged that not only the participants, but also the researcher, make interpretations. In other words, meaning is co-constructed. These interpretations, however, are grounded in rich data. Interpretation requires reflexivity in order to bring the researcher’s preconceptions and responses to light (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By recognizing and acknowledging their assumptions, researchers become conscious of how they may be affecting their interpretations; thus, subjectivity is grappled with rather than hidden (Charmaz, 2006).

To Charmaz (2006), in contrast with Glaser, recognition of context is essential; meanings are constructed in a specific time and place and under specific conditions. She argued for sensitivity to the larger networks within which experiences are embedded and for the conditions in which “hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity” (p.130) are supported. Since Charmaz (2006) was interested in interpreting how and why participants construct meaning and because of her acknowledgment of the importance of social context, her approach was appropriate for this study.

Researcher Background

Since the researcher is the prime instrument for this qualitative study (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994), it is important to give some information about my background. The interaction between the researcher and the respondents results in the creation of knowledge in a social process (Bess & Dee, 2008). I have been involved in ABE for over 30 years as a teacher, counselor, staff development coordinator, and program administrator. I have taught students at all levels from beginning literacy and beginning English language instruction through GED preparation and transition to college. At present, I am a director of an ABE program. I admire the adults who have made a commitment to go to school while dealing with the many complications of their lives.

My connections with the network of ABE providers made it easier for me to gain access to sites and classrooms within them. My experience also made it easier for me to communicate with and establish rapport with the research participants. At the same time,

I recognize that my own educational trajectory is very different from theirs. I went directly from high school to a bachelor's and then master's degree program before starting full-time work. I have been educationally privileged. My continuing study as an adult, however, has given me the experience of juggling family and work responsibilities with schooling. This is not to say that my situation is the same as that of the participants in the study, since I had a stable job, a much stronger educational foundation than most of them, and, as an educator myself, had a different window into the process. I also benefited from the congruence between my studies and my work, with one enriching the other. Still, I understand the opportunity cost of education as an adult, including foregone earnings, loss of time with family, and the emotional toll of years of study. In addition, my own parents came to the United States as adults, and my own undergraduate experience was abroad, so I have empathy for the mixed cultural experiences of many ABE students.

I recognize that my values have influenced my selection of a research problem and that my perspective has influenced my choice of a research method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My values, as expressed through my life's work, include creating opportunities for those who have experienced educational and economic barriers. While my tacit knowledge was useful in the research process, I also strove to put my assumptions and preconceptions up front and keep an open mind as I listened to the research participants and examined the data.

Site Selection

Participants were drawn from three ABE programs. The sites were selected from among Massachusetts ABE programs funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), which sets and monitors implementation of standards and curriculum frameworks for ABE programs. Massachusetts has engaged in reform and continuous improvement of ABE programs, emphasizing quality over quantity served, guidelines for program quality, and considerable professional development opportunities (Comings & Soricone, 2005). It is therefore a state where ABE programs are likely to be of high quality in terms of curriculum, relatively stable student populations, and teacher qualifications. There is also a high concentration of colleges in Massachusetts, giving adults opportunities for higher education within reach of their homes. Criteria for selecting sites included (1) provision of GED preparation (separate upper-level classes for students testing at grade-level equivalent 9 to 12) and upper-level English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, with a large enough pool of students (over 40) that met the additional participant criteria (see below); (2) a student population that was diverse in terms of age, national origin, and prior schooling; and (3) access to follow-up and contact information on program graduates who had gone on to college. I informed ABE directors about the research by distributing descriptions at a DESE statewide meeting and followed up by contacting individual directors to solicit their interest. Once directors had expressed initial interest, I presented a more detailed research proposal to them verbally or through email for them to discuss with appropriate staff and to determine whether they were interested in proceeding. I

explained the purpose of the research and measures to ensure confidentiality of participants and anonymity of the sites. I outlined the responsibilities of the researcher and expectations of the site, including access to classes and contact information for graduates and identification of a site contact person. I selected sites in three different cities and in three different types of organizations: one was a school department program, one was a community-based organization, and one was an ABE program within a community college. Once a program agreed to be a research site, each program director and I signed a site agreement (see Appendix B).

Participant Selection

In keeping with a qualitative approach, a purposeful sampling process was used to recruit participants. While there are several types of purposeful sampling, I used maximum variation sampling, deliberately selecting a heterogeneous group of participants in order to obtain a broad range of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My study therefore included both current and former ABE students to provide a range of perspectives and backgrounds. For the purposes of this study, an adult was defined as a person aged 25 or older. Although adulthood is a concept that cannot be tied to a specific age—with many ABE students under the age of 25 and many people younger than age 25 possessing adult responsibilities and experiences, I chose age 25 as a cutoff point for several reasons. First, ages between 18 and 24 are generally considered the traditional college age, and this is a study of nontraditional students. Second, the U.S census uses ages 25 and older for educational attainment data. In addition, it is generally likely that a

person over the age of 24 will be independent of parents, in the workforce, and out of formal schooling for some time.

Among the participants were (a) students enrolled in an ABE program who aspired to go to college, were in an upper-level class (GED preparation or advanced ESOL), and were at least age 25 and (b) former ABE program students (either from ESOL or GED classes) who had enrolled in college and who were also at least age 25. To reflect the diversity of ABE participants, I also aimed for variation in student demographics, specifically age, gender, prior educational experiences, immigrants and U.S. born, and participation in ABE and ESOL classes. Grounded theory methods also include theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), a strategic approach to achieve greater clarification and confirmation once concepts are developed (Charmaz, 2006). This gave me the freedom to select additional interviewees after I completed interviews with initial participants, analyzed data, and began developing categories. With the final three participants, I was able to explain my developing analyses and seek their reactions to my initial themes after they answered the initial set of interview questions.

Participants who were current ABE students were recruited through their programs once the program director signed an agreement to participate in the study. I visited the GED and upper-level ESOL classes at each site to describe the research purpose and process and invite students to express their interest in being interviewed. With ABE students, I believed this direct method of recruitment would be most effective. In a face-to-face situation, they had the opportunity to ask questions about the research

and clarify their understandings before deciding whether to participate. During classroom visits, I asked any interested people to fill out a brief form giving demographic data— age, nationality/ethnicity, amount of time in the U.S., and prior educational background— and time availability for interviewing. I also gave them a brief description of the research, including its purposes and procedures. They were assured of confidentiality and of the option to withdraw from the study at any point. To show respect and appreciation for their time, I offered participants a stipend. I was pleased at the number of people who responded with interest in participating, making it possible to select a diverse group. With participants who were former ABE students, I used a different process to recruit them since they were no longer present at the ABE programs. I had intended to send out a mailing to program graduates, but it turned out that mailing lists were not available through the sites. Instead, I contacted potential participants by phone or email after program staff had spoken to them to ascertain their interest in participating. In all, I interviewed 14 students: nine current ABE students and five who had completed ABE and gone on to study at a college.

Data Sources and Data Collection

The source of data consisted of one- to one and a half-hour interviews with 14 ABE students and graduates. Since the research questions examined meaning-making by individuals, interviews were the best way of obtaining this information. The interviews were semi-structured. I asked participants to describe and reflect on their current and prior educational experiences, their conceptions of the learning process, and their

identities as students. Questions were open-ended, and participants were asked follow-up questions or probes depending on their responses. For one question—“What does it mean to be a good student?”—I gave participants some time to prepare a written response before giving me their answers. The purpose was to allow them a chance to reflect on the question before responding. (See Appendix C for interview questions.) Interviews were audio recorded.

To further an understanding of the context of the students’ current educational institutions, I examined relevant documents, primarily course descriptions and syllabi from the ABE and college courses. In the case of current ABE students, I asked their program directors or coordinators to provide the documents; I assured the staff that I would not share or cite from the course descriptions. In the case of participants who were enrolled in college, I asked them to bring copies of syllabi from their courses. I also looked at the websites of the educational institutions. All documents were used as background information about explicit and implicit expectations of student behavior and learning, thereby further elucidating the educational context for students.

The first data-collection stage after IRB approval was to test the interview process and questions by interviewing six students: four current students and two graduates from an ABE program that was not a site of the subsequent research study. During this preliminary stage, I developed and refined procedures for approaching and selecting participants, organizing data, and noting preliminary findings and methodological insights. Following what I learned from this stage, I made small revisions in follow-up

probes to the interview questions, although not to the primary questions themselves. These changes were made in the interests of clarity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an inductive process and occurred concurrently with data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process was adapted from Charmaz's (2006) guide to grounded theory. I transmitted each interview to a transcription service the same day it was completed. After receiving the transcript (generally within three to five days), I listened to the recording carefully and made corrections as needed. Since many participants were not native English speakers, some corrections were necessary, and my presence in the interview and knowledge of the context sometimes made it easier for me to catch what they were saying than the professional transcriber was able to do. This process also allowed me to immerse myself in the rhythm and tone of the language and to follow a consistent protocol for transcription (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Then I read through each transcript carefully in its entirety and did line-by-line coding in pencil using an open coding system. This initial round of coding stayed very close to the text, with respect for participants' descriptions of their experiences and meanings. Following Charmaz's method, I used gerunds to start each code; as she explained, this keeps the data close to the participants' perspective. After coding, I wrote some initial memos based primarily on individual interviews, but increasingly making comparisons across interviews. In most cases, initial coding was concluded before conducting the interview

with the next participant, but on two occasions I conducted two interviews on the same day and therefore coded each after hearing both.

For the second round of coding, I used NVivo, a qualitative research software package. Through this focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), I identified categories that emerged from the data and synthesized initial codes. I imported each transcript into NVivo as soon as I reviewed and corrected it. Based on the initial coding of the first interview, I set up a few codes in NVivo, adding to them as I conducted additional interviews and did initial coding of those. I went over each transcript in NVivo and highlighted and coded passages or lines according to these codes. This was an iterative process. As I added transcripts, I added codes, then went back to earlier interviews and recoded them for these new codes. The constant comparative method that is part of a grounded theory approach involves comparing data within interviews and across interviews. Initially, I compared within single interviews, but as I conducted additional interviews, I compared across interviews and participants.

Simultaneous with and subsequent to the coding processes, I wrote memos (Charmaz, 2006) to note ideas and insights that emerged from examination of the data. Each memo was dated and given a title. These memos helped to clarify my thinking as well as to raise questions. They served as a step toward interpretation of the findings. While the first memo was based on a single interview, subsequent memos included comparisons with prior interviews. Initial memos were based on the codes and the data, looking at what participants were saying, doing, and assuming. Subsequent memos became increasingly abstract and conceptual. I looked for patterns and comparison

among individuals and categories. Some memos included segments of interview transcripts to maintain the connection with the raw data, and some included references to the literature.

The process of analysis was not linear. I sought the approaches that would give me the most insight at a given point, sometimes methodical and sometimes more intuitive, but always staying close to the participants' words in the transcripts. I started with codes that arose from the interviews. After completing several interviews, I decided to methodically pull out references to background information including family background and early educational experiences across the interviews. Then I pulled together all the responses to one specific question about how participants would introduce themselves. Later I decided to adopt a more imaginative approach, pulling out from each interview what I called "notable quotes," those statements that seemed to carry the most meaning. I printed out and went over these quotes carefully, noting (in pencil) any underlying meanings and recurring themes. This process helped me to identify my initial three categories: "work ethic/compliance," "respect," and "starting over." I subsumed the initial codes I had entered in NVivo under these categories and found they fit well. I searched for key words in the transcripts, noted their frequency, and looked for dictionary definitions and synonyms for those words to deepen my understanding of their meaning. This process helped me reach a greater level of synthesis and abstraction. I wrote memos on the categories. Another helpful exercise was to diagram each of the categories, showing subcategories, examples of each based on the data, and connections between them. For one category, later titled "student as worker," I looked at each participant's

responses to the question “What does it mean to be a good student?”, summarized all the responses on a spreadsheet, and made a grid showing which participant made each response. This helped me to see the prevalence of certain responses.

Analysis included the explicit and implicit meanings of the interviews, including an investigation of the use of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These metaphors provided insights into participants’ thinking. I also analyzed and compared data according to participant demographic characteristics and their location in the educational trajectory. I tried to understand, within their contexts, what meanings participants constructed, how they constructed them, and why (Charmaz, 2006). I kept in mind Bourdieu’s (1990) theory of cultural capital, as described above, to provide insight into the influences of class position and prior schooling experiences on students’ aspirations and construction of identities as students. As I worked, I used Charmaz’s (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory* as a resource, returning to relevant chapters at the various stages of my analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is based on methodological consistency (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the richness of the data, the systematic process of comparison, and the logical connections between the data and the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Through the memos I wrote as well as some less formal notes, I tracked the process of my analysis. In order to further establish trustworthiness, I contacted interviewees for member checking (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned above, I included discussion of

my initial findings at the end of my final three interviews. I also conducted in-person follow-up interviews with two of the participants. I mailed or emailed a summary of my findings to all but two of the participants (whom I was unable to reach). I had follow-up communications by email or phone, and participants generally confirmed that my themes resonated with their experience. In all, I was able to present and discuss my themes with nine of the participants, 64% of the total. I included the voices of participants in Chapter 4 in a wealth of quotes from the interview transcripts. I also conferred with a colleague as I wrote drafts in order to question or provide confirmation of my analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My dissertation committee chair provided ongoing input on drafts.

Ethics and Confidentiality

In my presentation of findings, sites are identified by general descriptive characteristics only, not by name. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality. Their actual names were not used in the write-ups of data; they were invited to propose a pseudonym. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants signed a consent form that clearly described the purpose and processes of the research. Participants were informed that they were free to discontinue the interview at any time.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations included that the sample was purposely small, and it was drawn from a single state. Participants were only interviewed at one point in time. Since the study was not longitudinal, it was not possible to directly examine changes in students'

conceptions over time. Participants were also taken from a small segment within ABE programs: they were in the highest level classes, and they had articulated a desire to go to college. As a result, they may not be representative of the broad population of ABE students. In addition, since students volunteered to be part of this study, the sample may have tended to consist of people with certain characteristics such as a desire to help others (including the researcher), a loyalty to their ABE program, or a level of comfort in talking about themselves. The goal of this research, however, was to show the value of the process of explicitly examining and working with adult students' conceptions of themselves as students.

One limitation is the possibility of the researcher's background and values unduly affecting the findings. As a person who has been immersed in the field of ABE, I was bound to have preconceptions about ABE students. I tried to be vigilant through the process of memo writing and frequent review of interview transcripts so that I was not imposing my viewpoints on the thoughts and feelings of the participants. My perspective could not be absent from the analysis, but I tried to be aware of what I brought and what came from the participants. On the positive side, my experience with ABE and ABE students made it easier for me to communicate with participants and understand some of the references they made, such as to standardized tests. Other limitations include the possibility that participants may have responded with what they believed was a socially sanctioned answer, that they may have responded to unconscious nonverbal cues from the researcher, or that their accounts may have suffered from the imperfections of memory.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents a description of the study participants, including their demographic characteristics, their educational experiences, and their aspirations. I identify three themes that emerged from the data, and elaborate on each one with examples from the interviews. The chapter ends with reflections on students' perceptions of the characteristics of a good student.

Description of Participants

Fourteen students, with a range of ages, educational backgrounds, countries of origin, and employment situations, participated in this study. They were recruited from three sites, all Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs in Massachusetts. One site was a community-based organization, one was a school department program, and one was within a community college. Four participants were recruited from the community-based organization, six from the school department program, and four from the community college site. At the time of their interviews, eight participants were enrolled in an ABE program: two were taking advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and six were in GED preparation classes. One had recently passed his GED and, on the morning of the interview, had just enrolled in a community college. The other five

participants were graduates of ABE programs who had begun college courses: three had started college after completing an ESOL program followed by an ABE transition to college program, and two had entered college directly from a GED program. (See Table 1 below.)

Table 1
Participants' Educational Characteristics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Site</i>	<i>Prior schooling</i>	<i>ABE Classes Taken</i>	<i>Student Status at Time of Interview</i>	<i>Career Goal</i>
Amy	CC	Grade 10	GED	Community college student	Ultrasound tech
Buoy	CBO	Grade 7	ESOL, GED	GED student	Unsure; possibly health care
Candida	CC	Law degree	ESOL, ABE transition to college	Not in school; had taken ESOL course in private college	Unsure
Gabriel	LEA	MBA	ESOL	ESOL student	Teaching elementary math
Kerry	LEA	Grade 11	GED	GED student	Nursing
Lanie	CBO	High school	ESOL, ABE transition to college	Community college student	Medical assistant
Linz	CC	Grade 11	GED	Just completed GED and enrolled in community college	Unsure
Maureen	LEA	Technical school	GED	GED student	Nursing
Natalie	LEA	High school	ESOL, GED	College student	Chemist or researcher
Nick	LEA	Grade 9	GED	GED student	Unsure
Rul	CBO	Some college	ESOL, ABE transition to college	Community college student	IT
Simone	CBO	Grade 11	GED	GED student	Nursing
Sirlei	LEA	Some college	ESOL	ESOL student	Unsure
Theo	CC	Bachelor's	GED	GED student	Agriculture

Abbreviations Key:
LEA: school department program
CBO: community-based organization
CC: community college program

Four of the participants, Nick, Kerry, Linz, and Amy, were born in the United States, and the others were all immigrants. Among the immigrants, three spoke English as their primary language and/or had been educated in English. Those included Theo, from Ghana, Maureen, from Uganda, and Simone, from Jamaica. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 50, with a median age of 37. Nine had children, although only six had children living with them. Of the remaining three, two had adult children and one had left her son with her parents in her home country. Nine participants were working at the time of the interview: two worked part-time, two had full-time jobs, one worked in a family-owned small business, and the other four worked multiple jobs. Several reported workweeks of 50 to 60 hours; one had three jobs and worked up to 90 hours a week, including some overnight shifts. Two of the U.S. participants were not currently working (one because of an injury), although they had worked long hours in the past; and three of the immigrants were not working and were being supported by a family member. (See Table 2 below.)

All but two participants came from large families, each with four to 10 siblings. None of the participants came from financially well-off families, and all but two described experiences of poverty and deprivation, or at least lack of sufficient resources for education. Three of the four U.S.-born participants, Kerry, Linz, and Amy, had very unstable family lives when they were growing up. Two of the participants, Maureen and Theo, lost their fathers when they were young, leaving their mothers to struggle to support their families; three, Natalie, Linz, and Amy, lost their mothers as young children. Sirlei was the daughter of parents who each formed separate households and

sent her to live with her grandparents. Simone lived with grandparents in rural Jamaica because her mother emigrated for four years to seek work. Rul, who came from Haiti, grew up with a serious illness—sickle cell anemia—and lost three of his four sisters to illness while they were children.

Most of the immigrant participants described parents who worked hard and made sacrifices to send their children to school. In most cases, those parents themselves had little education. Only two participants, Maureen and Theo, both from Africa, reported parents with postsecondary education; their mothers, both widows, struggled to put their children through school. Three others reported one parent with a high school diploma. The rest of the immigrant participants had parents whose education ranged from no schooling at all to around nine years of school. Sending their children to college was not an assumption for most of these families, and only two immigrant participants were able to get some financial support from parents for college in their home countries.

On the whole, the participants had more education than their parents, sometimes substantially more. All but one of the participants had attended high school. Eight of the immigrant students had graduated from high school in their home countries; of these, two had attended some college, one had graduated from a technical school, one had a bachelor's degree, one had a law degree, and one had earned an MBA before emigrating to the U.S. Yet all but two of the current students, were in the process of earning a GED; Gabriel and Sirlei were in ESOL classes. Although Maureen and Theo already had postsecondary education in their countries and Natalie already had a high school diploma from hers, they started over with a GED in the U.S. because they found it too

complicated to get a transcript from home or they felt they needed to learn the U.S. educational approach.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Children (Yes/No)</i>	<i>Work Status</i>
Amy	United States	28	F	Y	Part-time
Buoy	Cambodia	31	F	N	Family business
Candida	Brazil	50	F	Y	Not working
Gabriel	Colombia	47	M	N	Full-time
Kerry	United States	27	F	Y	2 Part-time
Lanie	Philippines	37	F	Y	Part-time
Linz	United States	49	M	Y	Not working
Nick	United States	39	M	Y	Not working
Maureen	Uganda	46	F	Y	Full-time and part-time
Natalie	Thailand	42	F	Y	Not working
Rul	Haiti	35	M	N	Not working
Simone	Jamaica	34	F	Y	Full-time
Sirlei	Brazil	37	F	N	2 Part-time
Theo	Ghana	30	M	N	Full-time and part-time

Early educational experiences.

Participants' early educational experiences varied. Three of the participants from the U.S., Nick, Kerry, and Linz, changed schools multiple times. Nick had the most upsetting and damaging school experiences due to his sense of stigma at being placed in special education because of an auditory disability. His parents sent him to a special

school for students with learning disabilities, but this did not work out, and he returned to the public school system. He left high school because he and his girlfriend had a baby, and, in any case, he felt he was not learning. Linz reported going to 12 different schools because of his family's frequent moves, but, despite the disruptions, he said he enjoyed school and found ways to adapt to the changes. Clearly, it was not easy, though. He admitted to being lonely, but claimed the experiences toughened him and made him able to handle different situations. He also described school as an escape from his "crazy household." He gave up school in his senior year, 14 credits short of graduation, when he was working a night shift with his brother cleaning a department store. Kerry felt she did fine in elementary school but started falling behind and having trouble understanding the work in middle school. Her parents placed her in a private school, but she had to withdraw because they failed to pay the tuition. After she got to high school, she kept falling further behind, skipping classes and getting poor grades. Kerry described feeling so lost that she would never catch up:

I started feeling like it was like pointless for me to try because I felt so far behind. And when I would be in the classroom I would just feel lost. How I wouldn't want to ask questions and answer questions. So like when I would go to school I would just sit there and like be blank and not take anything in. And so the problem just kept getting worse and worse and worse because I wasn't asking for help. When I went to school I wasn't doing anything. I wasn't doing homework. And I knew how serious the situation was, so I didn't want to think about it, so I

avoided it. And I just didn't deal with the situation, and it just kept getting worse and worse and worse.

Participants who grew up in the U.S. described school as a source of suffering, a place where they were tested and made to feel unworthy—although, in the case of Linz, looking back on his school experiences over 30 years later, he interpreted them as helping to making him stronger. He also regarded school as a haven from a dysfunctional home.

Amy, the fourth participant from the U.S., said she hated school but identified her troubles as stemming primarily from her home life—losing her mother at age six and having an alcoholic father who did not care about her and required her to work to pay for room and board from age 15. It was only because of her friends' encouragement that she stayed in school as long as she did, until the 11th grade. When asked why she left school, she replied, "I just didn't care.... [T]here was no sense of going to school, so I just stopped." For these U.S.-born participants, school was not a place to build a future. To them, it did not seem to lead anywhere.

There were greater differences among the early educational experiences of the immigrant participants. Some reported negative experiences, some were quite positive, and some were mixed. The most eloquent in speaking about the poor quality of their education were Buoy and Rul. In Buoy's situation in Cambodia, schools were overcrowded, and teachers were underpaid. The only way a child could get a good education in a public school was to pay the teacher for tutoring outside of school hours; however, her parents were unable to afford that extra help for her. In addition, as an older sibling, Buoy was expected to leave school at age 13 to help support the family and

the education of the younger children. Rul complained about the quality of teachers in Haiti, some of whom he said were unqualified and uncaring and refused to answer questions. He finished high school and went on to a university accounting program but felt the quality of education was poor even in the university. Simone was in a rural Jamaican school system. Unable to qualify for the high school she desired, she went to a technical school where she did not do well in her final exams and failed to earn a diploma. Lanie finished high school in the Philippines but felt she missed out a lot because her family could not afford the expenses of extracurricular activities and supplies for projects. She was unable to afford a college education.

Some of the immigrants had generally positive educational experiences. Gabriel, for example, came from a poor family, but, with his positive outlook, he emphasized how lucky he was to attend good schools with scholarships. During the interview, he repeated over and over again that he was a good student at every stage of his schooling. However, he also said there were 40 to 45 students in a class in Colombia, so if he wanted individual attention, he had to see the teacher after class. Thanks to scholarship opportunities, he was able to continue his education through to a graduate degree. Similarly, Maureen felt her early education in Uganda gave her a good academic foundation. Theo appreciated the discipline in his schools in Ghana and considered himself a good student. Candida reported that she was an active student who enjoyed school in Brazil; she did not report any negatives. Sirlei, another Brazilian participant, described herself as an average student who was quiet and did not stand out in any way. Natalie said her father was concerned about her education and sent her to good schools in

Thailand, but she was not a serious student. These six participants all earned high school diplomas, and all but Natalie went on to postsecondary education soon after high school graduation in their home countries. When they came to the United States, however, they found they lacked the English skills or credentials to find good jobs or to further their education, so they found their way to ABE programs.

Identity.

My primary research question was, “How do ABE students and graduates conceive of their identity as students?” I first tried to approach this question indirectly by asking participants how they would introduce themselves if they met a new person at a party or picnic. I was interested to see how many would introduce themselves as students, thereby indicating that being a student was an important part of their identity. In fact, most participants did not identify as students. Rather, they largely identified with their home countries or hometown and with their roles as family member and/or worker. Most of the immigrant students (Maureen, Gabriel, Theo, Simone, Natalie, and Rul) led with their nationality or mentioned their nationality within the first sentence of their response. Buoy and Candida also felt their culture, nationality, or experiences as a foreigner would be the most interesting topics to talk about in an introduction. Linz, although not an immigrant, also started by identifying his place of origin, in his case the city where he was born and raised.

For the immigrant participants, the fact that they responded in terms of their national identity may be in part because they felt they were immediately perceived as

foreigners and, when they met people, were often asked where they came from. Gabriel, for example, said that when he meets new people, they notice his accent and are curious about his nationality:

About identity, I have seen with everybody, when you start talking with someone on the street or in the school, the first question is, “Where are you from?” and “How long have you been here?”.... When they feel your different accent, they just start going, “Where are you from? I like your accent.” [laughs]

Gabriel’s identity was influenced by the perceptions others held of him. While he started his introduction with his nationality, he went on to present multiple aspects of his identity, including his work and family. He mentioned his educational background but not his current status as a part-time ESOL student in an ABE program. Similarly, Simone talked about various aspects of her identity: her age, her children, her extended family, her work, the fact that she loves to cook, and her excitement at being in the U.S. Some participants identified primarily with their family roles. Kerry presented herself as the mother of her two young daughters, Amy as a single mother, and Maureen as one of nine siblings and the mother of 12 children. Several participants (Nick, Simone, Theo, Gabriel, and Sirlei) indicated that they would discuss their work roles in an introductory conversation. Two participants, Simone and Maureen, also mentioned their religion.

Only four of the 14 participants (Buoy, Theo, Amy, and Natalie) referred to their identity as students when asked how they would introduce themselves. Buoy, a GED student, simply said she would tell a person she met that she was a student. She did not mention what she was studying, and she later said people tended to assume she was a

college student. Amy, a college student who had completed several courses, said she would introduce herself as a “single mom, who is in school.” Natalie, who had started taking courses at a community college, was the only participant to say she would name the specific college she was attending and what she was studying. She was not working at the time, although she had worked in Thailand, her home country, and she did not present a worker identity. The only person who specifically stated he was going to an ABE program and studying for his GED was Theo, who already had a high school diploma from Ghana.

It seems important to note how unlikely it was that ABE participants would identify as students. We all have multiple identities, but some are more salient than others. For most of the participants, a student identity was not salient; they presented themselves as workers, immigrants, and/or parents. Most of them were completing their phase as a student in an ABE program, but since they all stated an intention to go on to college or were already in college, a student identity would seem important to their progress.

Although a student identity was not how most participants presented themselves, being a student from an ABE program who was aspiring to go to college or had recently started college held meaning for them. These meanings emerged from a deeper analysis of their words. After several rounds of coding of the interviews, I identified three themes that represented what it meant to participants to be students. I titled these themes “journey,” “respect,” and “student as worker.”

Journey

The metaphor of being on a journey came through strongly from the interviews, either directly or implicitly. For the participants, adult education is a stage on a journey. The destination is a new career and a new sense of self. Within the larger theme of a journey, I identified several subthemes. On the journey, adult students encounter *obstacles*, but also find *supports*. Participants experience a variety of *emotions* while on their journey. The journey may affect their *sense of self*. They may have a dual *time perspective* in relation to their goals. Many of them see this journey as an experience of *starting over* in life. This theme and subthemes are elaborated below.

The theme of a journey was an *in vivo* code that emerged from the interviews when participants described their educational experiences and goals. Lanie, a community college student from the Philippines, for example, related how she had written a graduation essay for her first ESOL program on her chosen theme of a journey, in which she talked about the long path she still had to travel. Similarly, Rul said, “My journey is to have a degree in the United States and to return in my country and to help.” To him, earning a degree meant that he could contribute to the development of his country, Haiti. When asked what she thought it would be like to be a college student, Maureen, a GED student who aspired to be a nurse, said:

I will be halfway—as if I’ll accomplish my goals.... You know when you are moving—when you start the journey, like now, I think I’m still stuck. But when I go to college, I think I’ll be halfway on my journey. Because I know, I know, at any cost, I’ll make it.

Other participants referred to a journey by implication. Amy, who had taken several community college courses after passing her GED said, “At the end of the road there’s going to be something bigger there for me.” She explained that the vision of a better job and a better life for her and her daughter was what helped her to keep going in school.

The participants were choosing to leave a life where there was no hope for a change and to make an effort to realize their aspirations through education. As Amy put it,

I just didn’t want to stop at just my GED. Nowadays you have to have some form of certificate or education to make good money. I don’t want a minimum an hour job where you make \$8.00 an hour. Like I’m never going to go anywhere. So I thought by going to college, I can always get my certificate, and then go on to get an associate’s degree.

Amy’s stated goal was a practical one. She had already taken several college courses and had mapped out a plan starting with a medical-office certificate and then going on to an associate’s degree in radiology. For others, the goal or the steps toward it were less well defined and sometimes less practically oriented. Simone reported that one day when she was going home from working at a coffee shop, she said to herself, “I need to do more.” This led to her changing jobs and then developing the goal of becoming a nurse. To Buoy, who worked in a family-owned small business, “Education is really important. Like I can get a job for myself; I can do anything, but not the one that I like to do.” Similarly, Sirlei, a Brazilian participant who came to the U.S. with very limited English, said she enjoyed working in a coffee shop at first because she was learning the language,

but “[n]ow it’s getting boring because [of] the routine. Every day you do the same thing. It’s never change.”

Two of the U.S. participants returned to school looking for changes in their lives that were not linked to specific careers. Linz, a 49-year-old GED student who had suffered a back injury and could no longer do physical labor, said he went back to school because he wanted a purpose in life. He was looking for knowledge, happiness with himself, and a career that was relevant to the future. Similarly, Nick’s journey was to “find” himself and discover what he really liked to do instead of continuing to follow in his father’s footsteps in the restaurant business. He said, “I wasn’t satisfied with me. There’s more to me than just that. I don’t want to cut myself short in life.... That’s why I’m going to college.”

Obstacles along the journey.

Participants portrayed a lack of education as a wall that blocked progress or as an obstacle to moving forward. Linz reported that when he advised a young man to get a GED, the words he used were, “Knock that wall down!” Similarly, Nick reported:

I’ve got six brothers and sisters. None of them went to college. All later in life they hit the brick wall and said, ‘Man, what am I going to do, or why didn’t mom and dad do this and push us more?’

Looking back, Nick wished his parents had placed more value on school for their children instead of bringing them up simply to value hard work.

In contrast to a wall that blocks people, educational achievement was perceived as opening doors to a better future. As Rul, a college student originally from Haiti, put it, “When you have education you can open every door in your life.” Lanie also talked about her ESOL program opening doors for her. After completing the program, she went on to a transition to college program before enrolling in a community college.

The journey for these students, however, is not a simple matter of walking through a door. It may be very long and full of twists and turns. Adult students face many trials or barriers along the way. If they are immigrants, they are learning about and adapting to a new country and culture. Like Buoy, who had only a seventh-grade education in Cambodia, some may be struggling to read and express themselves in English. Others are burdened by long hours of work, sometimes at two or three jobs, and find it difficult to find time to study. Maureen, for example, was working extra shifts in nursing homes in addition to her full-time job—for a total of 60 hours of work a week—and found it very difficult to find time for homework. Gabriel, who worked as a supermarket stocker, said,

When we come here [to the United States], it’s like a new life where you have to start learning everything. But the most important thing that I had to do here is job—work, work, work, work, work, and make money to send to your country and to pay things here. It was the first thing that we had to do here. If you have time and extra money, we start to study.

As Gabriel pointed out, some adult education students lack resources for school or even for basic needs and have to put all their energy into making money. Many

immigrants also send part of their paycheck to family members in their home country to support them and to pay off debts. For those who attempt to be both a good student and a good employee, stress and lack of time make it hard to maintain a balance between the two roles, as Lanie explained. Having emigrated from the Philippines to marry an American who was himself out of work, Lanie related her long efforts to find a job:

I applied so many times.... I think almost hundreds [of] applications, if you believe....And then...some company reply back, which is very nice, but saying... thank you for your interest, but sorry because we are looking, you know, for... at least one year experience in this.... I also have a family, I need to provide. So it's just like that my first year here is...really a trials....What I heard about America is... it's just the people think, in my country or the people who don't know the situation, it's like, "Oh, America is very good and very good life." That is what I heard, but when you're here it's a little bit different from what you expected. I found out that here if you don't have a diploma, if you don't have a good education, you don't have a job.... I said, "Oh my God, I'm thinking that I'd rather...go home." Because it's just like nothing. What should I do here?

Lanie was supporting a son back home whom she had left in the care of her parents. In the U.S., she faced the hard reality of a recession economy, very different from what she had been led to expect, and questioned whether she should continue to struggle so far from home. What she learned about the job market, at the same time, influenced her decision to go back to school.

Having to raise money to support family members is one barrier to these students' educational progress. For others, like Amy, having young children living with them to take care of may be simultaneously a barrier and a motivation to study:

Anything you do, something always gets in the way, but you have to be strong enough to step over that, and say, "You know what, that's not going to stop me, because I'm going to continue to keep going."

Amy's main difficulty with getting to school was finding reliable care for her daughter.

Faced with these barriers to their educational and career advancement, the participants made reference to being stuck or trapped, to being lost, or even to moving backwards. Buoy, for example, the student who worked in a family grocery, said, "If I don't have this program I wouldn't—you know, my life [is] not going on. I was stuck. So I wouldn't have my second chance." After she started college, Lanie remarked, "I don't want to just stop there and hanging...because I want to go farther." Maureen, who had 12 children, explained, "Because of the large family and the responsibilities, I've always tried and get stuck in the middle." Similarly Kerry, another GED student, said, "I'm behind where I should be.... I still feel like I'm never going to get there." These metaphors of place, position, movement or lack of it came up frequently in the interviews. They provide vivid illustrations of the way the participants conceived of the student role as being on a long and difficult journey.

Time perspective in relation to the journey.

Participants exhibited a dual time perspective toward their journey. On the one hand, the adult students were desperate for change. Aware of their age, many felt their current involvement in school was their last chance to make that change and insisted that they did not want to waste time. In fact, they felt they were already making up for or recovering lost time. As Simone, a 34-year-old mother of two, put it, “We are all big people who realize that we missed out on something and we’re trying to make up for it before we get older.... We want to come, get our GED, move on to college.” Rul, who suffered from sickle cell anemia, felt he wasted his first four years in the U.S., being confined by his illness and other problems: “But now I have this opportunity to go to college. I think I would like to get back the time that I lost.”

Despite being the youngest participant, Kerry, at age 27, expressed the sense of desperation most strongly:

I know that this is the only way. You know what I mean? Like because there are times [when] obviously I’m tired. Like I get up at four o’clock in the morning. I don’t want to be getting home at 10 o’clock at night. I’m very tired. But like I have to do it. Do you know what I mean? I have to do it. I have to. It’s like just the only way.... But if I don’t push myself, my life’s never going to be better. It’s always going to be a struggle.

Kerry was dealing with the care of two young children, two part-time jobs, and an unsatisfactory living situation while going to school. She felt compelled to make a change in her life despite how hard it was to manage everything. Similarly, Lanie, after

completing several college courses, said there was “no turning back” despite the stress of working and studying.

On the other hand, the adult students accepted that the journey would be long—perhaps as long as five or six years before they saw a change in their lives—but they were willing to go step by step, and they understood that they had to work extra hard given who they were (immigrants or non-high school completers). So they were willing to embark on a long journey as long as they could see the signposts and have a vision of the end. As Gabriel, who was working as a supermarket stocker, said, “I want to get my dream. I want to become a teacher. But I’m [in] no hurry about that dream. I say everything step by step, step by step.” His plan was to take time off from school and save enough money for tuition and living expenses before starting full-time college study. He estimated that it would take him two more years to save the money and another two to earn a teaching license. Theo was planning to enlist in the military to get tuition benefits, while Buoy hoped to get a job at a college in order to benefit from free tuition for staff who studied there. These plans all meant waiting to continue their education.

Although, on the one hand, Gabriel said he was not in a hurry, on the other, he said that, at the age of 47, he felt that if he did not accomplish his goal within four years, he probably never would. Similarly, Simone said, “I give myself until 40 to achieve everything. I’m 34, so hopefully in the next six years I’ll be done with school.” Kerry, the young mother who had left high school because she had fallen so far behind, declared,

I want to be a nurse like really bad. Before I just never thought that I could do it and especially because so much time had gone by. But I was like, you know what—because at this time I was maybe 23 or 24, I was like, that’s still young. Even if it takes me like six or seven years I’ll still only be 31, like that’s still young. And I can have a good life.

The destination of the journey may be a modest aspiration—just having what might be considered a “normal” or “typical” life with a regular job and vacations. Here is how Maureen, the mother of 12, expressed her vision of her life in five years:

I think if I, God willing, if I make it and become what I want, a nurse, I think I’ll change. I’ll be less stressed. I’ll be working fewer hours. I’ll be able to attend to my family fully. And I think I’ll be happy. I’ll be able to meet the cost of my extended families.

Simone also wanted to be a nurse, doing work that she loved, doing better financially, moving to a quieter neighborhood, and taking a vacation. Kerry, another aspiring nurse, longed to live in her own apartment with both of her daughters rather than staying with her boyfriend’s extended family and, like Simone, to go on a vacation with the children.

Starting over in a new adult journey.

For the immigrant participants, whatever their educational background, coming to the United States meant starting life over. In a somewhat different way, the U.S. participants were also embarking on a new life by going to school as adults and trying to leave behind their troubled high school experiences or, in the case of Linz, feeling

“reborn” with the chance for new opportunities after suffering a back injury that ended his ‘blue collar’ work life. Candida had earned a Master’s in Education and a law degree in Brazil before she came to the United States because of her marriage to an American. Reflecting on having to return to school to learn English when she was almost 50, she said,

It’s very frustrating just learning. I know I thought I had [it] all done. I say we never stop...learn[ing], but my goals was like almost complete about career, and I restart[ed] everything like in the zero point.

She realized that it would be very difficult for her to resume work in the field of law in the United States, so she needed to consider other options. Rul had studied accounting in Haiti, although he had not completed his degree program. He made a similar observation:

When you come to the United States... even [if] you have a good degree in your country...you’re supposed to restart. It’s a new life. It’s a new culture. It’s a new language.... Sometimes you think you know something. You think you have a good knowledge but the reality [is] that you don’t know nothing. You still need to learn.

Natalie expressed similar sentiments. “The first month I came here it was overwhelming. So American culture, food. I know nothing. But I want to learn something. And I thought the first thing I have to learn is English.” She had met her American husband in Thailand and came to the U.S. to live with him. Maureen, who had been an accountant in Uganda, talked about “going back to scratch” as she worked on her GED. Gabriel, who

had an MBA in Colombia, also said he felt like he was starting school all over in the U.S., and he felt nervous and afraid when he had to speak English in the classroom.

Candida, another highly educated participant, said, “When we speak about learning a new language for adults, you’re going to be like kids inside the class. We’re going to start [at] the beginning. When you don’t know, really, you start with [the] beginning level.”

Psychologically, it can be very frustrating for adults to feel like children again because of difficulty expressing themselves in a new language. Professionals like Candida also find they are unable to transfer their credentials and need to undergo new training and certification or change fields.

Other participants, with much weaker educational histories, also talked about starting from the beginning. Buoy said she didn’t know a word of English when she arrived in the U.S. from Cambodia with a seventh-grade education, and when she looked at a page of print in English, she felt that “it’s blank to me.” Nick, who had a very troubled early education in the U.S. and estimated that he was at a fifth-grade level when he started in ABE, said he couldn’t write a sentence, “and the math class I just started from zero learning how to do all that stuff, add, subtract.” Simone recalled that when she started in the GED program, many years after failing to graduate from high school in Jamaica,

Oh my God, I felt like I didn’t remember anything that I’ve learned for so long....

When I came to class, the simple things, it’s like I didn’t remember. It took me like maybe a month to get into things, you know? Simple math, simple adding fractions, percentage, it’s like I’m doing them for the first time.

Participants used terms like “blank,” “zero,” and “first time” to express a perception of starting at the bottom. At least at the time of their interviews, however, all the participants in the study exhibited the determination to keep going despite believing they had a very long road to travel.

Starting over is difficult and may be frustrating, but it may also mean the chance to realize a long-held dream. Gabriel, for example, had wanted to become a teacher since early adolescence, but he was unable to do so because his family could not afford to send him to a high school that would enter him into the pipeline for that career. In Colombia, where he grew up, high schools specialized in certain careers. He was able to earn a scholarship, but it was not to the high school he would have chosen. Here in the U.S., he was inspired to return to that dream. Similarly, Theo was interested in agriculture but had to study engineering in his hometown in Ghana because the university that offered a major in agriculture was located in a different town, and his widowed mother could not afford to pay his living expenses there. He was looking into agriculture majors in the U.S. Simone, who had left high school in Jamaica without a diploma, reported that since she was a small child, she had told her mother that she wanted to be a nurse:

I always wanted to be a nurse, but at that time I don't think, even if I had graduated from high school, my parents wouldn't have the money to send me [to nursing school].... I said, “One day, before, I don't know, before I die, before I get old.” ... I just have this thought that one day things are going to turn around for me and I'm going to be able to do it. So I'm going to work on that right now.

Other participants were forming new career goals as they progressed in adult education. Rul decided to major in Information Technology in college because he could not face restarting the accounting program he had begun in Haiti, repeating courses he had already taken. In addition, his ABE transition to college program offered to pay for his first course if he selected the field of IT. Natalie, who had worked in retail in Thailand, wanted to become a professional, specifically a chemist working in a lab, because she relished the challenge of doing something different from what would be expected of a woman coming from a less developed country. For Nick, who grew up in the U.S., starting over meant giving up a life of 13-hour days, seven days a week, managing his own restaurants. He was looking forward to a new, less stressful, and more satisfying and creative life—although unsure of what that would be:

I work hard for [my children]...and so that's why I went right into the business.

And I put myself in harm's way, basically, you know, to working all those hours, all that stress.... And it just wasn't worth it anymore. The money wasn't worth putting myself at risk. So I ended up selling the businesses.

In Nick's case, returning to school gave him a chance to think about what he wanted his future to look like. The possibility of taking time off work was very helpful to him in that regard. Others participants needed to find support for their journey in other ways.

Support on the journey.

Several of the participants, including Lanie, Natalie, and Linz, expressed appreciation for the opportunities available in the U.S. for a free basic education for

adults and financial aid for college. It is difficult to predict whether any of the 14 participants will achieve their dreams, given all the obstacles they face. Many also benefited, however, from moral and material support, whether from family, friends, co-workers, classmates, ABE program staff, or even chance acquaintances. Some of the people who supported and encouraged participants even served as guides to them in the phases of their journey. Amy, who had grown up with a neglectful alcoholic father and had dropped out of high school in the U.S., testified to the importance of support:

You have to have support. Going to school you can't just be on your own. You have to have support from somebody, whether it's teachers, or your advisor, or your friends and your family, because they're the ones who motivate you to stay focused and keep going, even when you get discouraged, like there was times where I was, "You know what? I'm done. I don't want to do this." My boyfriend is like, "Nope, you're going to keep doing it. It's the only way you're going to get on to what your goal is."

Family members may serve to inspire or encourage, and may be a motivating factor for persisting. For Amy, Kerry, and Simone, their young children were a strong motivation for their persistence in school, both because they wanted to set a good example and because they wanted to provide for them. When asked why she went back to school for a GED, Amy replied that her daughter was the reason:

I didn't want her to grow up and say, well, you didn't finish school so why am I? I wanted to be a role model for her because her father dropped out of school. He didn't make it to the eighth grade, so I had a lot on my shoulders to be a role

model for her where I didn't grow up with anything. I want her to grow up with a good role model, knowing that, "Well, mommy did it, so I'm going to do it."

Simone's mother, who lived with her, was always encouraging and helped out by taking care of her children after school so she could work in the evening and go to school in the morning. Gabriel and Lanie also reported receiving encouragement from family and friends both in the U.S. and in their home countries. Theo was encouraged by a friend to stay with the GED program when he was thinking of giving it up after just one day. Kerry, a young mother, said her co-workers, mother, and some of her friends "say good things about me all the time and they just say that they're proud of me and I'm a hard worker and I'm a good mother." Maureen, who worked as a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA), and Simone, who did housekeeping in a hospital, also received encouragement from nurses at work to pursue a nursing degree.

Sometimes fellow ABE students or people from participants' home countries that they met in social settings helped by exchanging experiences and information. Maureen, for example, was encouraged by some members of the Ugandan community in Massachusetts to pursue her education in the U.S.:

Those people, my friends, such people who did the same like me, are the ones who encourage me to go back because you need to understand the system. So those people, I talk to them and they guide me. And they tell me that no matter how many years you take, any day and any minute you spend there is not time wasted. It will be time invested. And it will help you when you go ahead in college.

On the whole, however, the immigrant participants did not report much specific support or guidance for further education from immigrant social networks. Three of the immigrants (Lanie, Natalie, and Candida) happened to be married to Americans, and two of these were isolated from their ethnic communities. Some participants received general encouragement from family and friends and financial assistance or help with childcare from family members. For educational guidance, however, several participants, as described below by Lanie, Amy, Nick, and Rul, relied more on their ABE or college program staff.

Emotions and sense of self on the journey.

The adult students experienced many contradictory emotions and shifts in their sense of self in the course of their journey. They oscillated between optimism and desperation, excitement and misery. Their emotional states were influenced by the people around them. Some described negative experiences with family and community members. While some people supported or welcomed the participants, others denigrated or rejected them. Linz, who had an unstable childhood, described his family as unsupportive and hoping he would fail. Kerry also felt belittled, especially by her boyfriend's mother, with whom she lived, who did not appreciate her going to school two days a week to study for her GED. In fact, her boyfriend's mother complained about how long the GED program was taking and sabotaged Kerry by arriving late when she had agreed to take care of Kerry's daughter. Kerry described her feelings in this way:

There are days I feel good about myself and I do feel like I get up every day and I try the very best that I can...I force myself to just keep going and going and going because I know I have to because I know if I ever want my life to be better or to change this is what I have to do.... But then there's days that I don't feel good about myself because I'm always late and because I'm always rushing...[and] I don't have time to do homework.... So it's like I care about this a lot, but because I can't give it complete 100 percent...it upsets me.... And I think that there's people in my life, some people, who are very negative people. They're not even good people for me to be around, who no matter how good I do, right, will just say, "What is she doing that's so great? Everybody has to go to work." And they'll just try to act like I'm not doing anything and they'll just try to make me not look good.... A lot of times because those people have really bothered me a lot, like it's consumed me at times because I obviously want people to like me.... It's like the better I do, and the more I grow up and change...the more tension there is, you know.

Kerry described emotional swings caused both by her own perceptions of what she was or was not accomplishing and the feedback she was getting from others. She was unable to avoid interacting with people who did not support her efforts because she was living in the same household with some of them. Maureen, in contrast, said she tried to avoid talking to fellow Ugandans who discouraged her from pursuing a GED. She preferred to interact with those who supported her because they had themselves gone back to school in the U.S., some after a nursing career back home.

The participants were excited about moving forward but at times felt overwhelmed and uncertain whether they could continue either in the ABE program or in college. Simone, who was pursuing her GED, explained, “I’m telling you, my brain is turning over. I’m really excited, now, about coming back to school, going to college.” Linz, who had just passed the GED and enrolled in college, was also enthusiastic about going back to school, “I’ll be 50 next month, and I got a new world. I’m excited because of the opportunity. I’m very grateful.”

Lanie, however, a student from the Philippines who had left her son back home with her parents and whose American husband was disabled, had conflicting feelings, “I’m really struggling. I’m telling you that. Like sometimes I come to the point that it’s just...too much for me. I mean I’m far from my son and...I found out that America is not [an] easy place, you know.”

Lanie described a state of war within herself as she debated whether she should focus on making money or on going to school. She felt pressure to do well in college because of all the assistance she had received from her ABE transition to college program. She also worried about losing her financial aid:

Because I am depending on my grant, I said, oh, my God, if I fail this I may lose my grant. So it’s... nerve-wracking.... It’s a lot of pressure because first I need to think that I need to do well because I am depending on [a] federal grant because that is their rule. You need to maintain your grades. So aside from that like there’s a lot of worries, you know, I have financial worries, too. You know, providing [for] my family.

Maureen, the parent of 12 children, also said she was miserable because of her difficulty making ends meet, trying to support several children in college and being unable to help her family in Uganda.

For those students who were parents, making time for school meant spending less time with children. It meant giving up some of the attention the children needed in order to make a better future for them. It was a painful dilemma and a source of internal and external conflict, especially for a mother of young children like Kerry or Amy. As Amy explained,

I think the whole parenting is very true, because it is less time with your child, because you have to obviously make time to go to school. Like my daughter told her counselor...“I’m very proud of my mom, but I get to spend less time with her, because she always has to go to school.” But to hear her say how proud she was makes it worth going to school.

Even Gabriel, while generally very positive, expressed some doubts about continuing to seek a teaching degree. He questioned whether it would be worth continuing or not, because he missed his family and social life in Colombia and heard from friends who cautioned against taking out loans for college. Amy also expressed the doubts she had when she started her GED program. She was nervous and afraid she would not “make it”:

Sometimes it’s just really frustrating, especially if you don’t understand something, or a material, and you’re at home, and there’s not someone there to ask how to do it. It’s very frustrating, and you get very discouraged. I know I

do, and when I first started school I had a very negative attitude.

Amy persisted, however, and received support from ABE program staff; eventually, learning math began to feel easy. Yet, the conflicting emotions did not end there because she underwent similar discouragement and doubt when she started college.

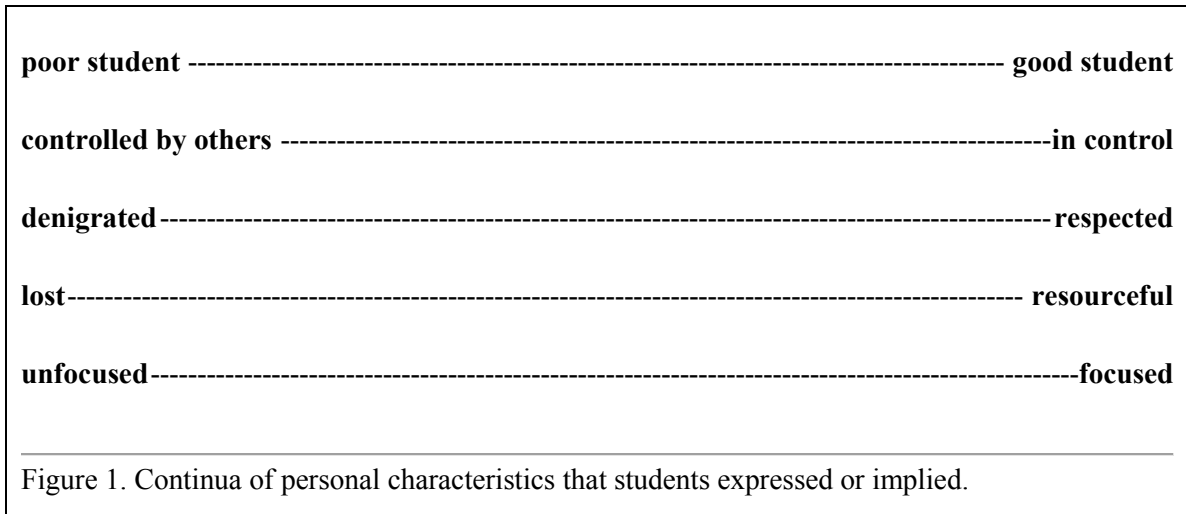
Kerry reported that she had made a list several years ago and was accomplishing the items on her list; however:

I still feel like I'm never going to get there.... I feel like I say this is what I want and this is what I have to do to get there, but I always deep down feel like it's just not going to happen.... So if I ended up really being in college and being like that close to what I want, it would just be such an overwhelming feeling. It would be like a surreal feeling because I just can't even imagine it being real.

The participants with the greatest current financial pressures and those with negative prior school experiences appeared to experience the greatest doubt about continuing on their journeys. Maureen, Lanie, and Kerry, all quoted above, worried about being able to support their children. In contrast, Linz and Candida, whose children were grown up, and Gabriel, who did not have children, expressed themselves in more consistently positive ways.

Participants' earlier and current experiences, as well as their emotional reactions, contributed to a sense of self that represented a series of dualities. These dual perspectives often existed within the same person, but some people were closer to one pole than another. Individuals may be at different points on a continuum as compared to

each other. Individuals also move back and forth along the continuum themselves. (See Figure 1.)



Some of the immigrant participants, like Gabriel, Lanie, and Candida, thought of themselves as having been good students all their lives. Some, like Sirlei, said they were average students. Other participants, like Nick and Kerry, both born in the U.S., represented themselves as poor students as children or adolescents—whether due to lack of opportunities and support, lack of interest, or a learning disability—but as better students as adults. Others, like Natalie and Simone, felt they had the potential to be better students now than when they were younger because of their greater maturity, but the pressures of life interfered with their ability to dedicate the time they needed to study.

Theo, who worked as many as 90 hours a week helping adults with mental challenges, was struggling to live up to his own standards for being a good student:

A good student is the one that studies hard, do[es] his homework, and do[es]n't miss classes.... That is the main thing. If you study hard, I mean you do your homework and you don't miss classes, then that makes you a good student. And you do your research and spend time in the library. It all comes down to studying hard.

When asked if he considered himself a good student, he replied,

I would say, I mean I am. I am. I'm getting there.... If I didn't have so much else, I would say I would be a very, very good student. I love to study, but sometimes I get tired and I don't.

Theo thought of himself as potentially a very good student, but he struggled to live up to that image of himself because of the difficulty of finding time to study.

Another difference among participants' sense of self was the degree to which they felt they were in control of their lives, that is, exhibiting agency, versus being controlled by others. Lanie, especially, talked about feeling like she was in a dream, being swept along by the directions she received from her transition to college program coach and teacher rather than making her own decisions. She had intended to find a job and save money first, then maybe later think about college, but almost by chance found herself in an ABE transition to college program where they led her through the steps to college enrollment: "I feel like I am just floating.... This is the flow so I'm just going with the flow.... I am not the driver." Lanie had embarked on a journey, but she was moving along in a dreamlike state. It was like a journey in a boat where she was following instructions, but someone else was steering. She emerged from a trial of joblessness and

started moving in a positive direction with a lot of support. At another point in the interview, however, she acknowledged that she needed to take responsibility for herself after all the help and pushing she had received from her ABE transitions program. “They’re giving you food to your mouth, and they even open your mouth.” So she felt responsible for getting good grades and eventually a good job to show she deserved the help—and as a way to repay the program staff.

Sirlei, one of two Brazilian participants, also seemed to feel little control over her life. She said she really did not know what she was doing in the U.S. She seemed to have arrived on a whim because she had friends in the Boston area. She was also vague about her future, saying she wanted “to keep going” and “to study something” but was not sure what profession she would prepare for in college or when she would enroll. Kerry often felt she was not in control; she described ways her boyfriend’s mother manipulated her. Nevertheless, she tried to assert her agency. When referring to her quest for an education, she argued,

You just have to want to do it. And I just keep telling myself if I work really hard now and I push myself, like later on in life it will be better because of it. But if I don’t push myself, my life’s never going to be better.

Theo, who worked multiple shifts caring for adults with mental challenges, also tried to reinforce his determination and sense of control over his life. He related that, in order to push himself to study despite his tiredness from long hours at work, he had written “I want to have a better life” on his wall so he would see it whenever he woke up. When asked what helps her to keep going, Simone, an aspiring nurse, responded,

It's a drive to achieve. The drive to have a career, not just a job. I want to have this education so I can help my kids....and do something.... I want to have an education, get through college, work hard to say, like when I'm older...“Yes, I did achieve something in America.”

Clearly, Simone demonstrated a strong sense of agency, believing that her drive would propel her to achievement and that she was responsible for her future.

For these adult education participants, being a student meant identifying as a person embarking on a difficult journey. They saw themselves as making every effort to move forward to a better life despite all the obstacles in their way. This better life would also bring them greater respect.

Respect

The second major theme is respect. This theme comprises self-respect, being respected by others, and respecting others. Respect means receiving recognition, being a role model to others, and respecting diversity. It is the converse of being belittled or feeling shame.

Self-respect.

Self-respect is the most basic aspect of respect, and it is the foundation for success. In the context of this study, it is primarily about believing one can learn and succeed. For some participants, negative early school experiences damaged their self-respect while for others, success in school reinforced their self-respect.

Nick, who had a learning disability, described his experiences of shame at being in special education classes and being made fun of by other children: “It really kills the kid’s confidence, because they used to put you in a separate room. And a lot of the kids in school would call you names.” Nick explained that he would even hide behind the house when the “special bus” came to take him to school. Rul also had negative experiences in school. He complained at some length about the poor quality of education in Haiti, with overcrowded classrooms and unqualified teachers who lacked respect for students and declined to give them explanations or help. He said, “Sometimes you feel very bad if you ask a question and the teacher tells you you are a bad student or you’re supposed to understand.”

For some participants, damage to self-respect came from their treatment by family members. Amy, who lost her mother in childhood and lived with an alcoholic father, reflected,

I’ve always been negative. I never had somebody there to say, “No, Amy. You are smart. You can do this.” I always had somebody that was always putting me down. So, when you have somebody constantly putting you down, you kind of fall into that. And that’s what I had throughout my whole life, between my daughter’s father, my father; it was always negative. Now I have a boyfriend, and his parents that are very positive, so I needed that positive attitude...because if I would have had a negative attitude I wouldn’t be in college now.

Not every participant had issues with self-respect. Gabriel, for example, was proud of always being a good student, from elementary school through university in

Colombia. In fact, his proudest moment was when he was given an award for being the best student in his university program. Linz and Candida, the two oldest participants, also emphasized their confidence and ability to handle all kinds of situations. Candida remarked that she had dealt with challenging job situations and difficult university professors in Brazil, so studying English in the U.S. was a “piece of cake” to her. Linz claimed that he was always able to adapt to different school environments and referred to his responsibilities at several previous jobs he had held, including running his own business.

Being respected by others.

As the statement above by Amy makes clear, there is an interaction between self-respect and being respected by others. Respect by others is important within the school setting as well as with family or on the job. When asked how she would advise a teacher to work effectively with adults, 27-year-old GED student Kerry responded:

Not talking down to them...talking to them like they're adults...Making them feel comfortable because I think a lot of adult students, like especially people getting their GED, might feel a little bit ...embarrassed about it sometimes. Like I get embarrassed to tell people that I didn't graduate high school. Do you know what I mean? So I think sometimes it's embarrassing and uncomfortable...and so I think it helps to feel comfortable in the classroom and feel like your teacher's not looking at you like you're beneath them, like you're a loser. You know? Like to make them feel like you care, and you're here because you care, and you

understand, you know, that life doesn't always go the way you want it to go.

Because I think if you feel uncomfortable, you just wouldn't even come.

Kerry exemplified the sense of shame that adults who grew up in the U.S. may feel if they have not earned a high school diploma. Buoy, the Cambodian GED student, also hinted at this when she said that she did not want people to think the reason she did not have a diploma was because she was a "bad girl." Nick said that when he was younger, either his teachers did not care or "maybe I was such a bad student they just gave up on me." In ABE, he has found caring teachers, and, as an adult, he assumed some of the responsibility for not getting support or respect from his teachers in the past. Linz, who transferred from one school to another as his family moved, also compared adult education programs to high school, saying of the former, "You won't get bullied. You get treated with dignity: 'We're so glad you're here.' I mean, every morning I walk in, 'Hey! Hi!' Even in another language! 'Hi, how you doing?' It was so nice!"

For Lanie, joining an ESOL class helped her overcome her sense of isolation created by living with an American husband and having no friends from her country.

Describing her first day in an ESOL program, she said,

I feel like relief because I said I thought my English was worse. But when I mix with different friends... mostly from South America...Dominican Republic...the Latin people...I said, before I thought my English is worse, but when I am looking at them I feel relieved because [it's] not only me. I'm not alone. So I said, oh my God, I am not alone. So I have a classmate that we became close and

then until now we're getting in touch. And I said to her, you know what, before I...met you I thought I am the [only] one who has the bad English.

Some participants mentioned a lack of respect on the job, but this was a much less common finding than one might expect given the loss of status some immigrants had experienced on coming to the U.S. In fact, those who did comment on this made general statements, not responding about themselves personally. Theo talked about unequal treatment for immigrants on the job—not getting respect or co-workers refusing to communicate with people who had a different language or accent. When asked to elaborate, he backed off and said this was just something he had heard from friends, and he himself did not admit to experiencing this. Gabriel, at first, seemed unconcerned with his loss of status on moving to the U.S. but later acknowledged that it was hard for him in the beginning to go from bank manager to supermarket stocker. However, he accepted that he needed to learn English, and therefore had to start from “the first level.” Later, speaking in general about immigrants from Latin America, Gabriel explained that it is difficult for them to build self-esteem when they see discrimination at work in the form of failure to get promoted or being given the hardest jobs. At the same time, he recognized that language was a barrier to promotions because even if the person knows how to do the job, he cannot express himself fluently or write reports. Lanie described how she found out, to her surprise, that you cannot get a job in the U.S. without a diploma and a good education. Her work experience from abroad (in the Philippines and Hong Kong) was not valued, so she needed to pursue further education.

Rul said he was considered by some people to be different from other Haitians in the U.S. It appeared that the difference was due to his relatively high educational level; he also referred to knowledge and aptitude. By inference, he seemed to believe that people in the U.S. look down on Haitians as uneducated and perhaps lacking potential. He was reluctant, however, to appear to be lacking humility by acknowledging a difference from other Haitians, and said that everyone needs to learn, regardless of their background. Simone also expressed concern about people from the U.S., specifically African Americans in her community, criticizing immigrants like herself for coming here, taking jobs, and acting like they are American when it is not their country. Additionally, at work, she felt that people assumed that someone doing a job like hers (housekeeping in a hospital) must not have an education or be able to read. On the other hand, Simone said she got a lot of support from the nurses at work for going further, as did Maureen, one of two African participants.

The theme of respect also came up in participants' goals for the future. Kerry wanted "a job to be proud of" and one that "your children can feel good about you doing." Theo expected that a degree from the U.S. would give him respect and open up possibilities for him if he returned to Ghana.

One way of earning respect (and self-respect) is to become a role model to others. Several of the participants (Lanie, Gabriel, Candida, Amy, and Buoy) reported that they had encouraged other adults to go back to school. Some even became active promoters of their ABE programs. Amy said, "Actually, I have a cousin who wants to come and take her GED, and I kept all my papers from when I did my classes, so I told her, you

know, if you ever need help, I'm here to help.” Similarly, Linz said, “I've told people, ‘Go down there.’ I'm an advocate. Give me flyers [about the ABE program]. I'll pass them out.” Lanie said if people at work showed an interest in college, she would encourage them to go to her ABE transition to college program; she picked up program flyers for one co-worker and reported that the latter joined the program soon after. Buoy, who worked in a family store, talked to customers about her ABE program:

I said if you want to learn English or to go to college you can come to this program, which is free and the program runs really good.... And I also brought a few fliers and posted [them] in my store. So if they want to learn they can ask or call.

Gabriel also encouraged his friends to take English classes at his school, telling them the program is free and the teachers are very good. Candida talked about helping others:

I have a few numbers of friends and family that emigrated from Brazil, and even though my English is not the best one yet...most of them have more difficult[y] to communicate than me, so when they need me to do some translation or go with them somewhere, I always try to be helpful, to help them. Sometimes they call me [to] translate some letters.... And also I can understand Spanish, and when I was involved in my program to learn, the Spanish people sometimes they was just beginning.... I used to go to their class and try to translate something to help, because a lot of people it's very beginning, so they have no...idea. So, as much I can, I help, because I know how difficult it is when you get here and you cannot communicate at all.

Although she could not practice her profession of law in the U.S., Candida looked for ways to feel useful to other immigrants both within and outside her ESOL program.

Respect for others.

Respect for other students and willingness to help other students is an important subtheme (elaborated further below in the teamwork subtheme of the student as worker theme). This includes respect for the diversity of people found in the adult education classroom. Several participants remarked on their amazement at the number of different countries represented in their classrooms. As Candida said,

I just was very impressed about the mix of different cultures inside the class. This is wonderful here. You're going to have—sometimes...12 different countries in the class. This is not amazing? So I was impressed, and I was very excited to be together.

Linz, a student who had grown up in the same area where his GED program was located, also made a point of remarking on how surprising the diversity in the GED class was for him: “Well, coming from my background, it was diverse, to say the least.... Like I said, guys from Sudan, Ecuador, Mexico, Italy right next to me.” He said it required humility to go back to school at age 49, but at the same time, he felt he had something to offer the younger students based on his life experience, and that seemed to help him accept being “on the same level” with students who were as many as 30 years younger than him.

Some participants also made reference to class differences in the ABE classroom. Rul alluded to this when he said he was perceived as different from other Haitians. (See

above.) Gabriel and Candida, who had earned graduate degrees in their countries, expressed ambivalence about sharing a classroom with much less educated students who struggled to learn the language.

The concept of respect may also be connected to a sense of fairness or its opposite, injustice. For example, in referring to her schooling in Cambodia, Buoy said of students that could afford extra tutoring outside of class hours, “So it didn’t mean they [were] much smarter than me but just they had money to pay for to get more hours.” Many of the participants, while not complaining of unfairness, clearly could have progressed faster in school if they did not have such heavy responsibilities, including having to work many hours at low wages to support themselves and their families. The following section includes additional analysis of the role that respect plays in the classroom.

Student as Worker

The third major theme, after “journey” and “respect,” is “student as worker.” As indicated above, only four of the 14 participants identified themselves initially as students when asked how they would introduce themselves. All of the participants had experience in the workforce, although two had not worked in the U.S. When I asked participants what it meant to be a good student, their responses showed a great deal of consistency. The most common responses paralleled the characteristics of a good worker, that is, a person with a strong work ethic. These characteristics included responsibility, productivity, respect for authority, and teamwork. Since my analysis of the

characteristics described most often by the participants when talking about good students fit into those categories, I made those the four subthemes for this section.

Simone, a GED student from Jamaica, effectively summarized the characteristics common to many of the responses:

To be a good student, you have to be disciplined, determined, punctual, and respectful. A good student needs to be present at school on time and be ready to learn. You have to be able to take direction and participate in class. You have to do your homework and be able to work on your own. A good student is always prepared to learn. A good student needs to respect teachers and fellow classmates. As a good student, you need to maintain a certain standard, both at school and outside school.

Sirlei, a Brazilian ESOL student who worked in a coffee shop and as a housecleaner, made the connection between working and studying explicit: “The same responsibility I have at work we should have at school too.” Lanie, who was enrolled in a community college certificate program, also made the connection in relation to college studies toward a career:

When you are a good student in college, that means that you are a good employee or working in a company in the future.... If you are a good employee, of course the company will keep you. So I think that is the beginning, being a good student and being a good worker...because what we are learning in college is preparation for our job searching or ... the line of profession. So when you are a good student

in that profession, so when you master the profession, and then you work [in] the profession, you are a good worker.

Since Lanie was in a medical assistant certificate program, preparing for a specific career, she clearly connected school and work. Similarly, speaking about her ESOL program, Candida maintained, “You have to look [at] this almost as you look [at] your job. You cannot miss, you cannot drop.... It’s a profession.”

A development of each of the subthemes follows.

Responsibility.

In the context of this study, responsibility meant attending class regularly, being on time, and doing homework. The emphasis participants placed on attendance and punctuality and completing assigned work reflects the participants’ work ethic. It was reinforced by ABE program rules in written material supplied to me by the study sites and in the community college vocational course syllabi that three participants brought to their interviews. As Gabriel reported when talking about school rules in his ABE program,

About responsibility, about being on time for class, it’s a priority for the school because they say, “If you are not here in the first 10 minutes, 6:00 to 6:10, you can’t come to the school.” Sometimes it’s hard to get on time because [of public transportation] or something like that, or something on the way. But it’s a very good thing to be on time.

A similar emphasis on responsibility exists in transition to college programs for adult learners. When asked what was the most important thing he learned at his transition program to help him get ready for college, Rul responded:

It prepared you for college because they tell you what is college, what you're supposed to do when you're in college, what you need to avoid.... They always say be on time, never to be late.... If the class is...at two, try to be ten minutes or 15 minutes before the class and they told you too, if you have a test, try to be 30 minutes before the test.

The emphasis on responsibility is also a reflection of the enormous difficulty that regular attendance at school over an extended time poses for many of the participants, especially those who work long hours and/or care for children. Sirlei, one of the participants with multiple jobs, said, "I think the student has to be on time [in the] classroom. I know a lot [of students] they just come late, and so they don't care." When asked if she considered herself a good student, she responded,

Well, I do. 'Cause I [am] never late. Even at work, even at school I [am] never late. If I'm late, something happened, but [it] never did, thank you, God. So I usually do my homework.... And I missed a few classes on the 5th level, but on the others I never did.

Gabriel, a supermarket stocker with a regular schedule, was more understanding of his fellow students' circumstances but still emphasized the importance of responsibility in regards to homework:

The homework is very important. Because I have seen that problem in the adult education that they don't do the homework. Because they work very hard, they don't have time. It's [not] because we don't want, it's because we don't have time. But we have to get the time because it's very important to do the homework.

Listening to Kerry describe her typical week was dizzying. She had a daytime job that required waking up at 4:00 AM, a weekend job, evening GED classes that got her home at 10:00 PM, and two small children, one living with her and one she saw several times a week. Her schedule varied by the day, and the children were cared for by different people. Despite this, her life at the time of the interview was more stable than in her past, when she bounced from one living situation to another.

Maureen also had a daunting schedule, with 60 hours a week of work and a dozen children. She had to continue working overtime because she was supporting several children in college. The juggling required to make all this work with school commitments was overwhelming and admirable. Theo had three jobs as a support staff person for people with mental challenges. With extra overnight shifts, he worked as many as 90 hours a week and really had to push himself to keep up his motivation to go to school. Buoy was responsible for running a family business, often requiring long days. Simone got her children ready for school, went to her GED program in the morning, and worked 2:30 to 11:00 PM. She was fortunate that her mother lived with her and could take care of the children after school. Kerry worried about always rushing, always being late, and putting stress on her children. In talking about school, she was torn between the

absolute necessity she felt to continue in her GED program and the great difficulty of getting to class on time and finding time for homework. When she was asked to leave the school because of her frequent lateness, she convinced the GED counselor of her desperate need to continue:

I mean, I'd be devastated if they told me...that I wasn't going to be able to come back because I was late all the time. And I was hysterical. I mean, I was so upset, you know, because it just means so much to me. And even though I'm late and I don't get to do homework, I care so much about coming here. And I try so hard to get here.

Kerry's daughter's grandmother's lack of support made the juggling even more difficult since she was not always there on time to babysit when Kerry needed to leave for school. For Kerry, working was an important assertion of her independence and part of her emergence from a slump and her effort to believe in herself. However, she was constantly worried about what her absence did to her children, who were cared for by people who did not follow the kind of rules and routines or do the kinds of activities that she believed were good for their development.

Natalie, the Thai participant who had graduated from a GED program and started college, explained that she had to put much more time into doing her assignments than would students who spoke English as their first language:

I have to work very hard. Harder than American students. I always talk to my husband. I wish I could be like you. Read a book like you. One time, understand it.... When you [the interviewer] read a book, whatever, you can read only one

time and then you understand it. But to me, I have to read a few more times or sometimes ten times to understand it.

Thinking about Maureen, Kerry, and Amy and their balancing of work and children, and thinking about Gabriel's and Lanie's decisions to forgo a promotion or a steady job in order to maintain their school schedules, the sacrifices implied by just getting to class take on a deeper meaning. They are connected to the sense that school needs to be a priority in the midst of competing priorities. For example, when Nick was asked what advice he would give a new student, he replied,

First I'd ask them if they really want to learn. Some people come and they just give up. I would tell them to just work hard. Pay attention and make sure you come to school all the time, as much as you can.

Kerry's response to the same question was,

Making it a top priority. Finding time to study outside of school. Being a student should be one of the biggest parts of your life, you know, and just like give it everything you have.

This was a person who found her own advice enormously difficult to follow because of her parenting and work commitments and lack of support. Gabriel also talked about making school a priority:

Sometimes you have to work more hours than usual, or you don't have time because you had to work during the weekend, and when they put homework, the most is during the weekend. So sometimes we don't have time. But when you want something, you have to sacrifice.

For ABE students planning to go to college, school is a long-term commitment, many years long, which makes it much more challenging than deciding to take a semester-long course. As Kerry remarked,

Sometimes I feel discouraged because, obviously, like I was late for [my GED program] sometimes. And even like coming here I needed extra help. And...I told you like nothing that I'm doing is being done 100 percent. Like there's... slacking in every area. And to be a student you need to give it 100 percent, so I just have to figure out a good way where I can give everything I need to give to being a student because that's the only way my life is ever going to get better.

Several participants contrasted the attitude toward school of young people with the more serious and responsible attitude of adults. Talking about what she would tell another person who was thinking of joining an adult education program, Kerry pointed out the difference in being an adult student:

I would tell anybody to come here, you know. And I would just say you should go there and just take it very seriously. You know, obviously, you're not in high school anymore, you know, and you're there for a reason, and you're already at a certain age. Like you can't tell yourself like you're only 16....It's very serious and, you know, just take it seriously.

Natalie and Simone, two of the immigrant participants, said they were not serious students as adolescents; they preferred socializing with their friends. Amy and Nick, who grew up in the U.S., said they hated school when they were adolescents. Referring to her earlier years in school, Natalie said, "Anything that I couldn't understand, I wasn't

interested in it. But right now I know what I want. I try to understand.” Comparing her college experience to high school, Lanie said,

If my teacher said we have a due date like this, so I really think of the due date.... Since I’m an adult now, I’m more responsible for what I am doing. And like when I was in high school although I thought I was a good student too, but since I was just young, I had lots of playing around. But now I cannot play around. It’s just really schoolwork, house, schoolwork, house, like that. So it’s different, I think.

She also compared the process of studying English as a child to her adult experience, saying that she did not focus on grammar when she was younger but “now since I’m adult and I am...more serious now... I’m really eager to apply it.”

For these participants, being a responsible student meant being committed, serious, and determined. They emphasized the importance of attending every class, always being on time, and completing the assignments they were given.

Respect for authority.

The subtheme of respect for authority includes respecting the teacher, paying attention, and following school rules. Participants identified these traits as elements of being a good student. Natalie, for example, who had completed a semester of college, talked about focusing on “what the teacher teaches you” to do well in college. Simone spoke at some length about the importance of respecting teachers:

It takes a lot for the teachers, every day, to come into a classroom trying to teach you. What I always tell my kids is like, the teacher, they know their stuff already. So it's up to you to be thankful that they're there to help you to learn something [so] that you can be somebody. Don't go to school [and] disrespect your teachers. Don't talk back to them. Even when it's [an] adult, I might say, "Okay, my teacher is the same age as me, so I have the right to say whatever." No. That, for me, that's not right. You need to respect them.

As she explained, teachers deserve special respect regardless of the age of the students.

Lanie hinted at a power dynamic between teachers and students, saying it was important to respect authority and follow directions in school because the teachers give you grades just like supervisors at work evaluate your performance. To Sirlei, it was important to "[t]ry to follow the rules from school. Each school has their own rules. And have attention when the teacher explains something." Candida complained about some students who did not follow school rules, like the ban on using a cell phone in class:

People [were] still talking [on cell phones] in the middle of the class. It was just awful. So rules is rules. If you want to talk, go out. And don't let this happen next time.... The school have to help and say, "This is school rules, and in my class we're going to follow them."

Gabriel talked about a student in one of his ESOL programs who did not listen to the teacher. The other students spoke to her about her behavior, and she ended up leaving the program.

Natalie described the kind of teaching style she appreciated and criticized some other students for not accepting the structure imposed by the teacher:

I need a serious teacher, like, “Okay, you have to learn this. You have to study this. And tomorrow we will take a test, so you have no time to talk or blah, blah, blah in the class”.... Because [the teacher] was very strict, some students left the class because they probably don't like his style. That's what I thought. And I feel very sorry for them because if they want the teacher who is really nice, “Okay, you can do this. Okay.” And then what do you get from the teacher? You get nothing, almost nothing.

She praised the teacher for not wasting the students' time. In contrast, Theo described how he almost left his program after the first day because of a lack of discipline. When asked about how he experienced that first day, he replied that he “didn't want to be there”:

[Be]cause the teacher that we had was a very good teacher. I mean, she was an old lady and people [were] just like talking and talking and talking, talking through the class. When she say something they would just be talking and like there was no discipline in the class. And...I explained that from way back home when your teacher is talking, you don't have to talk. So it made me feel very reluctant to go back. I didn't want to be there.

He considered quitting school after that first day and only returned because a friend persuaded him not to give up. He was used to an educational system in Ghana where students do not interrupt the teacher, and he complained about younger students who

were making noise, but said he learned to concentrate on the teacher and not pay attention to distractions.

Productivity.

The concepts of focus, discipline, hard work, and not wasting time were common to many of the interviews. I include them under the umbrella of “productivity.” This subtheme also includes asking questions for clarification so that one does not stray from the teacher’s purpose. Some participants also talked about going beyond the given assignments by reading or doing their own research. On the whole, participants were very satisfied with their experience in their ABE programs and with the quality of instruction they received in publicly funded programs. They described several of their teachers as caring, generous, committed, creative, and focused on individual student needs. Some (Gabriel, Buoy, and Sirlei) had taken fee-based ESOL classes in private schools and found they were inferior to the public system. These determined students did, however, have some complaints about distractions in class. Sometimes these were attributed to younger students; ABE programs can serve students as young as 16. Sometimes they reflected teachers’ classroom management styles.

The word “focus” came up repeatedly in the interviews, as did the idea of working hard. Students complained about classmates who distracted others and got the class off focus. For example, Buoy, the Cambodian GED student, said,

Not just be there and annoy other students that they’re trying to focus on doing something. And I’m there, I’m quiet, and I really pay attention. But sometimes I

get distract[ed] by other students also.... [They] talk loud and [when] you try to listen to [the] teacher explain something, they cut off, interrupting.

When I asked Gabriel, the former bank manager who was studying English, if there was anything that ever made him feel uncomfortable in the classroom, he replied:

Uncomfortable...Yes. When there are people who don't [do] their homework and always speaking in another language, in their own language. And they always complain about the teacher but don't do the thing the teacher says, say they don't have to do [it]. This classmate makes me uncomfortable...people who don't focus on the class and focus on playing with others.

In a similar vein, commenting on some of her fellow students, Simone, the GED student from Jamaica, said,

You don't make noise so other people can't learn. You don't talk, you know, disturb others.... You don't come to class with your cell phone, talking, coming in late when teacher is teaching. I try to come here every day on time.... I hate like when class start at 9:00, and at 9:30 you come in and you're making a lot of noise. Teacher has to start all over again, because you're going to say, "I don't understand." But if you were there at 9:00 when class start[ed], you would understand. And as I said, respect each other, because we're big people.... [The teacher's] talking about one thing that has to do with school, and by the end of the discussion, it's way off.... People always walk in when the teacher is teaching, trying to find a chair, eating. A lot of other stuff that takes up time, yes.

Talking about younger GED students who were not serious, Linz, a U.S. born participant, remarked,

If I'm going to look at two kids talking in the corner that are only doing this to make Mom and Dad happy, then you're taking away from the rest of the class.

You can leave right now.

Kerry, however, contrasted the adult education classroom favorably with her high school experience in Boston:

I just think the people that work here really care, you know. And everybody in the classroom wants to be there. You know what I mean? It's not like when you were in high school and kids are mean and disruptive....Everyone knows how serious it is.

Natalie said she did not like teachers or students who talked too much and digressed from the class content. "When I go to the class," she insisted, "this is to learn, learn, learn." Describing why she appreciated her former GED, she referred in part to his classroom management techniques, like his insistence on starting class on time: "He didn't waste our time."

Candida, a highly educated Brazilian student, also weighed in on classroom management:

It's very important because deal[ing] with adult people is worse than kids, sometimes. Because like I saw the teacher here, my last teacher here, she had good control about try[ing] to make people be respect[ful] with each other.

Sometimes they are not, because they don't want to listen. The teacher makes a

question for you, [but] they answer before the person because they know the answer, and so make the person frustrated, and if this person is like ashamed she [is] going to be more ashamed.... You have to have some rules, like we could not answer the question.

Candida also criticized some of her ESOL teachers who she felt were not prepared to teach or did not seem to care:

First of all, you need to really like to help people who need to learn, because these people who go there, most of them, they are hard workers—sometimes they didn't have good background from their native country, so you have to be very patient. But you cannot lose control, because deal[ing] with adult people, and with different cultures—if [you] miss the control of the class, [it is] going to be a mess. Not going to work for nobody.... Sometimes you try to help these here with one problem, and you are teaching, and the students start to talk and, how you say, to talk across, and then you cannot know who was talking or what the teacher is saying. So you should be under control. "I'm going to explain now. I'm going to make you guys' question, and after that, when I make one person's question, don't answer another person's question. And then I'm going to give you guys 10 minutes...then you can all talk at the same time." Because adult people, they love to talk.... But I know when I did my university, we could never interrupt the teacher when he was explain[ing] something. Then we used to have our time to make our question. But it's very hard when you try to put things in the right way,

and one interruption, another one, another one, and then...nobody could get what [they] should.

Sirlei, another student with some college experience in Brazil, said it was fine to have fun for a few minutes, but then you should get back to work. She attended an ESOL class at night and said most students came to class after working all day, so they were not there to waste time. At the same time, several participants (Simone, Rul, Lanie, and Candida) talked about the need for teachers to be patient and encouraging to their adult students.

For some participants, another aspect of productivity was reading on their own outside of class. Simone, a GED student, said she enjoyed reading and tried to read books or newspapers on the train to work. Buoy, who was also working on her GED, said,

I have [a] problem with fiction so I need to practice on reading that's the only one way can help [me]. You know, read on my own. No matter how much I ask for help if I don't do [it on] my own it's not going to be there. But reading is not easy.

Candida, who had a college education from Brazil, advocated for reading outside of class and using an electronic picture dictionary:

I put books in my bathroom. Put books in your car. If you have to wait for somebody, take a couple biography, a couple sentence, and that's all going to help.

Lanie and Gabriel also spoke of the importance of taking every opportunity to practice English outside of school. Amy, who had completed several semesters of college, described how she went beyond the assigned work:

I went to the libraries; I sat at home for hours and did work. I called my boyfriend on the phone, like, “Help me. I’m stuck,” because he’s very smart, so I never just did what I was supposed to do. I always did extra, because in the long run it’s going to help you.

Most participants, however, even Natalie, who was not working, said they really did not have time for anything beyond the assigned homework or did not mention going beyond what they were given.

Teamwork.

The final subtheme is teamwork. This is closely related to the category of respect, particularly respect for other students. Teamwork includes participating in class, respecting other students, and helping other students. It was interesting to note how often participants equated being a good student with supporting their classmates. The culture of ABE, where no grades are given, may foster that cooperative spirit, as contrasted with the traditional values of individualism and competitiveness in U.S. society.

Participants saw respecting other students as an important part of defining who they were. Simone, who planned to study nursing, put this in the context of adult behavior: “Respect each other, because we’re big people.” She believed that being a good student in class should be part of being a good person in all contexts. Linz, a 49-

year-old GED student, said that part of being a good student is to “[h]elp your classmates. Realize that they are there to learn along with you.... To be respectful all the way around. You are not above anyone else.” Asked to elaborate on this, he replied,

Well, it’s important first of all to being a good person. And even it takes some humility at my age to go in there. Listen, look at how old I am and I didn’t get it yet, you know? It took me years to get here. You’ve got to show humility. Look at me sitting here with an 18-year-old, a 17-year-old, but I’m on the same level as you guys. I can help you, especially if you need some help with life experience, I can help you there because, you know, you hear their problems.

Buoy, a Cambodian GED student, explained how other students helped each other:

It’s like I am a friend to everybody because I don’t talk bad about them and we share work. Like I don’t know English, they help me with English, and they don’t know math, I help them with math. When they ask for [help], I would help them. And just respect, and then you get respect back.

Sirlei, an ESOL student, said it was important to respect others by taking turns and not dominating a conversation. To her, this was a way to help us live in a better world.

There was a tension, however, between some students’ admiration for the diversity in their classes and concern that the diversity in English ability and educational backgrounds might be holding them back from learning as fast as they could. This tension came out in interviews with Simone and Linz, who were native English speakers studying with students who were not perfectly comfortable with English. It was also apparent in interviews with Candida and Gabriel, the participants with graduate degrees

from their countries who found themselves learning English with some students who did not even have an elementary school education. Gabriel, who had come to the U.S. with an MBA from Colombia, explained his observations of less educated students:

I felt in the classroom that some people are very ashamed because they don't go in the same level of the others. So they don't like to talk, they don't do homework because they don't understand, and when they are going to ask someone how to do the things, they don't know how to explain themselves because they don't know. So they quit the class....Someone told me...“I don't like to go to the class anymore because they laugh about me when I talk”.... And some are very insecure because many of the people that you see here haven't gone to the school in their country. Some came from the farms to this country, and when they start to study, even they have difficulty writing. I saw that, so it's very, very difficult to get confidence when you're studying because you are scarcely equal to one or two years of school. So for them [it is] very hard. I think that for me it was very easy to learn English because I have the background, a very good background, so...I feel so comfortable in the class.

He differentiated himself from students with very limited educations and felt that difference accounted for his ability to persist and to progress in class. Candida, who had earned two graduate degrees in Brazil, said,

We have to be very careful [we] don't hurt nobody because, like I told you, it's a lot of different cultures inside. Some people are very ashamed; some people are very, how can I say? You have to be careful the way you dress, the way you talk

sometimes, [so you] don't make any misconception, you know? They say, "Oh, she [thinks] she's better than us." I feel a couple times like that, so I try to be careful [to]...make people more comfortable until they know who you are.... Because sometimes it's very simple people, people who worked hard—most of the people inside ABE program[s], they didn't have very good...educational background My second year, I was in [the] advanced class...[and] these people was very, very prepared in their background from their country, like unbelievable. But...[in] just one semester they, most of them, got out because this is not the right program for these people. It's not right for me, [to] be honest...but it's better than nothing. It's free, and it's better than you stay home [and] try to learn by yourself.

She compared her experiences in classes at her first ABE program where there were many very educated Polish students versus other ESOL classes and then compared her experience in ABE programs to a later ESOL class at a private university where most of the students were full-time students from China, and the academic expectations were higher. She felt that students with stronger educational backgrounds should study in a different track or a different institution from those with more limited educations. She first accused some students who were not succeeding of being lazy, but she then took that back and said,

I'm going to say they are not familiar to take this time to read, to learn, because maybe their life was just work, work, work. So we cannot call these people lazy.

They maybe don't have as much time they should to do [it], or maybe they are not

familiar, they didn't learn how to do that. So it's never late. They can be involved, and they can re-start their life in a different way. We [are] always still learning. I feel like a kid sometimes inside the class. Inside the class, we all are kids.

On balance, there was a cooperative spirit among the participants, over half of whom named respect for other students as a key characteristic of a good student.

Reflections on Teaching and Learning

In summary, for most of the participants, being a good student meant being responsible, respectful, cooperative, and productive, as they would be at work. The only participants who expanded significantly more on the meaning of being a good student or on teaching methods were Gabriel, who had an MBA from his home country and aspired to be a teacher in the U.S., Candida, who had a Master's in Education and a law degree from Brazil, and Amy, who had completed several community college courses. As Gabriel said,

To be a good student, the first thing that you have to have is the desire to learn.... And only the desire is not enough, you need to do the homework. You need to read a lot. You need to ask questions about [what] you don't understand. You need to do extra research.... You need to work with your classmates because you are not the only one, and the other point of view is very important for your learning. Also, to keep a healthy body and mind, you need to do extra activities

out of the class like dancing and exercising and walking to keep your mind ready to do your schooling.

His description of a good student went beyond respect for authority and doing assigned work to being an independent learner, considering and evaluating different perspectives on issues, and taking a holistic approach to mental and physical wellness. When asked to give advice to a new adult education teacher, Gabriel had well-considered ideas for teaching and learning:

I would say during the class, they have to do [as] many activities as they can.

Don't focus on only one activity because the student comes to class very tired, so when it's only one activity in the class they got tired very easy. So have a lot of activities like 15- or 20-minute activities.... And they have to have a lot of fun activities. When a student has the opportunity to laugh, to like play activities or games. And group activities is very important...because in group you learn a lot, and in group you're not afraid to talk.

He also reflected on how he would like to approach teaching math if he realized his dream of becoming a teacher:

I used to be a very good math student. And I say that the way like the teachers teach the math is not a correct way because they are very serious when they're teaching math. And we need like fun activities to learn the math because math by itself is very boring for many people. And since you are a child, people say math is very bad, that [it] is...boring. I think that is because of the way they teach the math.

He understood the value of active learning and of addressing affective aspects of learning. Candida suggested that for students to do well in an ABE program, they should,

Try to be more involved as you can with English out of the class. Don't just be with this contact inside the class. You have to try to watch TV, even though you do not understand all, but you can try to understand. Soap opera is very good because a lot of people, like Spanish people, they just have Spanish TV at home. So this is not helpful. And try to read books, kids' books; whatever you take in your hands is going to help you.... Really be involved with the program that you are taking, and do as much...activity that you can do, like inside and outside, because we cannot do well if you just do inside activity. You have to try to prove what you are learning outside, too.... I know everybody is busy, but...take a little time. So when you are waiting for some appointment, keep the reading things that you need. Take notes and make questions. Make this your priority of life. And I think, basically, it is really participating in all activities, and try to move on, be focused.

Candida also advised ESOL teachers to teach practical things that students can immediately apply outside of school in order to keep the class more interesting:

The people want to learn things they can use each day, every day, like I told you, how to go to [the] grocery store...go to the bank...go to the doctor, but do this as reality inside the class. This could make people more interested and more excited. It's [an] easy way to learn, like we do with kids...because this makes

people involved and gets the class less boring. When they learn here, and they see the difference when they try to do [something] outside the class, they could be excited. “Oh, I’m learning this from my class! I’m learning!”

Gabriel aspired to become a teacher and had siblings who were teachers. Candida had teaching experience. Amy was also able to reflect on the different teaching styles of her community college teachers and on the importance of studying independently. Generally, for the other participants, however, it was not natural to reflect much on teaching or studying methods. Asked what helped them to learn, for example, they had little, if anything, to say other than mentioning the textbook, a tutor, or the necessity of being focused on a goal. They concentrated on hard work to get them through school.

Adult education students are embarking on a journey that has the potential to change their lives. They struggle to persist on that journey. These participants have demonstrated their determination. For most of them, however, their identity is not primarily as a student. Their frame of reference appears closer to the world of work. Being a student means juggling time and commitments, being responsible, and dreaming of a better future.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examines the perceptions of identity of a category of students that has rarely been studied in the context of higher education. These are adults who have participated in GED preparation or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs. Increasingly, ABE programs are shifting to a much greater emphasis on transitioning students to postsecondary education and training; at the same time, students are increasingly discovering a need for further education in order to attain a better life for themselves and their families. The participants in this study, by design, either aspired to go to college or had already started their college education. This grounded theory study sought to determine how these ABE students and graduates conceived of their identity as students: to what extent they identified as students at all; what they believed were the characteristics of a good student; whether they thought they possessed those characteristics; and how their conceptions of being a student were influenced by prior and current educational experiences.

Data for the study were gathered from interviews with 14 current students and graduates from three ABE programs in Massachusetts. Through a process of coding and analyzing interviews, writing memos, and continually revisiting and recoding the interview transcripts, I developed three major themes. In this chapter, I begin by

summarizing and discussing the study findings, and then present a theory about transition to college for ABE students, making connections between the major themes that emerged from the study and relevant literature. Finally, I conclude the chapter by presenting implications of the findings for policy, practice, and research.

Discussion

The field of ABE is characterized by a diverse population, and the 14 participants in this study represented several aspects of that diversity. They ranged in age from 27 to 50. They included immigrants and people born in the United States. Among the immigrants, some had a high level of education in their home countries while some had not finished high school. Buoy, for example, a 31-year-old immigrant who emigrated from Cambodia as an adult, left school in the seventh grade because her parents needed her to work and help support her siblings. She did not know a word of English when she arrived in the United States, but family members gave her employment in their small businesses and helped her find English classes. She was working toward a GED with the goal of attending college. Gabriel, in contrast, had earned an MBA in Colombia as a scholarship student and had worked for many years as a bank manager. On arriving in the United States, he became downwardly mobile because of his lack of English skills. He worked as a supermarket stocker while studying English. At the age of 47, his dream was to become a math teacher. Amy, a 28-year-old woman born in the U.S., lost her mother as a child and grew up with an alcoholic father. She dropped out of high school, had a child, and then returned to school to earn a GED. She entered a community college

certificate program with a plan to later transfer to an associate's degree program to become an ultrasound technologist.

When I analyzed the interviews of the participants, I found common themes, despite the differences in individual stories. The first theme was the participants' perception of themselves as being on a journey to a better life. Many of them envisioned this journey as starting over in adult life in the face of daunting obstacles. They experienced strong and contradictory emotions on their journey, and some reported changes in their sense of self. The second theme was the importance of respect: self-respect, respect from others, and respect for others. To participants, the desire for respect was often a response to negative experiences caused by learning issues, lack of English language skills, poverty, or family issues; respect meant believing they could learn and succeed. The final theme was the connection most participants made, explicitly or implicitly, between the qualities of a good student and those of a good worker. For most, being a good student meant being responsible and productive and following rules.

In light of these three emergent themes, I theorize that ABE students with higher education goals tend to adopt the identity of a striver. The term "striver" is often used in higher education discourse to refer to a student (generally a young person) whose test scores or grades are higher than would be predicted for someone of their socioeconomic status and/or race or ethnicity (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). I use this term more broadly to refer to a person who works hard to achieve a goal despite serious obstacles.

Thus, my theory is that ABE students have an image of themselves in the educational environment that is based primarily on characteristics—such as a willingness

to work hard—that are often categorized as “non-cognitive” traits (Farkas, 2003). This striver identity provides both benefits and drawbacks to adult students’ transition to college. In general, benefits occur within the area of motivation, while drawbacks are related to an understanding of learning expectations. To reach their long-term educational and career goals, ABE students must develop a more complex student identity.

Having a strong and complex student identity requires going beyond the conceptions of a good student that the adults in my study articulated. My developmental theory entails two parts, as illustrated below in Figure 2. One part, the striver identity, consists of such characteristics as goal orientation, work ethic, determination, and focus. The second part, the academic identity, consists of cognitive and metacognitive skills such as critical and analytical thinking and understanding of learning strategies. Developing both identities while achieving emotional balance leads to an increased likelihood of persisting and succeeding in college and a career. My theory suggests that development can occur in either the striver or academic realm in any order or simultaneously. In the case of my study participants, they valued and were consciously developing the “non-cognitive” striver characteristics. They equated being a good student with hard work in the face of obstacles, and they relied on their work ethic to get them through school and to win them respect in school and beyond. Most of them, however, could not articulate the “cognitive,” or academic, characteristics of a student in higher education. This is not to say that they were incapable of critical thinking (analyzing and evaluating information and assumptions) or metacognition (being

conscious of and reflecting on their own thinking and learning processes), or that they did not practice these skills, but they did not consciously articulate them when talking about being a student. If they do not develop a conscious student identity, they face limitations in their understanding of the learning process in higher education. This lack of a student identity may also affect their ability to persist in higher education.

Intersecting identities.

An adult's student identity exists as one element in the multiple identities held by that person, and these identities interact in various ways in different places and times. There is an element of choice in the identities that people bring to the fore; at the same time, people are affected by how they are perceived and treated by individuals, groups, and institutions. The context of intersecting identities is presented in the outer circles of Figure 2. These identities include, among others, class/work status, race, ethnicity, place of origin/immigration status, gender, age/generation, religion, and family status. When an adult takes on the role of a student, that new identity interacts with existing identities rather than replacing them. Although my interview questions were primarily about participants' experiences and thoughts about education, the context in which their identities as adult students were shaped influenced their responses. These student identities were related to their worker identities, as explained in the student as worker theme. Those worker identities, in turn, were related to their class identities and to whether they had arrived in the U.S. as immigrants. Immigrants were often defined by others as such and may have benefited from this definition as an explanation for why they

would be in school as adults. The nature of available work may change class status for an immigrant but may not necessarily have a strong effect on identity (Waters, 1999).

Gabriel and Theo, for example, both of whom had college educations from their home countries, accepted the need to start in entry-level jobs in the U.S. Being a student with career aspirations had implications for the worker identity of adults. Linz had previously identified as a physically strong blue collar worker and only enrolled in a GED program after suffering a back injury and having to re-evaluate his identity as a worker. In addition, being a student had a different meaning, for example, for a younger person than for an older one, since education is generally associated with younger generations. Some participants, like Natalie and Kerry, compared their attitudes about being a student as a young person, when they regarded school as primarily a social environment, to their adult outlook, when they took their studies more seriously. Some, like Candida, said an adult should equate being a student with having another job or profession.

Being a student may also be connected to one's role in the family. Buoy and Lanie, as older daughters in low-income Asian families, were expected to sacrifice their full educational potential in order to help their younger siblings continue in school. Perceived gender-related and family roles were also relevant to decisions to enroll in school. Mothers like Simone, Kerry, and Amy wanted to be role models for their young children by pursuing higher education, but they faced the dilemma of balancing study time with time spent with their children. Their race and income levels affected their housing situations and gave them an additional impetus to get better jobs so they could move their children to better neighborhoods. Nick focused for 20 years on his role as

family provider and delayed pursuing a GED until he decided it was time for self-fulfillment. My theory thus focuses on the elements needed for a complex student identity (see Figure 2 and Table 2) while acknowledging that that identity exists within a cultural and structural context.

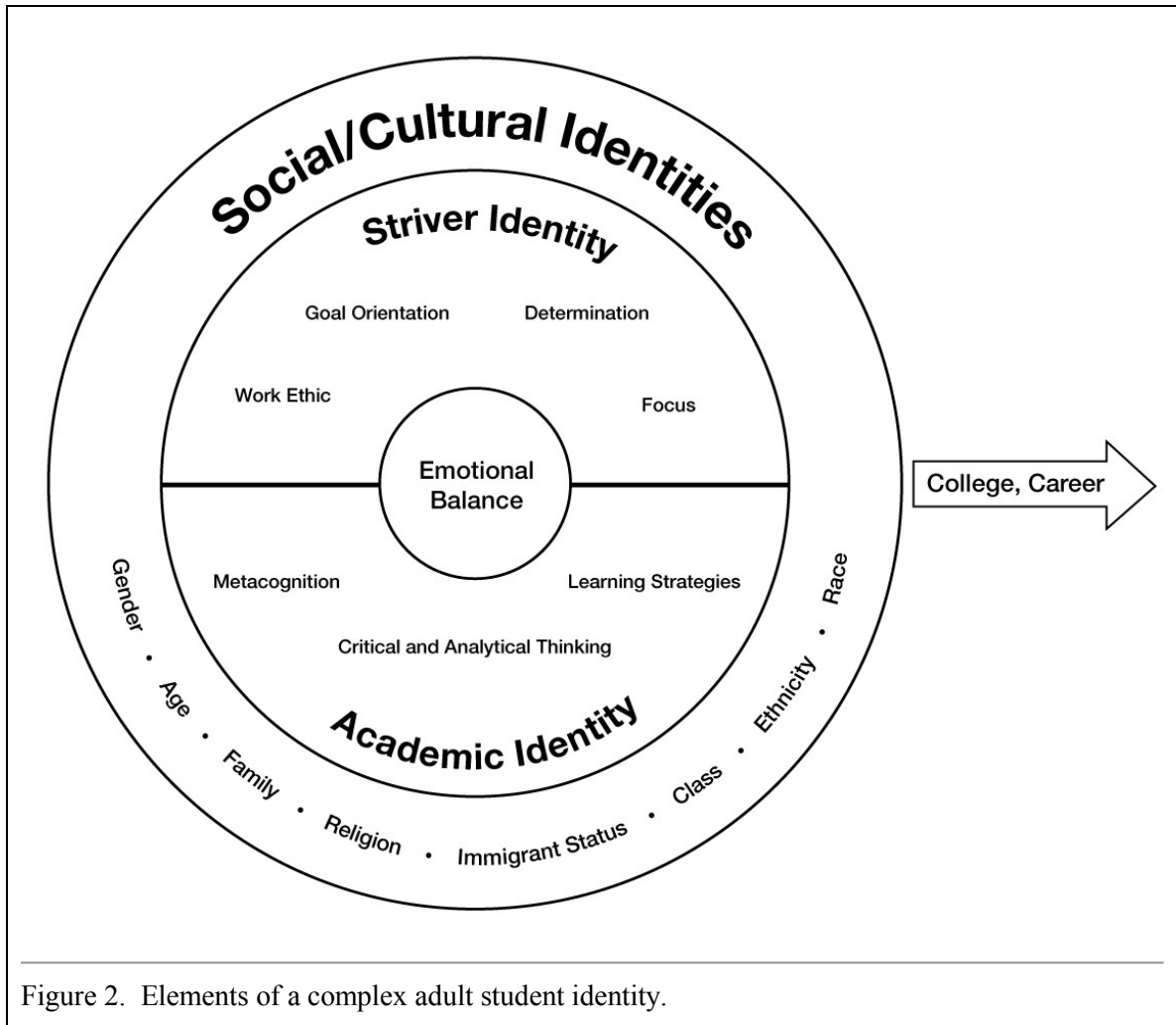


Figure 2. Elements of a complex adult student identity.

Table 3

Elements of a Complex Adult Student Identity: Relationship to Themes

<i>Striver Identity</i>	<i>Academic Identity</i>	<i>Emotional Balance</i>
<p><i>Journey Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Goal orientation• Focus• Determination• Persistence <p><i>Student as Worker Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responsibility• Productivity• Respect for authority (following rules)• Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Metacognition• Critical and analytical thinking• Learning strategies• Understanding instructor expectations	<p><i>Journey Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Managing multiple roles <p><i>Respect Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dealing with self-doubt in the educational environment <p><i>Journey Theme:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establishing supportive relationships

The themes of “journey” and “student as worker” include the elements of the striver identity while the themes of “respect” and “journey” include the elements of adult students’ emotional balance. There are no themes that correspond to the academic identity, which was largely lacking from the interview data. In the sections below, I develop further the themes and their connections to the literature to give more depth to the theory.

Journey to a better life and respect: Identity as a striver.

The ABE students and graduates in this study perceived themselves as being on a long and difficult journey, with echoes of the archetypal hero’s journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1990). This journey involves a series of trials or obstacles. Among the hurdles that participants identified on this obstacle course were poverty and low wages, illness, disability, immigration, language and literacy challenges, the need to care

for family members, lack of information about the availability of educational programs, and lack of knowledge about educational expectations. For many participants, especially those who were immigrants, the association between getting an education and struggling was based on their family history. Having the chance to go to school meant that their families made sacrifices for them. In some cases, it was not possible for the participants' families to support their education or that of their siblings even up to a high school level; choices of schools and programs were made based on economic feasibility, cultural expectations, and geographical location. The concept of striving also dovetails with the immigrant narrative of journeying from one country to another to seek better opportunities. In addition to other aspects of their identity (as workers, immigrants, family members, etc.) and interacting with those aspects of their identity, adult education students with aspirations to achieve a postsecondary degree developed a powerful identity as strivers.

By embarking on their journeys, the adult students in this study set themselves apart from others in their communities who remained in the same place, literally or figuratively. The students were changing a family trajectory or, speaking metaphorically, breaking out of a confining circle or treadmill of low-paying, insecure, or arduous work. This idea echoes Domínguez's concept of "social flow," movement out of the negative vortices in low-income communities (Domínguez, 2011). In addition, Waters (1999) described how some West Indian immigrants consciously present an immigrant striver identity when interacting, for example, with supervisors and with their own children to

distinguish themselves from the negative stereotypes of low-income African Americans, who were perceived as unwilling to work hard.

Their need to surmount obstacles set these adult students apart from those who had an easier time moving forward because of their educational privileges or facility with the English language. The participants in this study saw themselves as strugglers and strivers who had made some difficult choices to attain a better life for themselves and their families. For these strivers, being a student meant having hope and following a dream. They aspired to join people whom they perceived as possessing an easier, more pleasant, and more fulfilling life of rewarding jobs, good homes, and the ability to spend quality time with their families.

The journey undertaken by the adult students was a process of external and internal changes. External changes, such as a new job or house, were accompanied by internal changes such as an evolving sense of self, new aspirations, and new understandings. In the process of undertaking their journey, participants were creating a new identity. In the case of the U.S.-born participants, their childhood identities as persons who suffered abuse or neglect and who may have felt like “losers,” as Kerry expressed it, were being replaced by identities as strivers who could accomplish a goal they set for themselves. Immigrant participants were moving from identities as newcomers to seeing themselves as participants in the American Dream. At the core of these new identities is the concept of respect. The participants envisioned themselves becoming a person who is respected by family, friends, and society because of what they have achieved, thereby also building their self-respect. They began to see the possibility

of being role models and helping others. Given these adult students' frequent status at the bottom of the jobs hierarchy and their feelings about starting at zero in the ABE classroom, it is not surprising that respect was an important theme that emerged from the interviews.

These participants saw their journey as one of hard work, determination, focus, and adherence to rules. These characteristics sum up what it meant to most of them to be a good student. They strove to measure up to their image of the good student, and many of them felt they were able to do that at this point in their lives. Others, however, expressed their frustration that the obstacles in their way—primarily responsibility for children and long work hours—prevented them from being the good students they felt they would otherwise be capable of becoming as adults.

Developing a student identity.

An identity as a striver is important in maintaining a sense of purpose and determination, and faculty and advisors should recognize students for maintaining this part of their identity. It is not, however, an explicit student identity. Most of the study participants conceived of being a student primarily as a means to an end rather than as who they were; in other words, they took an instrumental approach to being a student. If they do not develop an explicit student identity, adult students may be hampered in the way they approach studying and participating in higher education. Most ABE students in this study stated or implied that being a good student means exhibiting the characteristics of a good worker. From a constructivist perspective, people hang new knowledge and

ideas on the conceptual framework they already possess in their minds (Brandsford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). For most participants, the student role was superimposed on the worker role they knew. Perhaps because they had given up their student role long ago or because being a student was associated with failure or disengagement, they tended to think of themselves in terms of the more salient worker role. In addition, because of all the juggling many ABE students need to do to get to school, the identification of being a good student with responsibility, that is, getting to school regularly and punctually and completing assignments on time, makes sense. Another reason for this association is because of the way state ABE standards reinforce program staff's emphasis on good attendance when they talk to students, as reported by some of the study participants. In Massachusetts, the state where this study took place, state-funded programs are assigned points according to their attendance data, and these points are an important factor in funding decisions.

Work ethic.

Characteristics of a good worker, that is, responsibility, productivity, respect for authority, and teamwork, are useful for succeeding in college as well as in the workplace. Attending classes regularly and punctually, being attentive, completing assignments on time, and cooperating with other students—all elements of being a good student identified by participants—are valuable but not sufficient for academic success. Several participants expressed a need to study harder than students for whom English was their first language; they said they needed to read slowly and to reread passages to grasp the

meaning. Being prepared to make this extra time and effort means they are realistic about the challenges they face in higher education. Two of the immigrant students who were English speakers also talked about learning how things are done in the U.S. academic environment, such as what is expected in an essay. Understanding that they need to make adaptations to the new environment is a step toward being a good student.

The student as worker theme of this study echoes the results of interviews of the community college subset of students interviewed in research conducted by Kasworm and Blowers (1994) almost 20 years earlier. Those students, many of whom were GED recipients and all of whom were at least 30 years old, also identified a student role with that of a dedicated worker. They believed in working hard, attending all their classes, completing all their assignments, being respectful of the teacher and the class, paying attention, taking notes, and making school a priority. Kasworm and Blowers explained that students used prior experiences to interpret their student role.

Because of open access policies and low tuition, the first step into higher education for ABE graduates is generally a community college. Within the community college, they may opt for a vocational certificate program. Among the study participants who had gone on to college, three of the five had enrolled in certificate programs. Of the other two, one enrolled in developmental education courses in a community college and the other had taken an ESOL class at a private college, so neither was yet in college-level courses. In vocationally-oriented courses in certificate programs, exhibiting the characteristics of a good worker will go a long way toward meeting instructors' expectations. In fact, when I examined the college syllabi of courses that three study

participants in certificate programs had taken or were taking, I found that the professors placed an emphasis on regular attendance and punctuality, respect toward instructors and classmates, cooperation, and learning of facts, terminology, and practices in a profession.

A more complex student identity.

To succeed in an associate's degree program with general education requirements, and, even more so, in a bachelor's degree program, it is necessary for adult students to go beyond being hard workers and to master a new code, culture, and new expectations related to learning—an assertion drawn heavily from the literature. I particularly relied on Conley's (2007) conception of college readiness and on studies by Collier and Morgan (2008) and Kasworm and Blowers (1994) of the experiences and perceptions of first-generation and adult students respectively. The academic skills needed for college success, as illustrated in the academic identity portion of Figure 2 above, include an analytical mind, critical thinking, a flexible repertoire of learning strategies, and an understanding of unfamiliar faculty expectations. A complex student identity includes both the striver characteristics that my study participants exhibited and the practice and demonstration of an academic mode of thinking. The Collegiate Learning Assessment, one tool to assess college learning, for example, tests critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills, and higher education faculty agree that these are important skills for students to acquire (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Only three of the participants in my study used language that indicated this more complex student identity. Gabriel and Candida, two of the ESOL students, had benefited from advanced levels of education in

their home countries and were able to reflect on teaching methods and effective approaches to learning. Amy, who had completed seven community college courses, including a college success course, and was in her third semester in postsecondary education, was able to compare and contrast the teaching methods of her instructors and discuss what helped her to learn. Similarly, the interviewees in Kasworm and Blowers' (1994) study who were enrolled in universities were more likely to have these more complex student identities than those studying at community colleges. Collier and Morgan (2008), who studied the experiences of first-generation college students, found significant disparities between students' understandings and those of faculty. In Collier and Morgan's conceptual model, students' college performance depends not only on academic skills, but also on students' cultural capital as exemplified by their understanding of faculty expectations. First-generation students needed help mastering the role of the college student in order to perform appropriately in different classes and contexts.

My findings are also consistent with Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) description of how those in the dominant classes acquire the "habitus," that is, ways of perceiving, thinking, appreciating, and acting, which enables them to respond to the culture and language of the school. Similarly, Lareau and Weininger (2003) describe how class background and its consequences for cultural capital affect students' dispositions to meet institutional expectations and their ability to advocate for their needs. If students enter college from ABE with the conception of a good student as primarily a hard worker, as most of my study participants did, they need a process for developing a

more complex student identity or they may find themselves confused, frustrated, and unable to earn the high grades that adults strive for (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). In addition, they will be blocked from advancement toward their career and financial aspirations if they are not able to earn degrees (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010).

None of my study participants expressed a desire to simply earn a certificate in a community college, go to work, and end their journey at that point. Amy was on her way to earning a certificate as a medical assistant, but she planned to continue studying in a degree program after that. She first planned to earn an associate's degree in radiology and then possibly to continue on to a bachelor's program. Lanie, another student in a medical assistant certificate program, talked about going on to become a nurse or an MRI technician. All the participants aimed for at least an associate's degree if not a bachelor's or master's degree. Therefore, preparation for a certificate program only was not sufficient. Brookfield (2006) cautioned that adult students need to have a strong identity as a learner in order to successfully integrate new learning and insights in higher education. Similarly, situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is a concept of learning as a social practice and consequently as the development of an identity. Learners become participants in a community and learn its practices, understandings, and relationships. Adult students, who often study part-time, are not fully immersed in a college environment where they can develop a student identity without specific and intentional supports provided to them, such as through orientations or peer mentors. The adult learners in this study did not generally fit the characteristics described by Knowles (Cross, 1981) as autonomous and self-directed learners. They were not ready to

independently determine their own learning needs and goals. They needed a form of apprenticeship being a college student, parallel to the professional preparation described by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Emotional aspects of student identity.

In addition to more complex understandings of the meaning of being a college student, there are emotional pitfalls that may lead adult students to abandon their college dreams if they are not forewarned and given support to overcome them. Emotional issues were not an explicit part of the research questions for this study, but they emerged as an important dimension of student experiences in the interviews. There were two aspects to this. One was related to the stresses of managing multiple roles, or role strain. The other was related to the feelings of loss and inadequacy students experienced as they re-started their learning process after a long gap (“starting from zero”).

On the issue of role strain, some of my study participants expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the burdens of working and caring for family. Some had serious financial concerns that caused them great stress. Some did not feel good about themselves as students because they could not find enough time to study due to family and work commitments. Some were unsure whether they should be focusing on making money in the short term or studying to attain a better future. These internal debates were stressful.

On the issue of feelings of inadequacy in learning, some participants felt frustrated when learning was a struggle. At the time of my study, the participants

generally identified themselves as good students or potentially good students. They had found sufficient support in the initial part of their journey to believe they could continue despite any continuing doubts. When faced with new learning challenges, however, new doubts are likely to emerge. For example, one student who was proud to complete the GED subsequently found the challenges of a computer class at the college level difficult enough that he planned to change his program of study.

Brookfield (1999, 2006) named such emotional pitfalls and self-doubt faced by adult students “impostership,” the feeling that one does not belong in college because of a lack of ability to perform according to an idealized image of an intellectual and “lost innocence,” a disillusionment that students experience when they find that education is about asking good questions, not about finding answers. Both impostership and lost innocence are more likely to occur in classes where students are asked to analyze and apply critical thinking to texts and ideas. None of the participants in my study described college classes that made these kinds of demands, although they may have been part of a hidden curriculum, that is, instructor expectations that were not made explicit to students. Nick, the GED student who had been in special education programs, however, displayed insecurity when answering my questions, seemingly concerned about giving the “correct” answers to what I asked. Linz, another U.S.-born GED student who went on to take a college computer course, tried to boost his self-respect despite his difficulties with the class work by identifying with his teachers, who were closer to him in age than the other students. Students may experience a kind of lost innocence when they discover the barriers to qualifying for their chosen careers. Some, however, like Amy, already

understood the realities of barriers to access to programs, specifically a waiting list to enter the ultrasound technology program in which she aspired to enroll. She had a plan to earn course credits and a certificate that she could build on in the future.

ABE students may be negatively perceived by their peers or family members as trying to get ahead of them, especially if the students are the first in their family to go to college. This may be an obstacle for some ABE participants who pursue a college education. This issue may have created problems for some of the participants born in the U.S. Kerry, the mother of two young children who lived with her boyfriend and his family, felt her boyfriend's mother criticized her for taking GED classes and for wanting to prepare for a career; she believed that the mother did not want her to succeed. As Kerry progressed in her ABE program, she had changed from a dependent and defeatist person with no hope to one who was working hard toward a goal. She felt she had grown up a great deal over the past several years but that the better she did, the more tension she felt with her boyfriend's mother. Linz also talked about family members who wanted him to fail in his educational pursuits. Similarly, Amy received no support for pursuing an education from her daughter's father, who only had an eighth-grade education. Brookfield (1999, 2006) calls this rift with family or community beliefs "cultural suicide." This tension, however, was not expressed by the other participants, most of whom were immigrants, as they reported receiving encouragement from their families to move forward educationally.

Implications

The problem investigated in this study was the often inadequate preparation of ABE students for a successful transition to college. The focus was on participants' perception of their identity as students and of how they described the characteristics of a good student. Implications of this study for policy, practice, and research in ABE and higher education are presented below. Some of the implications are directly related to the study purpose; others emerged indirectly through responses to the interview questions.

To Charmaz (2006), constructivist grounded theory goes beyond the way individuals interpret their situations and examines their experiences within larger contexts, including power relationships. Policy implications need to be examined within these economic and political contexts. Therefore, I begin this section with a discussion of the cultural, ideological, and economic forces that serve as both motivation for and obstacles to pursuing higher education.

“American Dream” and structural obstacles.

An enduring myth that has sustained United States society is the “American Dream,” the concept that America is a land with the opportunity for everyone to achieve upward mobility and economic success through hard work, regardless of background (Wyatt-Nichol, 2011). The myth has been sustained over the years by individual rags-to-riches stories and by the aspirations of each new group of immigrants, including those who participated in this study. A college education is increasingly seen as an essential factor in obtaining the American Dream. Open access to education through the

community college system keeps the dream alive as credentials gain importance in the job market. Open access also means that adults can pursue social advancement at any point in their lives. Several of the study participants pointed out that the U.S. provides this opportunity for education at any age, unlike many other countries.

Now, however, the American Dream is increasingly being questioned in reports that provide evidence of growing income inequality, a decline in real incomes at the bottom of the pay scale, and declining economic mobility (Levine, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012). My study was conducted in a context of economic recession with high and persistent unemployment. Cuts in public funding have led to reductions in government jobs and services that enable economic and social progress. These include cuts to ABE programs, resulting in longer waiting lists, and cuts to public higher education, causing crowding, tuition increases, and more limited access to popular programs such as those in the health professions.

The U.S. has a stratified educational system, with community colleges—the entry into postsecondary education for most ABE graduates—at the bottom of the higher education hierarchy in terms of prestige, funding, and educational outcomes. Brookfield (2006), Brint and Karabel (1989), Dougherty (2001), and Grubb and Lazerson (2004), for example, pointed to the contradictory roles of colleges, which reflect and maintain social and economic stratification while, at the same time, having the potential to support students' opportunities to gain knowledge and confidence. More recently, Carnevale and Strohl (2010) warned of the increasing stratification of higher education, with negative consequences for the implicit social contract between democracy and the inequality

generated by the market economy. The individualistic concept of the American Dream, however, persists in the culture despite statistical and experiential evidence that contradicts it (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008; Stiglitz, 2012; Wyatt-Nichol, 2011).

In a truly just society, people in search of an education and a better life would not have to struggle as hard as the participants in this study did to achieve their dreams. People's educational needs and aspirations are interrelated with a number of other economic and social needs. Ideally, fair wages, affordable childcare, universal healthcare, a free education, and even stipends for living costs while people are studying for a career would be available. This would reduce the stresses of daily living, allowing adults to concentrate more fully on education. The journey to qualifications would be shorter, and both society as a whole and individuals would benefit when the latter achieved needed skills and credentials. The maintenance of a belief in social mobility through education, based on evidence, is needed to motivate both adults and the next generation to continue to strive. The shift in the public discourse toward seeing higher education primarily as a private rather than a public good needs to be reversed. Unless ABE students receive both material and academic support, they are in danger of being relegated to a predetermined position in a stratified society.

Implications for policy.

The students in this study were doing what the policy messages were telling them to do: work hard, aspire to a profession, and go to college (College Board, 2008; Comings, Sum, & Uvin, 2000; Hodge, 2007; Jenkins, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007; Kirsch,

Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007; Osterman, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The struggles that adults like these go through to further their education, however, are not sufficiently recognized in those policy messages. If students have to delay their educational program, take just one course at a time, or study intermittently because they need time off to save money for tuition or living costs or deal with family issues, it is harder for them to develop and sustain the student identity that would help them to persist in school.

Short of major changes in the current economic and social structure toward a more egalitarian society, there are policy changes that should be made to benefit adult learners. A major investment in adult education—ABE, transition to college, and community college programs—as part of a serious national priority to reverse the growth of income inequality and foster national economic competitiveness is imperative.

It is therefore important to include adult issues and adult student voices when making policy about higher education. Since adults are a significant portion of the undergraduate population, policymakers must consider adult responsibilities, the serious burdens low-income adults face in managing college, the need for curricular alignment between ABE and colleges, and the need for advising for ABE students transitioning to college. This, however, is rarely done. The recent report from the 21st Century Commission of the Future of Community Colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012), for example, does not make any specific references to adult students and, while it recommends collaboration with K-12 districts on student readiness, it never mentions collaboration with the ABE system.

The dominant metaphor of education progression is that of a pipeline, a seamless progression from K-12 through higher education (Ewell, Jones, & Kelly, 2003; Karp, 2008). For adult students, especially those who have come through ABE programs, the pipeline metaphor does not apply. For them, education is more like a jagged path than a straight line. They may have left high school and earned a GED later in life; they may have emigrated here from another country; they may have had to take time off to attend to their children. Their ways of thinking about time, progress, and commitment are different from those of traditional-aged students. As Kasworm and Blowers (1994) noted, adult community college students in their study set short-term and incremental goals and had to work things out to take care of their major responsibilities each semester in order to continue in school. The school trajectory was a long one. While recognizing that adults may need to move in and out of educational programs due to their life circumstances, institutions and states should create better transitions from one education sector or program to another, including from ABE to a community college and from a vocational certificate program to a degree program, so that students are not continually starting over. They need to find ways for people not to “waste time” and to start courses as soon as possible. Making this possible requires adequate state and federal funding for ABE programs so they have sufficient capacity to serve the adults in need.

Serving adults well includes providing support services such as personal counseling, academic advising, and follow-up support; paying attention to the gap between ABE and college in academics and in culture and identity; and providing college programs in which students can develop basic skills simultaneously with career skills.

Providing transition to college courses in either ABE programs or in colleges will help bridge the gaps in understanding for students going on from ABE to postsecondary education. Community colleges need sufficient public investment to increase quality, completion, and transfer rates. These are the institutions that ABE graduates are most likely to transition to, and they are the most underfunded part of the higher education system (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010).

In order to obtain a better picture of adult trajectories in higher education, the data that postsecondary institutions collect and report on persistence and completion rates should be more inclusive of the variety of students they serve, including part-time and transfer students. Adults' intermittent patterns of participation and frequent part-time status make it difficult for institutions of higher education to collect reliable data. The current system of counting only first-time, full-time students therefore excludes many adults. Researchers have called for data collection across institutions and levels of education, as well as a unit-record system that tracks students longitudinally (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008; Kasworm, 2003b, 2008). These modifications would provide much better data to inform policy development. In April 2012, the U.S. Department of Education announced it would begin counting transfer and part-time students when reporting on graduation rates, but many questions remain about how to devise a reliable system to capture the information (Gonzalez, 2012; Mangan, 2012).

Implications for practice.

The experiences and reflections of the students in this study point to implications for practice in ABE programs, in higher education institutions, and for collaborations between the two systems. I have divided these implications for practice into three sections. In the first, I address adult students' knowledge about educational and career pathways, that is, the phases of their journey. Second, I present implications for advancing adult students' understanding of learning and about the culture of higher education. These are ways to guide them beyond the idea that a good student is a good worker. Finally, I address the affective aspects of the educational journey, that is, ways to help students develop and maintain confidence and self-respect so they can persist on their journey.

Charting pathways and addressing gaps.

By providing information about accessing ABE programs and supporting adult students' transition into and through college, ABE programs and institutions of higher education supply "road maps" to smooth the journey for adult students. Many of my study participants were quite vague about the requirements of the college programs they were interested in and their career prospects. A clear understanding of the educational steps they need to take to reach their goals would give students an overview of their pathways and help them develop a coherent vision and plan.

Local programs and the state need to more widely disseminate information about how to find ABE programs in the community. Some students in this study found their

ABE programs through chance encounters—one from a bus driver, one from a cousin who worked at a coffee shop where ABE teachers happened to be customers, and another from a flyer on a bulletin board where she was hoping to find information about jobs. When students are close to completing the highest level of an ABE or ESOL program at one site but are not yet academically ready for college, program staff should connect them to another site that has more advanced classes. Some of the study participants had positive experiences with referrals from one ABE program to another that better met their needs as their learning advanced, but others completed the highest level in a program and were left to find another educational program on their own.

ABE and ESOL teachers and counselors should help students chart pathways to further education and careers. In this way, they serve as “bridges,” assisting people who may be from different ethnic, racial, or class groups to improve their access to opportunities (Domínguez, 2011). To do this effectively, ABE programs will need to have sufficient funding for advising staff. The planning process with students includes self-exploration, career awareness, career research, labor market information, goal-setting, and planning. Because ABE students present a great diversity of backgrounds, advisors need to start with each student’s individual career and educational experience and aspirations. They should help students identify transferable skills they bring from previous experience. Students may also need to broaden their horizons, examining their dreams as well as local realities and researching several possibilities before settling on a pathway. Students would be helped by having the chance to meet and hear from others who have had similar journeys, such as graduates of their ABE program who have gone

on to college and a career. ABE staff could organize alumni panels during class time, for example. The career pathways concept (Duke & Strawn, 2008) is based on a progression of credentials and career opportunities over time, with opportunities to enter educational programs at various points to support increased career advancement. Teachers can help students identify and articulate how they can immediately apply their developing skills and knowledge outside the classroom. This will help students to develop a sense of purpose and progress along a pathway.

One way to make the journey smoother for adult students is for ABE programs and local colleges, with state support, to establish stronger mutual relationships so students become familiar with the physical layout, processes and procedures, and even some staff members at colleges before they enroll. Transition to college programs provide a comprehensive means of bridging the gap between ABE and college. Several of the study participants benefited from transition programs before starting college. Lanie and Rul attended a transitions program at their community-based organization while Candida and Amy had transitions help at the community college where they had completed their ESOL and GED programs, respectively. These students learned about financial aid and the ability to start college without having to save for the tuition in advance; they opened their minds to possibilities; and they received advising and coaching that no one in their family was able to provide.

Once they are in college, adult students need continued advice so they understand fully the requirements, expectations, and options of different programs within the institution and how one credential can build toward another. The I-BEST program in

Washington State, for example, provides structured pathways to certificates and degrees in specific professional/technical fields (Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2010). Adult students would benefit from orientations specifically for them and from student success courses that are geared to adult lives. Those who were professionals in their home countries need to learn about options for earning credits or using transferable skills in the U.S. Students need clarity on which courses are transferable from a certificate to a degree program within the institution or when transferring to another institution so they do not mistakenly take unnecessary classes. College staff also need information on translating and validating courses and degrees from other countries. Some of this information should be available on college websites. Job shadows and internships integrated into a college program are a valuable way to orient students to the reality of a career they are interested in pursuing.

Support for developing a complex student identity.

To help adults develop a complex student identity and prepare for higher education, ABE programs need to integrate metacognition—awareness of and reflection on one’s thinking—into their curricula. A student identity as described in this study is related to metacognition: being self-reflective, thinking about the learning process, and becoming aware of the best strategies for studying and learning.

ABE teachers should respond to the way ABE participants think about being a good student by conveying seriousness of purpose in the ABE classroom and setting and fostering respect for ground rules. They should then help students go beyond their initial

approaches to being a student by being explicit about and explaining the rationale for their teaching methods, which may be unfamiliar to students. Instruction should include reflection about strategies to approach learning, evaluation of those strategies, and adjustments as needed. Teachers should push students to go beyond what is currently needed to pass the GED by teaching the critical thinking and analysis needed for many college courses. Not only will these actions help adults build a more complex student identity while they are studying in ESOL or GED classes, but they will help socialize them into the student role, while facilitating the transitions ahead of them as they strive to continue on their journey. Moreover, they will help prevent students from being stuck along the way and from being “cooled out” in the vocational track forever when they have other aspirations.

ABE students need to learn about the structure and culture of postsecondary education. The culture of ABE programs is very different from that of colleges in several ways. ABE programs accept all comers, regardless of their skill levels or credentials. Unlike in most postsecondary institutions, there is a flexible time perspective in most ABE programs: students may take as long as they need to complete a level, whether they are in an environment of individualized or group instruction. They may stop out at any time and return when they are ready without fearing loss of credits or a failing grade. The course of instruction is non-standardized, and there are usually no grades given. In contrast, colleges have set semesters with strict deadlines and grades, so the stakes are higher for completion of courses. College courses may have an explicit career focus. A transition course or orientation either in the ABE program or at the college, or in both is

needed to bridge this cultural gap. To be most effective, the transitional activities should be planned and organized through close collaboration between ABE and higher education.

Some of the students in my study spoke about the levels of support they received in their ABE programs. Lanie, for example, described how the teachers and counselors in her community-based transition to college program shepherded her through all the steps needed to apply to a community college and choose a certificate program. They even followed up with her after she enrolled. She felt that she had someone cheering for her, and it encouraged her to keep going. This level of support, however, is rarely available once students transition to higher education, and students need to be prepared for changes in expectations and levels of support in college. ABE and college transition programs need to scaffold their support, providing high levels initially but gradually leading students to greater independence. In turn, students need to be prepared to respond with flexibility to varying expectations, learning environments, and educational delivery systems within higher education.

College faculty need to examine their communication with the adult students in their classrooms. They should not assume that students understand their expectations or know how to respond to them. By gathering knowledge about adults' prior learning experiences and ideas about what it means to them to be a good student, faculty and institutions can incorporate means of explicitly teaching learning strategies and college expectations to prepare adults for what they will encounter. College materials, including course syllabi, should incorporate messages about what it means to be a successful

student that go beyond attendance and turning in assignments and stress the ways of thinking expected of a college student.

Validating students.

It was striking how study participants described their first experiences in an ABE program as “starting from zero,” or “from scratch,” or feeling like a child. Clearly, the cultivation of respect is important in helping students to persevere. Rendón (2002) used the term “validation” to describe a process of developing the academic self-confidence of non-traditional college students. She advocated for institutions to take responsibility for validating students. This concept is also useful for ABE. Nick was an example of a student who experienced success in the ABE classroom after very negative learning experiences as a young child and adolescent. Some of the strategies for cultivating self-respect and mutual respect while students are in the ABE program include building community in the classroom, maintaining an orderly classroom with ground rules and clear expectations, designing activities that demonstrate academic success, and treating students as responsible adults. A positive experience in ABE may ease adults’ doubts about continuing their education.

One means of helping adult students to identify and deal with the emotional turmoil and difficulties they often experience would be to establish communities of peers or peer mentors in the ABE and college environments. Just knowing that one is not alone and that one’s feelings and fears are common can lessen frustrations or feelings of desperation. ABE teachers should encourage the development of peer support groups

and study groups by setting up the groups in the classroom and initially checking on whether they are meeting outside. Students will gain the experience to later set up these kinds of groups themselves when they are in college. ABE advisors or teachers should also help students who are completing an ABE or transitions program and who are enrolling in the same college as each other to form a peer group so they can continue to stay in touch, either in person or through social media.

ABE programs and colleges should encourage students to be role models for other students or prospective students and provide opportunities for them to do so, ideally providing a stipend for their time. Some, for example, may be trained and supported to mentor younger students or new students or encourage their friends and family to pursue an education. The educational institutions should give students roles as ambassadors for the school in the community or when orienting new students. These are ways to help students build a sense of agency and self-advocacy skills. Both ABE programs and colleges should find ways to nurture, and to recognize more intentionally, this valuable body of adult students who have serious purpose and focus. Support for peer mentors and role models builds on the concept of social networks in the immigration literature (Domínguez, 2011; Menjívar, 2000; Waters, 1999) by creating networks of academic role models for those who lack them.

College faculty should recognize the value that former ESOL students bring to class. Some colleges are recruiting students from abroad to bring more diversity to their classrooms, but diversity also exists among residents of the U.S. Faculty can help to welcome and integrate second-language speakers into the classroom by heightening their

awareness of their own language use. Several of the study participants expressed their need for stronger English to function optimally in the college classroom. Rul, the participant from Haiti who was taking IT courses, also commented on what a difference it made if professors spoke at a slower pace so second-language speakers could understand them. Communication would improve if faculty became aware of the difficulty students have understanding them when, for example, they talk with their backs turned while writing on the board or use idioms or cultural references that are more likely to be unfamiliar to English language learners. They should provide visual as well as verbal presentations. College faculty should also play a role in encouraging other students to learn from the experiences brought by adult students. Natalie, a participant from Thailand, reported that students in her English class did not want to do group work with her or another immigrant student. Faculty should encourage group work across age and national origin and demonstrate why that is valuable for all students. Professional development is needed for faculty to help them understand the issues faced by second-language speakers and the small modifications they can make in their classrooms to integrate those students. This topic would create a good opportunity for ABE and college faculty to share experiences and strategies.

Implications for research.

This study examined how ABE students and graduates conceived of their identity as students. It would be fruitful to investigate the ideas held by ABE teachers, ABE transition to college teachers, and community college faculty about the characteristics of

a good student and compare those with adult students' conceptions to elucidate areas of misunderstanding on both sides. In addition, an examination of institutional documents such as ABE and college syllabi and student handbooks for messages that convey, directly or indirectly, what it means to be a good student, and how those messages are interpreted by faculty, staff, and students, would reveal the hidden curriculum of the institutions. Research should examine to what extent the messages of ABE and higher education faculty and institutions emphasize the behavioral and work ethic aspects of being a student and to what extent they make explicit the cognitive and metacognitive expectations they hold of students.

A study of the culture of ABE compared to the culture of a community college should be undertaken, distinguishing the different conceptions of time, degrees of independence, and expectations of support. An additional comparison could be made between the expectations of student behavior and the types of thinking and approaches to studying that are developed in community college vocational certificate programs to those in degree programs. This would clarify what would be needed, in terms of their conceptions of learning and studying, for a student to successfully transition from a certificate program to a degree program.

Longitudinal research on ABE students who transition to college would be valuable. A study should be done of the change over time in adults' conceptions of student identity as they progress from ABE through several years of college.

Researchers, working with practitioners, could design an intervention in ABE classrooms to assist students in developing a student identity, focusing on ways of thinking as well as

responsibility and commitment, and compare the results with a control group. A comparative study should also be done of the college transition of immigrant ESOL students with and without postsecondary credentials from their home countries. Another comparison should examine the benefits and challenges of an additional year in ABE for advanced ESOL students or of participation in a transition to college program for both ESOL and GED students. An additional year would lengthen the time before transition, but could result in a smoother transition. This should be compared with the outcomes of the integration of developmental education and college-level courses, allowing students to move more quickly into college courses with academic support.

Conclusion

As a scholar-practitioner, this study has been more than academic for me. As an ABE administrator and teacher who works with students like those in this study, I gained the rare opportunity to listen in depth and at length to the voices of the study participants while suspending my own opinions and judgments. I had the opportunity to bring forward the voices of people not often heard from in policy debates and to show concretely what they are dealing with materially and psychologically. Through this study, I was also able to establish connections and themes in what I heard, to abstract from them, and to summarize the implications.

I have also examined what those implications mean for my own work and have started instituting changes in my ABE program. For example, I have worked with our advisors to revise the program's orientations for GED students and college-transition

students to address the factors in my model. Together with teachers in my program and another ABE program, I developed curricula for study skills and college and career awareness informed by my study, and teachers are piloting those curricula to ascertain whether they help adult learners progress more consciously and efficiently toward their goals. These curricula and lesson plans will also be made available to teachers statewide and possibly nationally through collaborative grants in which our program is involved. I also added language in our student handbooks to balance an emphasis on compliance with school rules with positive information on how students can study, learn, and participate in class most effectively. As I go about my work, I hear the voices of my study participants in my head reminding me of their realities.

As Amy, a study participant who had succeeded in transitioning from a GED program to college said, “I’m always going to want something better, and something more.” We can do more to help these strivers develop a stronger student identity to support them on their journey. As they progress through ABE programs and in their first year in college, ABE and college faculty and staff should validate students, thereby strengthening their confidence that they belong in an academic environment. While commending adult students for their work ethic, faculty and staff should also lead them toward a deeper understanding of what it means to be a student and of how to learn most effectively. They should guide them along the steps they need to take to reach their goals while supporting increasing independence. By taking these actions, we will benefit not only individual students, but also their families, communities, the educational institutions they attend, and society as a whole.

APPENDIX A:

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS AND LEVELS OF INSTRUCTION

	Adult Basic Education (ABE)	Adult Secondary Education (ASE)	English as a Second Language (ESL)	Transition to College
Instructional level	0-8 grade level equivalent in reading and math	9-12 grade level equivalent in reading and math	Beginning, intermediate, or advanced English language levels	Equivalent to developmental education in college
Prior educational level	Generally has not earned a high school diploma	Generally has not earned a high school diploma	Ranges from no prior schooling to advanced degree	Generally has high school diploma from U.S. or another country
Origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. born • Foreign-born native English speaker • Foreign-born non-native English speaker who has achieved fluency in spoken English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. born • Foreign-born native English speaker • Foreign-born non-native English speaker who has achieved fluency in spoken English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-native speaker of English ranging from beginning to advanced level of English speaking, listening, reading, and/or writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. born • Foreign-born native English speaker • Foreign-born non-native English speaker who has achieved fluency in spoken English

Adult Basic Education consists primarily of ABE, ASE, ESL classes. Transition to college classes are a more recent addition.

Note: confusion may arise because the term ABE refers both to the whole field and to the basic literacy subsection of the field. In this study, ABE refers to the field as a whole.

APPENDIX B:

SITE AGREEMENT

Agreement to Participate in a Research Project

This is an agreement between Mina Reddy, a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Boston Graduate College of Education and [ABE Program]. Mina Reddy is conducting research on how current and former Adult Basic Education (ABE) participants conceive of their identity as students. She will be interviewing students who are currently enrolled in GED preparation classes and advanced ESOL classes and students who have graduated from those classes and enrolled in college. All interview participants will be at least 25 years old. This research will be conducted between May 2011 and May 2012.

The ABE program administrator agrees to:

1. Provide the researcher access to students in GED and advanced ESOL classes during, just before, or just after class in order to explain the research project and ask for volunteers.
2. If the program schedule permits, provide the researcher with a small, private room in which to conduct interviews.
3. Mail or email information about the research to program graduates to invite them to participate.
4. Name one program staff person as a contact for the research project.
5. Provide the researcher the opportunity to review the agency's mission statement, curricula, and sample course materials for the relevant classes as background information. These documents will not be used in the data analysis.

The researcher agrees to:

1. Not identify the site in any documents related to the research.
2. Keep students' names confidential by using pseudonyms in any documents related to the research.
3. Give students a stipend of \$50 for each interview.
4. Provide a description of the research for program graduates.
5. Pay for postage costs for a mailing to program graduates.
6. If desired, provide a presentation for program staff on the study findings.

Name of ABE program administrator

Title

Signature

Date

Name of researcher

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Current ABE Students

1. Imagine you were meeting someone for the first time at a party or picnic. How would you introduce yourself?
 - a. What would you tell the person about yourself?
2. Tell me about your work, family life, and community involvement or any other roles and responsibilities you have.
 - a. Do you have children? How many and how old?
 - b. Do you have a job? Where do you work? What do you do?
 - c. How do you see yourself and is it different from how others see you? Or When you think about yourself and who you are, your image of yourself, do you think other people perceive you the way you see yourself or is there a difference?
Do you think that other people perceive you the way you see yourself?
3. Tell me about your experience with school as a child (and in high school).
 - a. Where did you grow up?
 - b. How many years did you go to school and where?
 - c. Tell me a memory of school that stands out.
 - d. What was your family's attitude to education?
 - e. What were you like as a student?
 - f. How did your teachers consider you as a student?
 - g. Did you think you would go to college?
4. Why did you decide to enroll in an adult education program?
5. What has your experience in the adult education program(s) been like?
 - a. What were your first impressions of the program?
 - b. How would you compare your experience (the teaching) in the adult education classes with your experiences with education in your earlier life?
 - c. What is it like to be in the classroom? How do you feel?
 - d. What kinds of activities do you do in the class?
 - e. What helps you to learn?
 - f. What can make it hard for you to learn?
 - g. What makes you feel comfortable in the classroom?
 - h. What makes you feel uncomfortable in the classroom?
 - i. In what ways have your teachers been helpful or unhelpful to you?
 - j. Do you study on your own apart from school?
6. Do you ever talk to other people about your studies? Who? What do you tell them?
7. What helps you to keep going in school?

8. What sometimes gets in the way of your continuing in school?
9. What does it mean to be a good student?
(Pause to write notes before answering.)
10. Do you consider yourself a good student?
11. What advice would you give to a person who is starting out in an adult education program?
12. What advice would you give to adult education programs or teachers?
13. Why do you want to go to college? (What are your goals?)
14. What do you imagine it will be like to be a college student?
 - a. How will it be different from being in this adult education program?
 - b. Do you believe you will think about yourself differently when you are a college student?
15. How do you picture your life 5 years from now?
16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Interview Questions for Former ABE Students

1. Imagine you were meeting someone for the first time at a party or picnic. How would you introduce yourself?
 - a. What would you tell the person about yourself?
2. Tell me about your work, family life, and community involvement or any other roles and responsibilities you have.
 - a. Do you have children? How many and how old?
 - b. Do you have a job? Where do you work? What do you do?
 - c. How do you see yourself and is it different from how others see you? Or When you think about yourself and who you are, your image of yourself, do you think other people perceive you the way you see yourself or is there a difference?
Do you think that other people perceive you the way you see yourself?
3. Tell me about your experience with school as a child (and in high school).
 - a. Where did you grow up?
 - b. How many years did you go to school and where?
 - c. Tell me a memory of school that stands out.
 - d. What was your family's attitude to education?
 - e. What were you like as a student?
 - f. How did your teachers consider you as a student?
 - g. Did you think you would go to college?
4. Why did you decide to enroll in an adult education program?
5. What was your experience in the adult education program(s) like?
 - a. What were your first impressions of the program?
 - b. How would you compare your experience in the adult education classes with your experiences with education in your earlier life?

- c. What was it like to be in the classroom? How did you feel?
 - d. What kinds of activities did you do in the class?
 - e. What helped you to learn?
 - f. What made it hard for you to learn?
 - g. What made you feel comfortable in the classroom?
 - h. What made you feel uncomfortable in the classroom?
 - i. How important were your teachers to you? In what ways were they helpful or unhelpful?
 - j. Did you study on your own apart from school?
6. What advice would you give to a person who is starting out in an adult education program to help that person do well?
 7. What advice would you give to adult education programs or teachers to help them work well with students?
 8. Why did you decide to go to college?
 9. What has your college experience been like?
 - a. How would you compare your experiences in college classes with your experiences in ABE classes?
 - b. How important are your college teachers to you? In what ways have they been helpful or unhelpful?
 - c. Talk about your contact with your college classmates inside and outside the classroom.
 - d. What do you wish you had known before you started college?
 - e. In what ways has your approach to studying changed since you became a college student?
 10. What advice would you give to an adult education graduate who is starting college?
 11. Do you ever talk to other people about your studies? Who? What do you tell them?
 12. What helps you to keep going in school?
 13. What sometimes gets in the way of your continuing in school?
 14. What does it mean to be a good student?
(Pause to write notes before answering.)
 15. Do you consider yourself a good student?
 16. What are your goals? How do you picture your life 5 years from now?
 17. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

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