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Investigating Adult Learner Perseverance through Practitioner Inquiry: Learning from the Voices of Students and Teachers

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INVESTIGATING ADULT LEARNER PERSEVERANCE THROUGH PRACTITIONER
INQUIRY: LEARNING FROM THE VOICES
OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, Mark, and my son, Cody, for their tireless patience with a wife and mother who could not stop going to school. Their perseverance is the most meaningful in my life. I am really done this time!

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My dissertation could not have happened without the support of many, many people. To my chair, Dr. Chris Bogiages: your guidance and dedication to your practice and your students are a model of self-improvement all educators should espouse to have. Thank you for motivating me to when I was close to the edge and pushing me when I needed to jump. To my dissertation committee, Dr. Aisha Haynes, Dr. James Kirylo, and Dr. Suha Tamim, thank you for providing vital instruction and feedback during this process and in my doctoral coursework. To my reader, Dr. Daniel Spikes, thank you for creating a space for me to think critically about my role as a school leader and for your genuine interest in my leadership development. I am grateful to all of the faculty of the Curriculum Studies program at USC for profoundly impacting my career and helping me to achieve a dream thirty years in the making.

To the students and staff of my adult education program, thank you for allowing me into your world. Your courage inspires me daily! To my special friends Ann and Lara, thank you for your ears and eyes. To the teachers of my career center, thank you for taking on the challenge of a director whose mind was often elsewhere, but my heart was always with you and our students. To all those who encountered me professionally at the main campus or in meetings, your kind words were always appreciated when I shared with you about my journey.

Finally, to my friends, family, and especially my parents, thank you for your encouragement and belief in me over the last three years. I am so happy to return to a normal life with you now, but we have a lot of catching up to do!

As a college freshman in 1987, I set a goal to one day earn my doctorate. I never imagined it would take me this long, so to my own persistence, I say, “job well done!”

The only easy day was yesterday. – Navy Seals Motto

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to examine, through the process of action research and design of practitioner inquiry, the experiences of students and teachers in an adult learning program in order to better understand the problem of adult learner perseverance. The program is located in a rural community in the Southeastern United States and serves adults ages seventeen and older who do not have a high school diploma. Often, these specific adult learners are saddled with barriers that prevent their success in our program, and adult educators face challenges themselves to find ways to support learner perseverance. The research questions that guided this study were:

(1) What barriers have our students faced in their previous learning experiences, what challenges do they feel they are currently facing, and how have they possibly overcome those obstacles in our program? (2) Why are certain adult students more persistent and successful in our program than others?

The participants were four recent graduates of the adult learning program, four currently enrolled adult education students, and four adult learning instructors who attended or taught classes in one setting. Foundational theories of adult learning from Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire were used to analyze qualitative data collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. Three cycles of inquiry produced findings in the areas of motivation, engagement, and relationships. Student and teacher

perspectives revealed important supports for adult learner persistence that can impact future practice as well as other adult learning programs with similar contexts.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“We live and learn. We try to make sense out of the situations in and through which we live and to use what we learn to guide us in the future.” --Elliott W. Eisner

Their stories are poignant. Karen, a young grandmother at age 43, stayed two weeks before her husband lost his job, and she was forced to leave to go back to work full time to support her “new” family. Brandon and his girlfriend had just settled into a nearby rental property when the hurricane warnings began, and sadly, after the storm was over, they had no choice but to move again. He could not stay. Angelica had been in her home ever since she could remember, but for some reason, she still could not say she lived there or get a driver’s license to prove it. She knows she must have that identification to move forward, so Angelica left and did not return. Finally, there is Jennifer, also known as Jenn. She had stayed on and off for five years, long enough that she could or should have moved on as far as she was concerned. “It never seems to be my time,” says Jenn. Karen, Brandon, Angelica, and Jenn are not their real names, and their stories are not connected by temporary employment or living arrangements. They are all real adult learners at Crossroads Adult Education (a pseudonym) who have enrolled in a program to earn their high school credential. Or so they hoped. Each one began the journey with the motivation to finish and the promise to stay engaged in the process. Life, or something else, just seemed to get in the way.

Student motivation and engagement are among the most researched topics in education and in my experience working with practitioners, among the most frustrating problems of practice for many of us. As dedicated professionals, we typically seek strategies to engage the minds of our learners in hopes of helping them find academic success as well as motivating a passion for life-long learning. In the traditional K-12 school, the effort to motivate and engage students falls largely on the shoulders of classroom teachers and administrators who are often equally saddled with the pressures accountability models and high stakes testing. By the time students arrive in high school, bringing their learning accomplishments or baggage with them, their motivation and engagement can sometimes determine serious decisions they make about their future. In the non-traditional setting of an adult basic or secondary education program, an alternative for those who “drop-out” of high school, the struggle to motivate and engage adult learners is equally challenging if not more so. Motivation and engagement frequently equate to persistence in our context. Adult educators who work in secondary completion programs grapple with learners who often have multiple obstacles to overcome along with the most obvious, they did complete their education on their first try. Our unique adult learners are tough crowd.

Until recently, I was the director of Crossroads Adult Education, functioning in the same capacity as a principal does of any school. However, it was probably one of the most atypical roles I have had as an educator and school leader. My new role as leader of the campus in which Crossroads is housed still requires me to hold a vested interest in the program’s adult students and their success. We are located in a rural county in the Southeastern United States, one beleaguered with high unemployment, generational

poverty, and limited educational opportunities. Life in the area can be harsh enough, without the extra blows of unpredictable employment, weather, or worse. When obstacles occur in the lives of K-12 or even young college students, the adults in their lives can help them get beyond the circumstance. What happens when the student is the adult, and it is his or her education that suffers? The dilemma has frustrated adult educators for decades, and yet external barriers that impede their goals are not the only reasons our specific adult learners struggle to persevere in programs like ours (Quigley, 1998; Avci, 2016). For some, the barriers that prevent the persistence and long term success of our adult learners, perhaps like Jenn, can be internal, born of challenge, interruption, and lack of success in a traditional educational environment.

Researchers in the field of adult learning have proposed situational and institutional barriers as common rationales that briefly explain the challenges of adult learner persistence (Quigley, 1998). Pursuit of education loses priority when adult life poses problems. Quigley (1998) also refers to internal motivation to commit or persevere as a dispositional barrier. Avci (2016) expands it to a personal epistemology when considering learner positionality. Malcolm Knowles (1973; 1980b; 1984) included consideration of personal experience and self-direction as primary assumptions in his theory of andragogy, or study of how adults learn, and that these aspects of motivation are key to learner engagement. Whether our adult students quit attending our program because of internal or external barriers, their exit has a plethora of consequences.

As a career high school educator, I recognize the future outlook for most adults without a high school diploma or GED can be dismal, both economically and socially. Annual earnings of high school graduates is an average of 30% higher than an adult

without a diploma; over a lifetime, that can translate to less mobility and stability in a modern society. The stigma of not completing their education can overshadow social status, and compounded with the struggles of poverty and less opportunity, adults without a high school diploma are often marginalized as a “less-than” group. If adult learners complete their secondary credential through our program, our hope is that they can reach their full potential. Unfortunately, our good intentions do not reach every student. They often walk away before they give us, and themselves, a chance. As the leader of the Crossroads program, I felt compelled to investigate why.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice to be examined through this research project is the challenge of adult learner perseverance in a secondary education program where non-traditional students enroll to earn their high school credential. Their perseverance or persistence in successfully completing our program can be jeopardized by a variety of factors (Quigley, 1998; Avci, 2016), not the least of which is that they are adults and can leave anytime they want to do so. Their attendance is not required, and enrollment for most students is voluntary. Although the curriculum of our program aligns state secondary standards and high school subject areas (SCDE, 2017), our students are adult learners with their own unique needs and experiences (Knowles, 1973; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Their motivation and engagement can determine their long-term commitment, persistence, and success (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001; Corley, 2011). Finding success in completing their secondary education in our program, through their own perseverance, bridges numerous gaps in future opportunities for our students.

Background of the problem. Adult basic and secondary education students, generally age seventeen and older, have the ability to walk away from our program at any time without fear of truancy or other legal consequences. At Crossroads Adult Education, the percentage of adult students who leave or drop out (again) in a school year is much higher than both state and national averages for similar settings (SCDE, 2017; Shaw, Tham, Hogle, & Koch, 2015). The program is one of fifty-four adult basic education (ABE) providers in the state where we are located, the majority of which are facilitated by local K-12 school districts. Eight programs are operated by community-based organizations, and three are managed by technical colleges. The Crossroads adult learning program has operated under the umbrella of the local technical college since 1998. The budget consists of state and federal funds, monies from the local county government and school districts, and annually-awarded grants from organizations like the Dollar General Literacy Foundation. We do not receive an allocation from the technical college but use of the facility and equipment is part of a larger collaborative agreement.

In 2017, over 27,000 adult basic education (ABE) students were fully enrolled and “fundable” in literacy, basic, or secondary learning programs across the state; the number of contacted students or other adults was almost 34,000 (SCDE, 2017). That 20% difference in contacted participants and full enrollees is indicative of the problem of adult learner persistence; the percentage who leave prior to making an academic gain, completion, or graduation is about twice as much (SCDE, 2017). Adult students who begin our program often drop out soon after enrollment and at higher rates than their traditional high school counterparts (South Carolina School Report Cards, 2016). The percentage of difference for our program is much greater, and the full picture for

Crossroads Adult Education is much worse. All of the data cited specifically from our program is collected internally (CAE), but it is reported to the Office of Adult Education quarterly and annually.

A review of data in the Crossroads program from 2017, the year I began my study, shows that 37%, 103 out of 278, of the students who started the enrollment process did not stay long enough to become “fundable” by the state and federal standard of twelve hours of attendance. Their absence is highly consequential when the total number of fundable students we have is only 175. Since 2015, overall enrollment in the program has declined 32 %, from 255 to 220 to 175. Of those who do become fundable, we lose another 30 % prior to their required attendance hours for post-testing through TABE, our way of measuring growth. The total is scary; 157 of the potential 278 students in 2017, or 56%, did not stay with our program long enough to count or demonstrate measured progress. In adult basic and secondary education, post-testing of students and those students making academic level gains are considered as important as graduates. We have a state goal of post-testing 60% of our eligible, fundable students; we barely missed that at 59.5% in 2017. The state department of education considered that almost 100% completion and a goal met. While the near miss looks good on paper, it also means that we did not post-test a large number of students because they did not have enough hours of attendance according to state assessment policy guidelines.

Of the 175 students who enrolled in the Crossroads program in 2017, 54 left before completing a level of improvement, whether that is full secondary credential or a year or more of academic growth. That same year, only 33 graduates earned high school diplomas or a GED out of the 175 who were enrolled. The numbers seem bleak, with

less than 20% of our enrollees completing or graduating from our program in 2017, especially when considering census data and the reported education levels of county residents. However, our graduation “rate” was lauded that year, and our program actually earned recognition at an awards ceremony for our growth in all six measured areas of student performance. The Office of Adult Education and our national oversight agencies allow that many students who begin the adult education process to earn a secondary credential or increase their literacy will not complete it or make an academic level gain (NRS, 2017). The goals set for our programs are attainable, realistic, and rarely reported in newspapers or online. Accountability looks very different in the world of state and federally funded adult education programs; however, the future outlook for students who attend our program is dismal absent a complete education.

Local context of the problem. The region in which our program is located is a rural community found along the notorious “corridor of shame” of Interstate 95. Once a heavily agricultural area, Clearview County (a pseudonym) is now caught between catching up to the manufacturing boom happening all around us and keeping its roots as a down to earth and humble place to live. The effects of generational poverty are very present but so is a certain optimism and hope for the future. I know first-hand because I live and work in this community. My husband and I chose to relocate here, his hometown, in 2015. According to the American Community Survey from the US Census Bureau (2016), the median household income for families in Clearview County between 2011 and 2016 was approximately \$34,000 and has consistently been in the bottom ten for counties in the state. The median household income in our state is \$48,000. Per capita income looks even worse, hovering around \$18,500 (SC DEW Community Profile,

2017). 65% of households earn less than \$50,000 per year, while the median household income in the US is \$57,000 (U. S. Census, 2018). 34% of children in Clearview County live in poverty, when the state average is 22.3% (Kids Count, 2017). Unemployment, while not the highest of all counties, consistently ranks above state and national averages. The ‘great recession’ saw it spike to as high as 15%, especially when the largest local employer, a manufacturer, shut its doors in 2009-2010. The current unemployment rate is 6%, which is over the 3.9% for the state in the same time period (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, 2018).

These statistics do not consider the non-employed, under-employment, or menial wages for the local population. What is considered a living wage in Clearview County, \$10.64 per hour for an adult with no children, is above what many residents are able to earn with the type of jobs most prevalent in the area (Glasmeier, 2018). An adult with one child needs to earn more than twice that much to live decently at \$21.54 an hour; even if two adults make over \$10 an hour each, if they are supporting a child, living well with appropriate housing and other expenses is tough in our rural area (Glasmeier, 2018). Many of the jobs our residents have do not require a high school diploma, but they do not pay very well. The connection between lower wages and limited education is well-documented for regions similar to ours (Prins, Toso & Schafft, 2009). The Department of Employment and Workforce Community Profile (2017) for Clearview County reports almost 26% of adults ages 25-64 and lack a high school credential. Further, population estimates hover around 34,000 residents. Of that, 16,490 are ages 18-64, our targeted age range. A modest estimate would mean we have over 4000 eligible students, adults

without a high school diploma. The difference between potential students and actual enrollment is staggering.

The harsh realities of income inequality, poverty of opportunity, and predisposed social identities discussed by Smiley and West (2012) and Boutte (2016) are very apparent in our county and in our adult learning program. The current largest employers in the area are retail and food services industries, neither of which pay much more than minimum wage. According to the director of our county economic development board, manufacturers in the county and in neighboring areas do pay living wages but finding qualified workers in the county itself remains a challenge (G. Kosinski, personal communication, November 9, 2018). Careers that require a college education and other higher paying jobs are available, but only 10% of the population has at least a Bachelor's degree (SC DEW Community Profile, 2017). Adults in Clearview County who do not complete at least a secondary credential have minimal employment prospects, less prosperity, and fewer long-term options to support themselves and their families. Increasing their financial or social standing through completing their education is an investment in equity and inclusion. The consequences of walking away from their education are severe for our program alone, but in reality, they can be catastrophic for our adult students. Unless the barrier is a life situation beyond their ability to control or mitigate, something has to change for them.

Introducing the Theoretical Framework

Adult learner persistence is a complex problem with multiple perspectives. Structures that can support researchers in our field are often pieced together through intensive study and years of practice (Quigley, 1998; Corley, 2011; Merriam, 2001).

Theories to be introduced in this chapter and explored in depth in chapter two include andragogy and assumptions of adult learning motivation (Knowles, 1973; Tough, 1979; Knowles, 1980b; Merriam & Bierema, 2014), critical pedagogy and motivation (Freire, 2000; 2005), and motivational connections to relationships and adult student engagement (Freire, 2005; Payne, 2005; Puroway, 2016). Each theory will be briefly summarized here, so as to link the problem of practice and the Crossroads Adult Education program in a relevant framework.

Adult learning and motivation. Given the stories of the students described in the opening of this chapter, the distinctive attributes of adult learners are a primary consideration for this study. The four assumptions of *andragogy*, presented by Malcolm Knowles (1973), are a key component of facilitation in any formal adult learning program. These assumptions drive adult motivation to learn and engage in their own academic or educational progress (Knowles, 1973; 1980).

A maturing individual has the need and capacity -

1. to be self-directing and to be seen as self-directing by others.
2. to utilize his own experience in learning.
3. to identify his own readiness to learn.
4. to organize his own learning around life problems.

(p. 43)

While Knowles (1980b) also acknowledged that adults arrive at learning on various points of a continuum with these assumptions, the environment of any adult education setting must include them in order for the learners to feel accepted, supported, and

successful (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). That emotional support can only be further enhanced using appropriate goal setting and growth mindset processes or activities so that students can fully engage in their own learning plans (Dweck, 2007; Knowles, 1984). Knowles drew inspiration for his interpretation of *andragogy* from the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers and the constructivist philosophy of John Dewey (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Adult learners can epitomize both a student-centered approach and the ultimate “learning by doing” scenario. Bridging the gap between unsuccessful settings, disengagement, and lack of motivation from past experiences and providing an adult learning dynamic based on the precepts of andragogy and learning growth is the role of Crossroads Adult Education.

Critical pedagogy and motivation. According to researcher Ruby Payne (1996; 2005), school and its hidden rules of the middle class can pose a barrier to students like many in our adult education program who have grown up in poverty or lacked resources in a rural area. While Payne’s work has met with skepticism and criticism for promoting stereotypes and oppression (Gorski, 2008), her framework can provide some valuable insight into classism that permeates into school environments. For many marginalized groups who are challenged with poverty and lack of resources, education and systems of organization are often treated suspect at best, as the enemy at worst (Payne, 2005; Smiley & West, 2012). Not without reason, though, because a back-story is usually present in the foundation or dialogue of the cultural structure, family members, or students themselves. Freire referred to these as the “obvious realities” of poverty or illiteracy and the inherent consequences of injustice and oppression (Kirylo, 2013). The dialogue and framework that can rise from a problem-posing education for adults is what built Freire’s

movement into a critical pedagogy and connects him with the autonomy, self-direction, and motivation of Knowles' (1973) assumptions. The big picture for our adult students is the emancipatory possibilities that a complete education can provide for them and their families.

Relationships and adult learner motivation. Payne (2005) further asserts that two key components for moving out of poverty are education and relationships. Enduring, positive relationships created and developed at the school level are vital to student motivation and lead to greater achievement (Payne, 1996; 2005; Jensen, 2009). Students, even adult students, who come from poverty need trusting relationships and natural connections with others that can become support systems they sometimes lack (Payne, 2005; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009; Smiley & West, 2011). Payne specifically states in her 2005 article, *Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty*, "When individuals who made it out of poverty are interviewed, virtually all cite an individual who made a significant difference for them" (p.4). Adult students from poverty often find these individuals and more in literacy and basic education programs that serve them (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009).

Subsequently, in almost every educational context, there is a support network or at least a person whose role is to know and develop personal relationships or connections with students. K-12 schools have guidance counselors, coaches, homeroom advisors, and even mentor clubs that expose students to a one-on-one relationship. The role of this support network or person is to aid students in setting goals and achieving success.

Colleges and universities are full of student advisors and even have 'Freshman Experience 101' type classes to support student perseverance and success. Capps (2012)

studied adult student persistence at the community college level, and participants in her research frequently mentioned the teachers and advisors who deeply affected them and contributed greatly to their determination in classes. Harkening back to the theories of Knowles (1973, 1980) and Freire (Kirylo, 2013), a key relationship or support existed that facilitated the learning, motivation, and engagement for adult students. Within that relationship, adult learners are given the tools to change their mindset and determine their own destinies (Capps, 2012). The synthesis and application of adult learning theory, critical pedagogy, and motivational approaches serve to guide the efforts of our program as well as the theoretical framework that informs my study.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative investigation will be to examine, through the process of action research and design of practitioner inquiry, the experiences of students and teachers in an adult learning program that serves an economically disadvantaged, rural community in the Southeastern United States. I will begin with examining the experiences and motivation of the persistent students to see if there is a common thread or meaning behind their success. In particular, I want to understand the specific barriers our students have encountered and how the context of our region is playing a role, if any. Finally, I want to include teacher perspectives as they are major stakeholders in our program. The design model of practitioner inquiry will allow me to closely analyze student and staff experiences through interviews, protocols, and collaboration. The results of the study and my findings will impact future students as well the practice of teachers, the new director, and even my own.

My specific research questions are:

1. What barriers have our students faced in their previous learning experiences, what challenges do they feel they are currently facing, and how have they possibly overcome those obstacles in our program?
2. Why are certain adult students more persistent and successful in our program than others?

The statistics shared earlier do not paint a very flattering picture of success for our program. However, just asking “why?” or “what is wrong?” seemed counter-productive, especially given my changing role with the program.

Last summer, after I received a promotion on campus, I hired a new director and became her immediate supervisor. While I began investigating this problem of practice as the leader of Crossroads, I did not feel comfortable designing, implementing, and measuring an intervention for an action research project with a new person at the helm. A professor had already planted a seed with me that perhaps enrolling in the program was a student-led intervention, so I began contemplating how I could study an existing problem while collaborating with current teachers and students to understand it, and them, better. I decided to examine what was going right for the students who do stay with or complete the program, those who are motivated and engaged in their course of study, and to figure out how we can build on positive student persistence.

In making meaning of their experience, I wanted to tell the story of our community, our program, and our students. I wanted to know about our students’ lives and learning situations before enrolling in adult education and what barriers might have existed previously. I also wanted to know how they are experiencing the many

components of adult learning in our program, and if our processes are impacting their experience. Ultimately, I wanted to determine what we can do, if anything, to support or impact their adult learner persistence. Our scenario begs the question, why are certain adult learners more successful in our program than others? The model of practitioner inquiry, through qualitative action research, allows me to answer all of these questions and to tell the story I want to tell.

Researcher Positionality

In the summer of 2016, I attended a professional development opportunity for new directors of adult education programs in our state. The weeklong course was designed by experienced professionals, approved for graduate credit hours through a notable university, and facilitated by an instructor who remains a program director today. During the class, we focused on everything from adult learning theory to effective practices in adult education to daily operations of successful adult education programs. Although all of us were experienced educators, we were new to a world that focuses on adults without a high school credential as well as other academic and life barriers, a classic at-risk population.

As our introductory activity, we were divided into small groups to create posters that used words or symbols describing the typical adult learner who is served by one of our programs. Given the job we were hired to do, we were at least familiar with the average adult education student. We went to work, collaborating and discussing similar aspects of most adult education students as well as the obstacles they often faced. When we were done with the activity, we were instructed to hang the posters on the wall and take a short break. While we were out of the classroom, our instructor did his work. Ken

(pseudonym) took a red sharpie and circled everything on our posters that was critical, derogatory, or negative. He then folded the posters up so that we could not see them when we returned. Ken led a short discussion to get us back on track, and then unveiled our edited posters. The room was silent. A symbolic flood of red bled all over our pages. Our true perceptions of our adult students were staring right at us. Wasn't that the biggest obstacle they faced? If we can't see their potential, how can they? (Transcript, Journal Entry)

I wrote the story behind the journal entry above one night after I began the second chapter of this dissertation. I did not realize how much it would connect to my positionality until I was well into data collection and analysis, chapters three and four. I just knew it would matter, and I think it demonstrates an important viewpoint of my entire research project. My role as leader of the Crossroads program changed over the past two years since I wrote my original research proposal; I became the supervisor of the current director and hence the staff and students. As it worked out, the new director and I have easily collaborated in this effort to investigate student experiences, some of the practices of the program, and how improving both of these approaches may lead to more success for our adult learners. Through action research, I remained the primary collector of data and interpreter of finding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I worked closely with our teacher participants for three years and daily with our recent graduates as well as the current student participants. In brief, my positionality would be an insider working with other insiders on the continuum provided by Herr and Anderson (2015). I may not be as “inside” as I once was, but all of the participants in the study are familiar and comfortable with my role as an advocate of their adult learning goals and intentions.

The relationship I have with our students is multidimensional. Essentially, I function in the same role as a principal of any school, a position of power and authority. If students do not meet our standards or make judgment errors while with us, my decisions can impact their progress and success. I can still suspend or expel adults in the program in the same way as the current program director or administrators at a K-12 school. We have a student handbook, which is reviewed during orientation, and all enrollees sign a contract agreeing to adhere to our rules and consequences. I have to consider how my role of authority impacts the adult learner experience and the overall climate of the program. It would be different as a teacher or tutor. Unfortunately, I am now the leader of the campus where our program is located, so my day-to-day contact with our students is limited. In this way, student participants in our program might see me as an outsider.

Demographically, I do not appear to have much in common with the adult learners who will participate in the study. I am a well-educated, cisgender white female who grew up in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area in a neighboring state. I had modestly successful high school career, but I would never describe it as the time of my life. A lot of the time, I felt like an interloper, even if I did not look the part. I hated high school social dynamics, but I always loved learning, reading, and thinking. In getting to know our students over the last four years, I have found that adult education students in our program have often had similar awkward, outsider feelings but with obviously dissimilar outcomes and for very different reasons. Wherever I turn in my history, though, it seemed like there was always a person who pointed me in the right direction, who helped me focus on my goals, or just made a difference to me because he or she

cared. I became a teacher because of those people, and I became a school leader because of their support and encouragement.

Some of our adult learners have those people, too, but many do not have anyone who supports them through their enrollment in our program. Having someone, a mentor or advisor or even an entire staff, who helps keep them on track with their goals or who they can count on for emotional support could be impactful, regardless of positionality. I believe different people and mentors made a difference in my life, and I have witnessed the same process for others. One goal for the current inquiry is to examine significant relationships as a support for student engagement, motivation, and persistence in our program. At one time, I thought of this as my most important personal connection to my study. In my original research design, I had imagined creating an organized mentor or advisor process to impact adult learner perseverance in our program. I will still recommend that as a part of my action plan for the new director, but informed this time by the data of my inquiry.

What I discovered in the process of my changing leadership role and in the progress of my study, while I was taking an elective course in school leadership in fact, is that my positionality alone would become a determining aspect of my findings. In the vignette I shared to begin this section, I contemplated how the prior perceptions of a group of program directors, a.k.a. school leaders, might be impacting their students and programs. I had been an educator long enough to realize the truth about self-fulfilling prophecies and students rising to the level of our expectations. What I began to consider more deeply, though, was did these perceptions rise to the level of bias, even implicit bias? Was I being overly influenced by my own stocks of knowledge that dictated what

was normal to me and not our adult learners (Dugan, 2017)? If education is a system that can marginalize groups of people and limit their opportunities (Payne, 2005; Smiley & West, 2012), as representative of it, am I contributing to greater hegemony and ideology that critically limits their growth and potential (Dugan, 2017)? Was I confusing compassion and empathy with acknowledging but not honoring learner experience and supporting self-direction (Knowles, 1973; Freire 1973)? Whose positionality, perceptions, or definitions of motivation and engagement mattered most in this context? The iterative process I was involved in with my study began happening inside of me.

An Action Research Investigation using Practitioner Inquiry

To answer the context-dependent questions listed in the previous section as well as those derived from interrogating my positionality as a researcher above, an investigation based on practitioner inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) under an action research premise (Herr and Anderson, 2015) provides the best and most authentic approach. The final product will align with a narrative inquiry, described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), which offers guidance to the next steps of action and further cycles of the research process (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Foundational thinkers of adult learning are the theoretical basis of the design, or for the researcher, the “why.” Action research, based on practitioner inquiry and a narrative style, is the “what” and the “how.” Through the blending of action research, practitioner inquiry, and narrative analysis, I hope to take a stance that effects change in the practice of our teachers and the persistence of our students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Practitioner inquiry. Although it seems a more recent movement in academic or educational research, practitioner inquiry has roots in John Dewey and the philosophy of

constructivism (Krell & Dana, 2012; Demetrian, 2012; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Hallmarks of Dewey's work such as experience and reflection are embedded in what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) refer to as a "systematic, intentional inquiry" (p. 5). Demetrian (2012) considers Dewey's mode of analysis and theory of knowledge acquisition the critical link between teacher research, problems of practice, and resolving those problems with immediate experience. Freire's critical pedagogy rests in problem-posing and action (Kirylo, 2013) to raise the literacy and social status of non-literate or disadvantaged groups. This facet of the adult learning or basic education program must be considered when investigating reasons for the lack of perseverance with our students.

Practitioner inquiry can be specific to content, curriculum, pedagogy, strategy, beliefs, identity, social justice, or even one specific context and child (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The current problem of practice troubling our adult education program staff invests in more than one of these passions. Collaboration with others in this setting will take on the model of inquiry support, which includes a close relationship between the researcher, the current program director, and the staff (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Inquiry practitioners can draw inspiration and data from a wide variety of sources and participants within their context (Hinchey, 2010), which pairs naturally with the format and style of a narrative for presentation and sharing.

A case study-like product. A narrative inquiry, similar to a case study, seeks meaning and understanding, calls for the researcher to be the primary instrument of data collection, arrives at conclusions through an inductive process, and creates a product that is richly descriptive in details. Narrative inquiry allows for stories and experiences of participants to be told through their lens and voice, using both words and thick

description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Investigating and managing an inquiry of our program will allow for an examination of our students, teachers, and processes that promote motivation, engagement, and persistence. The context of our program is difficult to separate from the phenomenon of attending it, so narrative inquiry allows for this deep dive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An individual program study also provides a vital venue for the participatory, thematic research approach advocated by Freire. Here, research and action can become a single process (Herr and Anderson, 2015). Further, the collaborative roles of inquiry of the researcher and the participants are viewed as equal when producing the critical knowledge for the social change needed by our disadvantaged and often marginalized students (Ravitch, 2014; Townsend, 2014).

Action research. Once the initial data from the participants is analyzed, the action research framework of the inquiry provides for immediate applications, proposed strategies, new processes, and further research cycles. Action research and practitioner inquiry are indistinguishable with these aspects. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) prefer the term inquiry only because there is less “baggage” attached to it for practicing classroom teachers. Research is a loaded term and can be intimidating or antithetical to the process available (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Action research is described as constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Efron and Ravid (2013) attempt to be as inclusive as possible when allowing for action research questions to “arise from events, problems, or professional interests that educators deem important” (p. 4).

Action research also seeks to engage participants in some element of practical problem-solving (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The iterative, practical problem solving is captured in a circular six-step process proposed by Efron and Ravid (2013): Identifying a problem; gathering background information; designing a study; collecting data; analyzing and interpreting data; implementing and sharing the findings (p. 8). The most commonly used action research designs also incorporate an intervention that the researcher hopes will create an impact or improve student learning (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Practitioner inquiry allows for the impact of an already existing phenomenon to be discovered (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The current research study lies in the crossover; an inquiry that will effect change. By examining teacher and student perspectives, I hope to build on the positive aspects of our adult learning program and address concerns that ultimately affect the persistence of all students enrolled in Crossroads Adult Education.

Research Design

The iterative process of action research and practitioner inquiry might make some researchers uncomfortable (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). However, it makes sense for the current context given how much has changed about my study from when I began as well as the unique, bounded nature of the adult learning program itself (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Studying human experience, like the practice of teaching and learning, has to allow for the first aspect, being human and how much we change over time (Hinchey, 2010). Although supporting documents and statistics are not unusual in qualitative study design, words become the data that drive the research. In this study, I use the words of our students and teachers to “enter” their perspectives, drawing inferences through their themes and experiences (Patton qtd. in Merriam & Tisdell, p.

108, 2016). The sample was purposive, with twelve participants: four previous students who are graduates; four currently enrolled students, and four teachers. All of the participants were enrolled in or taught classes at our main location on the satellite campus of the technical college. Both groups of students were invested in the program based on their consistent attendance and outcomes; as participants in the study, they can reveal the greatest insights into their valid experiences. Teachers have an obvious interest in both student success and their effective practice. Their group descriptors gave me natural categories upon which I was able to build both organic and intentional cycles of inquiry in examining their experiences (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). My new office as campus director is across the hallway, so access after my change in role was not an issue. All of the participants agreed to be a part of the study before data collection actually began during a summer session.

Data collection. Face-to-face interviews with students and teachers were the primary data source, and examination of the data drove the practitioner inquiry. Interviews were semi-structured and recorded, with a list of questions to be explored and enough flexibility to follow-up natural and organic topics (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Follow-up questions were not needed, but all participants were given the opportunity to read their interview transcripts. Because the more formal interviews would take place during the summer when fewer teachers and would be available, I initiated a collaborative process in the spring to create the actual questions for interviews to be described further in the methodology chapter. The final product turned out a little differently as a result, but the topics I originally

wanted to discuss shown below in Table 1.1, with formal list of questions included in Appendix A.

Table 1.1 Interview topics offered as discussion points will collaborators.

<i>With Students</i>	<i>With Teachers</i>
previous school experiences and reasons for enrollment in our program	pre-conceptions about student history and motivation
academic confidence	retention strategies
life outside of the program, including external and internal barriers	activities with students that provide guidance and support
relationships and available support systems	self-fulfilling prophecies
current or recent experiences in our program	Roles
processes we have in place that impact or impacted their motivation and engagement	processes we have in place that appear to impact student motivation and engagement
growth or deficit mindsets	growth or deficit mindsets

Other sources of data included my researcher's journal and notes from collaborative, critical-friend meetings with the current adult education director. I also added notes during some participant interviews, if there was an insight that came to me during the conversation. Student demographic data, assessments and attendance

information are included as prior data and reported only as needed or where appropriate to demonstrate themes in the data analysis.

Data analysis. During the cycles of inquiry, two methods of analysis were employed to examine experiences and code the data for interpretation. Since two of the groups were students, I used an inductive process of constant comparative to discover insights and categories from both sets of interviews (Fram, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method was reflective of the critical practices of Paulo Freire described by Elias (1975). I used their words to find the repeated connections and themes that become apparent with while constantly comparing their responses (Elias, 1975; Fram, 2013). With the teacher group, I applied a deductive process where I was able to apply Knowles' (1973) assumptions of andragogy as an a-priori framework and the basis for reaching conclusions. I purposefully chose this method to use with teachers as Knowles (1950; 1973; 1980b; 1984) himself collected his list of assumptions through time and observations in his own practice as an adult educator.

As a large part of the data collected was qualitative, a triangulation method was used to reinforce trustworthiness of the interpretations (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This included three cycles of inquiry with three different types of participants. A practice of member-checking and peer review was implemented over the course of the study to ensure that participant experiences were fully reflected and credibility receives unfiltered feedback (Creswell, 2012; Efron & Ravid, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Thick, rich description is demonstrated in study findings, using the words and stories of the student and staff participants. Creswell and Miller (2000) recommend that qualitative researchers utilize a "lens framework" in order to apply the best validity procedure. To

reflect the lens of the researcher, triangulation and researcher reflexivity will be used. To reflect the lens of the participants, member-checking and collaboration will be employed. To reflect the lens of people external to the study, rich description and peer debriefing are endorsed. Each of these data analysis methods and validity processes yielded in-depth understanding and generation of new knowledge that is the hallmark of action research (Creswell, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Significance of the Study

The educational significance of the current study is two-fold: limited implications in the field of adult education practice and a larger effect in the local context of the program I previously directed and now supervise. This does not imply generalizability but an awareness of other programs and directors who report and share similar concerns. As an audience, they would definitely benefit from the new knowledge and findings ((Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Adults who enroll in basic and secondary learning programs across our state and country have many common demographics, attendance issues, and learning gaps. I have participated in numerous meetings, professional development sessions, and even online communication venues where adult learning program directors discuss our shared problems and solutions. Enrollment and attendance in programs like ours are currently in a downward trend (SCDE, 2017), and practitioners have pondered for years how to impact the perseverance of the struggling adult learner (Knowles, 1973, 1984; Quigley, 1998; Herod, 2002; Muth, 2011). In the state where we are located, the fifty-four adult learning providers must compete for funds and allocations are now based on student enrollment as well as academic growth indicators. “Finding what works” is a financially smart option for all of

us. Adult and Family Literacy is also a mandated federal program, now under authorization from Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. While thought-provoking and evocative, the findings of this study can resonate with other programs and directors no matter their location.

More importantly, the design and findings of the study should resonate most with the new program director, our staff members, our students, and me. We were all participants in the investigation, and the power of practitioner inquiry lies mostly in those who are personally involved and served by it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The insight of reflection planned in the collaboration, interview questions, and validity processes blend the framework of action research and practitioner inquiry with the precepts of adult learning and motivation. Practitioner inquiry can be specific to content, curriculum, pedagogy, strategy, beliefs, identity, social justice, or even one specific context and child (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The current problem of practice troubling our adult learning program staff invests in more than one of these “passions” as identified by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014). Collaboration with others in this setting took on the research strategy of inquiry support, which includes a close relationship between the researcher, the current program director, and the staff (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The results and findings being most relevant to the local setting, and an action plan included to continue the next steps, the study fulfills more than one major goal of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Limitations of the Study

A traditional researcher might see the limitations of a narrative, practitioner inquiry based on a single program in its size and scope. However, neither of these elements takes away from its importance or meaning in the areas of qualitative investigation and action research (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While the study as it is proposed is research-based, it is specific to a small adult learning program in a high-poverty, rural area. Replication of the study, or even implementing its suggestions, would be improbable in most contexts. However, those constraints demonstrate its highest quality and that it is true to the participants it is examining. It is about them and the impact of what they are experiencing (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Whether one follows the wisdom Dewey or Eisner, making meaning of experience is the best way to learn (Dewey, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Wadlington, 2013).

Focusing specifically on the limitations of the study and its design, I had to determine if my positionality was ultimately a benefit or a detriment. All of the participants knew me in a trusting, leadership role, as their former director. They agreed to participate because of our relationship, so that influence could help and hinder their honesty. I was concerned that the students would only say what they thought I wanted to hear, but it was soon negated when the interviews began. With my leadership lens, I also had to consider if my cultural and educational background was a bigger influence than I was willing to admit. It did not occur to me until I was in the midst of data collection that I missed aspects of my own bias in designing my research and interview questions.

Concerning limitations with the participants, I struggled to contact and include any adult learners who had left the program completely as non-graduates. I knew of their stories, which I alluded to in the beginning of the chapter, but I was not able to include their perspectives on their own lack of persistence. For those participants who were graduates, reflecting on their perseverance after completing the program seemed to come more naturally, but the nature of my inquiry did not allow them to reflect on its long-term impacts. This limitation could turn into a positive with another cycle of action research. Finally, because of the timing of data collection, I was unable to facilitate an authentic inquiry protocol with teachers and staff. While my insights into the data are compelling, their participation in a protocol to discover findings themselves would have been the most fruitful and applicable to their practice. Regardless of these limitations, the current inquiry has great value to me as well as the new director, teachers, and students of Crossroads Adult Education.

Organization of the Dissertation

The remaining chapters of the dissertation begin with an extensive review of literature in chapter two, providing an extensive background to the problem of practice and presenting a theoretical framework in which to examine it in my specific adult learning program context. A full description of the practitioner inquiry design and methods of data collection follows in chapter three, with greater consideration of researcher positionality. The data is then presented through a narrative style with thematic, cyclical analysis in chapter four. To conclude in chapter five, I reflect upon my most important findings and implications for practice as well as offer an action plan of guidance for the new program director and staff. Appendices A and B include the

interview questions for students and teachers, and Appendices C and D contain a matrix summarizing student interview data.

The next chapter, the literature review, takes an in-depth look into the problem of adult learner persistence and proposes how to address it through a theoretical framework based on humanistic psychology, constructivist philosophy, and adult learning theory. Research studies that support the inquiry and the methodological framework are examined in both chapters two and three. Methods and data analysis chapters will heavily influence conclusions and implications in the final section, recognizing the most important features of quality action research and practitioner inquiry.

Avci (2016) refers to student's past experiences as a "messy construct" when connected to his or her motivation to learn. Our adult learners, both those who I referenced in the beginning and others who are participants in the study, have experiences they just simply want recognized for being real. Being with them again, one on one, was the highlight of my study. Bourke (2014) recommends a process of reflexivity for both participants and researchers as it relates to positionality. I think we did that. Hinchey (2009) states that inquiry practitioners pursue their own goals to promote better learning experiences and better lives for their students. I hope I did that. Perspectives on all sides of the research study will prove vital to improving adult learner perseverance, motivation, retention, and academic success in our program, as well as demonstrate Efron and Ravid's (2013) contention that action research blurs the boundaries of practice, theory, and research in positive, democratic, and important ways.

Glossary of Terms

Adult Basic or Secondary Education (ABE/ASE) – level of literacy service provided in the areas of reading and math to adults who lack a high school credential (no high school diploma) or need literacy or numeracy instruction, whether a local school district program or community-based organization.

Adult student or learner – students who are 17 years of age or older, who for the purpose of this study, lack a high school or secondary credential.

National Reporting System – a federally mandated, state monitored assessment policy and system used for inputting and tracking student achievement in ABE programs.

Academic level gain – progression from one NRS level to the next on a TABE assessment, usually based on a grade-level equivalent (GE). Six levels are approved for use in ABE programs when assessing students and tracking their results:

NRS Level I: GE 0-1.9;

NRS Level II: GE 2-3.9;

NRS Level III: GE 4-5.9;

NRS Level IV: GE 6-8.9;

NRS Level V: GE 9-10.9;

NRS Level VI: GE 11-12.

Fundable student – enrolled students who have completed a TABE pre-test and attended class for twelve hours or more. Adult education programs are allocated funds for each fundable student only when he or she has attended for the minimum twelve hours.

TABE – Test of Adult Basic Education: a standardized test of adult literacy and numeracy skills; our program uses only Reading and Mathematics sections of this placement assessment.

HSED or GED – High School Equivalency Diploma, known also by is “brand-name,” General Education Development (GED). This is the test offered on location Crossroads Adult Education*.

Engagement – In the adult education setting, an engaged student is one who is persistent, attends regularly, and participates in his or her educational program of study.

Motivation – In the adult education setting, a motivated student is one who demonstrates progress his or her program of study and reveals positive feelings toward their progress and the overall program.

Success – For the purpose of this study, completing the adult education program with the desired credential and finding a pathway to the next steps in life.

Persistence – For the purpose of this study, the act of consistently attending the adult education program with continuous enrollment.

Perseverance – For the purpose of this study, the personal attribute or value that encourages one to attend to and complete a goal or task. In this study, perseverance equates to completing or graduating from the program.

*Although the descriptions of the students, teachers, and program are accurate, Crossroads Adult Education is a pseudonym.

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”

--Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

The challenges of adult learner perseverance are as diverse as they are numerous. The problem of practice becomes even more complex when those adult students live in a rural setting and attend a basic or secondary credential program (Spivey, 2016), like Crossroads Adult Education. For adult learners in our program, institutional or systemic barriers of generational poverty and lack of opportunities are compounded with individual obstacles of chronic failure and less than quality learning experiences (Payne, 2005; Smiley & West, 2011; Quigley, 1998; Avci, 2016). Adding these issues to concerns about the motivation, engagement, and commitment to finish their high school education, and our adult students’ barriers sometimes overwhelm them (Davis, 2014). Struggles with student persistence also interfere with effective program facilitation for teachers and staff, which when appropriately grounded in adult learning theory, should provide a positive experience for our students (Idoko, 2018; Spivey, 2016). Too often, the plight of our adult learners does not result in success, whether personal, academic, or financial.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to examine the experiences of students and teachers in an adult learning program that serves an economically disadvantaged, rural community in the Southeastern United States while utilizing an action research process. These shared experiences, collected and critiqued through an inquiry design, yielded knowledge that provided insight and meaning to the problem of practice as well as an impact on future practices and decisions within the program and for its participants. Further, practitioner research often has implications beyond the local context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016).

Research Questions

Inquiry researchers believe that a true change in practice can only be brought about by those closest to the day-to-day work of teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Examining participant experiences is the best way to understand what is happening, or not happening, in our adult learning program that has frequently manifested into lack of attendance, persistence, and success for our students. Data from Crossroads Adult Education shows the scope of the problem, and its consequences in our local and community context. An inquiry into the challenges of adult student persistence in our program specifically, with recent graduates, current students, and teachers as participants, is personal like our approach to adult learning. We know our learners often face challenges or barriers to success, but yet we do have successful students. Ultimately, we want our students to be in control of their own

learning journey and for our program to positively impact their lives. To that end, my explicit research questions were:

1. What barriers have our students faced in their previous learning experiences, what challenges are they currently facing, and how have they possibly overcome those obstacles in our program?
2. Why are certain adult students more persistent and successful than others in our program?

Research questions are the primary mental models that guide the path of any study, including its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological frameworks (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Dana & Yendel-Hoppey, 2014). A review of the literature supporting these frameworks comprises the rest of the chapter.

Importance of the Literature Review

The review of relevant literature regarding any topic of interest is the foundation upon which a researcher builds a case that argues the need for his or her study. It is reflective of an organized way to research and a critical thinking process (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). In qualitative research, the review takes the form of a narrative essay that integrates, synthesizes, and critiques the thoughts of other researchers, authors, and theorists on a given topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further explain that a researcher can situate his or her findings within the literature based on the topic, but consistent exposure and understanding of the available resources is also recommended. “Having a command of the literature early in the process greatly facilitates the shaping of the research problem, and, simultaneously, decisions related to

carrying out the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 93). Herr and Anderson (2015) state that readers need to grasp why the problem and study even matter, and that researchers must signal their intentions in the introduction as well as in their literature review.

Action researchers must show their familiarity with the stances of others and be prepared to debate the merits of their own (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

The literature regarding the persistence of adult basic and secondary education students is sated with references to adult learning theory and existent barriers to that learning as well as theories of motivation and engagement that lead to higher adult student retention rates (Chametzky, 2014). This chapter will examine the literature closely to provide clarity and answers to the existential questions of the research problem. Beginning with the challenges of why adult basic education students may not have not been persistent or successful, the literature shows it is a result of an abundance of barriers (Johnson, Duckworth, Apelbaum, & McNamara, 2010; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2012; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013).

The problem is both current and historical, and commands attention in a diverse body of research and theories. Through conceptual frameworks of humanism and constructivism and the historical perspectives of Maslow, Rogers and Knowles as well as Dewey, Piaget, and Freire, one can answer the question how adults learn. With theories and concepts of motivation from traditional as well as contemporary models, one can answer how adults stay motivated and engaged to learn. However, it is the motivational practices of andragogist Malcolm Knowles and critical pedagogue Paulo Freire that provide a bridge to examining and understanding adult learning perseverance through an inquiry approach. The phenomenon of adult learner attendance and persistence in our

program specifically is already an intervention in and of itself; understanding why it works for some and possibly not others is the most important question of the study. Hence, the background of the problem and the theoretical framework for addressing it show the need for the design of the current study: a relevant investigation based on practitioner inquiry of a problem of practice through which findings can be immediately applied to the program ((Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Approach to the Review of Literature

The argument supporting the current framework and resulting study began with the question posed in an Introduction to Action Research class: What problems in your practice keep you awake at night? My immediate answer was our dwindling program enrollment. From 2015 to 2017, Crossroads Adult Education (a pseudonym) reported a 31% decline in total adult students (CAE, internal documents, 2017). Although the decline was evident of a statewide trend, the lower numbers still hurt. Beyond that, many adult students who would begin enrollment or even attend for a few months would not stay long, complete an academic level gain, or much less graduate. The constant pressure of trying to encourage our adult learners to stick around was the catalyst for me. We could not afford to continue the status quo if our program was to remain viable; I owed it to our students and staff to find out more or what was going on. The summer prior to beginning my doctoral program, I completed a graduate course for new directors taught through the Office of Adult Education in which I was introduced to the theory of andragogy put forth by Malcolm Knowles (Knowles, 1973; 1980b; 1984). I began research at those two starting points, understanding the background of problem and the framework of how I could begin addressing it. I found practitioner inquiry a little later in

the process, and it allowed me to blend both. “Teacher inquiry is a tool that integrates the power of research done by others with the potential of research done by practicing educators themselves” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016).

Through database searches on ERIC and ProQuest, as well as gleaning the reference lists of other research studies on adult education, I found numerous articles and dissertations that were both peer-reviewed and primary sources. Textbooks from previous and current coursework as well as an earlier Master’s thesis on the same community provided me with background knowledge as well as more primary sources. Newer design paradigms and critical approaches, like those of Freire (2017), introduced in more recent doctoral study classes continued to shape the review, the framework, and subsequent methodology. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2016) advise inquirers to use the literature throughout the investigation to become well-informed on the current knowledge in the field and as a source of data to gain insights into the problem of practice. The search felt exhaustive when familiar names and sources appeared repeatedly, and I felt a command of the literature consulted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the strategies of research concluded, the outline of the narrative began to take shape.

The remainder of the chapter is organized in two major sections: first, a complete background on the problem of practice including common barriers to adult student persistence and what approaches to the problem have worked for others in similar contexts; second, an in-depth presentation of the theoretical frameworks from adult learning that allowed me to integrate practitioner inquiry with motivational theory while examining the experiences of the participants. Adult learners and their instructors are the center-piece of it all.

Background on the Problem of Practice

A program, a study, an inquiry or an intervention with a strong theoretical framework, combined with significant historical perspectives and influences from the world of adult learning, can tumble down quickly in the face of barriers to persistence faced by disadvantaged and marginalized learners who often attend adult basic education (Johnson, Duckworth, Apelbaum, & McNamara, 2010; Mellard, Krieschok, Fall, & Woods, 2012; O’Neill & Thomson, 2013). Research indicates that one quarter of adult learners separate from their adult basic education programs before completing even one educational level due to a variety of reasons and barriers (Mellard, Krieschok, Fall, & Woods, 2012). The next section will discuss the shared strands of these barriers.

Institutional and situational barriers to persistence

Quigley (1998) first separates these barriers into two categories: institutional and situational. Institutional barriers are organizational in nature, and often involve red tape, lengthy processes, and generational or locational experiences with bureaucracy, government, and other structures (Quigley, 1998; Payne, 1996). “Hidden Rules” identified by Payne (1996, 2005) often hamper the navigation of students of poverty through the traditional middle-class nature of an educational system. Adults who attend basic education programs have often left their secondary school experience because of an inability to overcome stigmas, differences, and inequalities over which they have no control (Davis, 2014). Situational barriers to adult student persistence, according to Quigley (1998), arise from day-to-day adult life. These can include transportation, location, lack of childcare, and in general, lack of opportunity and impetus to complete an

education (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2012). The profile of an adult basic education student frequently includes low-socioeconomic status; lack of support systems; chronic failure or absenteeism in school; family demographics that indicate low educational attainment; and/or a unique set of circumstances that contributed to the student's lack of persistence (Quigley, 1998; Davis, 2014; Hernandez & Salinas, 2012).

Individual Barriers to Adult Student Persistence

While numerous external factors seem to conspire against the sustained efforts of many adult basic education students, internal factors are equally if not more challenging (Avci, 2016; Davis 2012). Academic persistence for the adult learner is a complex problem (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). Quigley (1998) considered the dispositional barrier to adult student persistence to be by far the most enigmatic and devotes much of his life's work to examining the unique attitudes, personal values, and unstated perceptions of adult student learners. Avci (2016) considers an adult student learner's life experience as his or her personal epistemology and combines the literature to show that these must be considered, explored, and even instructionally included to impact adult student persistence.

Individual mindsets of motivation, drive, social circumstance, and construct perception often influence adult student persistence more than institutional or situational barriers (Quigley, 1998; Muth, 2011; Davis, 2014). In fact, in personal study referenced by Quigley (1998), the words "education" and "learning" carried positive connotation when associated with children and friends. However, when applied to adult basic

education or literacy, these same participants had a negative reaction. The idea of going back to school somehow carried a heavy burden for those who were not successful when they were younger (Quigley, 1998).

Successful Approaches to Addressing Adult Learner Perseverance

Regardless of barriers and in the face of great odds, there are countless adult learners who are successful in basic or secondary education programs. The research includes examples of unique case studies and qualitative inquiries that reflect the design of the current study as well as successfully implemented interventions or action plans. While a complex problem, adult student persistence can be deconstructed with unique, learner-specific, dispositional approaches.

Student perspectives. Davis (2014) created a powerful ethnodrama to present the personalities and stories of twelve GED program participants to explore their lived experiences in their own words. She enlisted student voices and created an interpretative response to the data of student interviews, field notes and journals, and recorded sessions. The result is infused with principles of postmodernism and social theory from Paulo Freire, a critical source to be examined in the theoretical framework of the current study. The four scenes portray 1. School days (experience in high school); 2. Leaving (deciding to leave high school); 3. Reflections (thoughts about leaving high school); 4. Change (getting a GED and transitioning to adult education). After writing the script, the author discusses two reader's theater productions of the ethnodrama, where she interprets reactions. The first performance was given by students for students and teachers; the resulting reaction from the audience showed that each student's life matters when

creating an inclusive learning environment; the second performance was given at a conference for adult educators and audience member reactions varied from “are we reaching and meeting the needs of all students?” to “whose voices are we listening to?” through which the author sees the paradigm shift. Understanding student voices is the first step of adopting a dispositional approach to supporting adult student persistence.

Teacher relationships. The second theme found in the literature that informs a successful approach to supporting adult student persistence pertains to teacher preparation and connections to their adult learners (Idoko, 2018; Spivey, 2016). It is not so much their instructional persistence (Fitzgerald & Young, 1997) as it is their commitment to better quality instruction. Idoko (2018) conducts a qualitative case study in which ten current and former students of one adult education program, ages 17-24, are interviewed and profiled to better understand their perceptions about their engagement and what motivates them to continue in adult learning. Students are specifically asked to consider teaching strategies or approaches that encouraged them. As the interviews and conversations are analyzed, Idoko found themes that organized as institutional, individual, and social factors that contributed to their success. The social aspect noted by Idoko connects her study to frameworks of humanism and social learning theory of Vygotsky, a perception also promoted in Freire’s work (Elias, 1975).

With this information, Idoko (2018) then creates a plan of action that includes teacher professional development on andragogy, other adult learning theory, persistence theory, and the student perceptions. While the capstone project is unique to the set of learners that participated in the study, its value to the current study is that student perceptions were equally valued with critical framework. Spivey (2016) also wrote a

qualitative study and created a project based on interviews with a broader range of adult learners in a secondary program. Her resulting project was a professional development plan that focused on new teachers to adult education specifically. Ideally, new teachers would participate in professional development that emphasized principles of adult learning and establishing connections with students from the very beginning of their tenure. Hence, teacher participation that supports adult student persistence is crucial (Idoko, 2018; Spivey, 2018).

Prins, Toso, and Schafft (2009) combine two qualitative studies into one article partially titled, “It Feels Like a Little Family to Me.” The phrase evokes an emotional reaction with intention. While the authors are primarily examining women of poverty who attend adult basic education, their findings regarding social relationships are uniquely relevant to all adult learners. In one part of the study, twenty-one participants are interviewed about their participation in a family literacy program. Student responses indicate that relationships with teachers and other students as well as a strong, supportive environment, not just the educational attainments in other words, were motivating factors for their persistence. The social factors contributed to developing a disposition, or personality, that welcomed program attendance and positive interactions.

Connections. The connection between adult education teachers and their students is perhaps the most salient feature of adult basic and secondary education programs like Crossroads (Johnson, Duckworth, Apelbaum, & McNamara, 2010). Payne (1996) posits that a significant relationship is often the most definitive personal factor in helping one move out of poverty. These relationships should develop naturally (Avci, 2016; Knowles, 1973). Enduring, positive relationships created and developed at the school

level are vital to student motivation and lead to greater achievement (Payne, 2003 and 2005; Jensen, 2009). Students who come from poverty need trusting relationships and natural connections with others that can become support systems they often lack (Payne, 2005; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009; Smiley & West, 2011).

Current education leader Hamish Brewer, known for his success with high poverty schools, delves into this type motivational approach in his writings and speeches. Brewer (2019) calls it “radical love” and one of his main premises is for teachers and school leaders to create supportive and “relentless” learning environments filled with relationships and authenticity. Students of poverty must be taught the mindset of not giving up, “going one more round,” through high expectations, celebrations, and opportunities that provide the very reasons for educational engagement. Brewer advocates intrinsic motivational strategies that can foster and feed a disposition of persistence and success.

Engagement and persistence. Themes that remain in the literature form the crux of many adult learning programs, one that is based in engagement processes that support student persistence: mentoring support, goal-setting, and motivational instructional strategies (Capps, 2012; O’Neill & Thomson, 2013; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2012). Capps (2012) completed an overall study of adult student persistence at a community college from the students’ perspective and authored a specific article focused on how institutional factors influence adult-student persistence. The researcher wanted to establish a connection to positive campus climate, but data revealed a different connection.

Persistence in Capps' (2012) study was defined as students who were enrolled three semester and took at least eight classes. Adult learners in the study were 25+ years old, supporting themselves or others, enrolled at least part time or returned to community college after time away. Results and findings from a series of four interviews of 28 participants over an 18-month period revealed a connection to the community college was established more through people designed programs or practices. This connection was a factor of persistence but not a cause-effect relationship (influenced but not credited for). The connection to mentoring or an advisor evolved from interviews of participants. Students responded that because someone believed in them, they could succeed. Students who made strong connections benefitted from those relationships, especially with instructors. A feeling that teachers care about students was seen as a positive connection to the school and motivation to continue/persist. Capps (2012) concluded with the following recommendations for practice: establishing learning communities; personal validation opportunities for students; faculty advising components; and mentoring that includes early alert processes.

Setting goals and using motivational instructional strategies to support adult student persistence have an obvious positive connection. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) conduct a meta-analysis literature review to identify effective research-based strategies through expectancy value theory, goal theory, and self-determination theory in order to propose a model of persistence that can be applied to program design. A model of self-efficacy that utilizes setting goals and measuring interest for task value and student affect is presented. The authors intend for their model to build self-directedness and thus persistence of low-skilled adult learners. Sustaining motivation and effort over time is a

complex theory, yet in this article the authors do not include an application of their theory. Examples from the “New England Adult Learner Persistence Project” are instead examined and a program design is proposed. According to the researchers, the model can be applied to instructor engagement, scaffolding of learning, and faculty and student relationships.

Finally, Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, and Woods (2012) present a retrospective design study based on data collected in a larger study of adult literacy. The retrospective recalls another included in the current review of literature that attempted to measure adult student persistence based on assessments. This study, however, explores dispositional factors of ABE and ASE students who make an educational gain within one year and analyzes if the factors show a connection or influence. A sample of 319 students across multiple programs completed a self-assessment and then their performance data were analyzed a year later. While no intervention is proposed, the methods and results suggest the dispositional factors that include self-efficacy, resilience, attitudes toward education, and internal attributes were moderate predictors of students who ultimately persisted and made gains. The study presented theories of intrinsic motivation and goal orientations and applied these specifically to participants, and then the focus was narrowed to analyze motivation during the learning and the process of motivational support among the programs. Including numerous programs in the sample skewed the data findings, but the consistencies in the learner results hold value. The study supports that setting goals and motivational instruction is connected to adult student persistence.

Summary

Adult learners who face significant barriers to their success deserve sincere and targeted support of their academic and personal goals. Students like Karen, Brandon, Angelica, and Jenny from the Crossroads program exist in other settings similar to ours, as seen in numerous studies above. The conflicts of situational or systemic barriers often pales in the face of internal struggles to maintain motivation and engagement in the adult learning program. What has worked for others provides valuable insight into how to address our specific learner needs. Infusing an advanced theoretical framework into an inquiry approach that can make meaning of participant experience is the next step that will aid in the discovery of what might work for us.

Theoretical Framework

A well-known Chinese proverb follows along, “Tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I may remember. But involve me, and I'll understand.” A profound framework for teaching and learning can be found in those humble words. The basis of action and inquiry research is no different. The process is heavily involved and evolutionary as it develops (Herr & Anderson, 2015). When I first considered how I would address my problem of practice, I began with how we could make it better or how we could fix it. Honestly, I assumed I understood the problem better than I did, and that my adult education teachers did as well. We were experts after all. As the research and literature I came across expanded, and my leadership role changed, I saw that I had to take a different approach. I needed to truly understand the background of the problem from our students' point of view and to understand their experience in our program in order to

better support their persistence. Practitioner inquiry would allow me to do this (Ravitch, 2014; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The theoretical framework that follows is an exploration of adult learning theory, beginning with its foundations in humanism and constructivism, and how it can most effectively be applied to promote the motivation, engagement, and perseverance of our students.

Humanism and Historical Perspectives

In the simple schema presented above, the philosophy of humanism is fully illustrated. It shows growth, self-actualization, and personal engagement, three basic tenets of the humanist philosophy (Muth, 2011). Broadly defined humanism is the philosophical approach whose aims and claims are based on an assumed known essence of the human being (Zhao, 2015). Borne out of a reaction to the logic and fatalism determined by behaviorism, humanistic psychology assumes that human beings have the potential for growth and the ability to make their own choices (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). In a learning context, humanism focuses on the individual and, as such, has become an essential part of modern education (Zhao, 2015).

The work of psychologists Maslow and Rogers firmly established the alternative perspective of humanism through human nature and learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Abraham Maslow's triangle shaped hierarchy of needs is perhaps the most well-known representation of a psychological paradigm (Acevedo, 2015) and established his legacy with the values of safety, security, love and belonging, self-esteem leading to epitome of self-actualization (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). "The focus is on the inner person, that person's needs, desires, and wants and how these require attending to in any

learning encounter” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 30). Even more imbedded in the humanistic approach to learning theory is the influence of Maslow’s counterpart, Carl Rogers. Rogers is actually credited with establishing the idea of the student-centered v. teacher-centered classroom (Heim, 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). In Rogers’ world, “the teacher is the facilitator of self-directed learning rather the dispenser of knowledge” (qtd. in Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 30). Rogers’ person-centered principles include empathy, congruence, and positive regard (Heim, 2011), and his definition of significant learning in his seminal *Freedom to Learn for the 80’s* has influenced forty years of educators (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). In his own words, Rogers wrote that an educated person is one “who has learned how to learn” (as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 30). The idea of an educated person who has learned how to learn is most assuredly the goal of all learning, but especially for those in an adult setting.

Constructivism and its Historical Perspectives

Through popular American folklore, a quote similar to the Chinese proverb cited above has also been ascribed to Benjamin Franklin. As a constructor of so much ingenuity, it is no wonder that Franklin’s words can reflect the learning theory of constructivism. Key principles of this theory are also more decidedly applicable to instruction, not just classroom settings and learning philosophies (Driscoll, 2005). To a constructivist, learning is created and assessed through making meaning as opposed to acquiring it (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Learners do not transfer knowledge through memorization or mind-mapping; learning is transferred through experience, interaction, and interpretations (Harasim, 2012). Constructivists acknowledge the influence of the environment and mental processes but also emphasize that it is the “interaction” of these

variables that create learning (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Discovery becomes investigating phenomena, asking questions, and assessing risks and new knowledge. Reflection on experience is what makes the difference, the crucial element for learning in constructivist theory (Harasim, 2012). The best learning situations are problem solving, and teacher-student relationships are characterized by high order thinking, framing, contextualization, and relationships (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Constructivists see knowledge as “constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experience” (Driscoll, 2005, p. 387).

John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky are the most well-known theorists of constructivism who informed educational practice in their time and remain equally relevant today. While seen as a pioneer of the progressive movement (Wadlington, 2013), John Dewey’s work is also appropriately placed with constructivism as he focused on learning by doing (Ouyang & Stanley, 2014). “Dewey argued that learning how to think or problem solve should be the focus of education” (Wadlington, 2013). In his own pedagogic creed, Dewey shared his vision that education is a process of continuing reconstruction of experience, and that he believed in giving learners power and command of themselves (Dewey, 2017). His concept of education as a moral and social force has marked relevance and resonance today (Wadlington, 2013).

Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s social development theory heavily influenced the interactive perspective of constructivists, focusing on the impact of culture on learning (Ouyang & Stanley, 2014). He viewed learning as a social process that mediated through models, symbols, and language of a group, environment, or culture (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Hence, aspects of humanism and constructivism are foundational to

understanding adult learning theory and practice, especially in the areas of self-directed or transformational learning and reflective practice. These two perspectives also support the theoretical basis of practitioner inquiry.

Practitioner Inquiry

Although it seems a more recent movement in academic or educational research, practitioner inquiry has roots in John Dewey and the philosophy of constructivism (Krell & Dana, 2012; Demetrian, 2012; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Hallmarks of Dewey's work such as experience and reflection are imbedded in what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) refer to as a "systematic, intentional inquiry" (p. 5). Demetrian (2012) considers Dewey's mode of analysis and theory of knowledge acquisition the critical link between teacher research, problems of practice, and resolving those problems with immediate experience. Freire's critical pedagogy rests in problem-posing and action (Kirylo, 2013) to raise the literacy and social status of non-literate or disadvantaged groups. This facet of the adult basic or secondary education program must be considered when investigating reasons for the lack of perseverance with our students.

Practitioner inquiry can be specific to content, curriculum, pedagogy, strategy, beliefs, identity, social justice, or even one specific context and child (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The current problem of practice troubling our adult basic education program staff invests in more than one of these passions. Collaboration with others in this setting will take on the model of inquiry support, which includes a close relationship between the researcher, the current program director, and the staff (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Inquiry practitioners can draw inspiration and data from a wide variety

of sources and participants within their context (Hinchey, 2010), which pairs naturally with the format and style of a narrative analysis for presentation and sharing.

Teacher researchers can lead classrooms and communities through causes of local importance and even social justice with a process of inquiry (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Arming educators with the tools for both professional growth and educational reform, through the process of inquiry, is both powerful and liberating (Hines & Conner-Zachoki, 2013; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). At the heart of teacher inquiry is the direct impact of systematic reflective practice and pushing it to the deepest levels. Checklists for teacher evaluations or analysis of standardized test data merely scratch the surface (Kiss & Townsend, 2012). Classroom locations and programs are targeted for genuine reasons; teacher decisions and results can be implemented immediately. The lag-time or disconnection with university research is negated (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Wood (2009) believes interventions proposed or created by researchers that do not fully involve the participants are fleeting at best because teachers do not internalize the change. They do not own it. When the practitioner is the co-creator of the knowledge, the cognitive process expands the knowledge base for instruction in important ways (Krell & Dana, 2012). If one considers students as equal practitioners, especially in an adult learning situation, their ways of knowing and life experiences become enormous funds of knowledge also worthy of exploration (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Adult Learning: An Overview

An eclectic audience of theorists, theories, and practitioners has developed through the study of adult learning over the last century. Considerable debate and

skepticism that adult learning is unique exists even, but within the literature one can find numerous proponents of andragogy and explanations of how adults learn. The assumptions of andragogy from Malcolm Knowles and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire emerge as the most influential, but contemporary adult learning and motivational concepts also exist. The literature supports applying both in contexts similar to that of Crossroads Adult Education. In brief, theories of adult learning align with the historical perspectives and conceptual frameworks provided as the basis of my study as well as the methodological framework considered under action research and practitioner inquiry.

Malcolm Knowles and andragogy. The essence of the work of learning theorist and “father of Adult Education in America” (Henschke, 1997), Malcolm S. Knowles, can be found in self-directed learning and reflective practice (Knowles, 1973). A patriarch in his field, Knowles’ effort to develop a theory of adult learning and to impact the basic precepts of teaching and learning was not without controversy. Early on, his detractors wondered what, if anything, he was teaching. Well into his catalog of books and published articles, critics still demanded more empirical data and tangible research. (Herod, 2012; Taylor & Kroth, 2009).

Influenced by many of his own learning experiences and humanist psychology of the time (Bell, 1989), founder Malcolm Knowles brought forth the concept of andragogy and his four assumptions in order to separate adult learning into its own study (Merriam, 2001). He studied the humanist works of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers as an undergraduate, just prior to beginning his first teaching assignment with adults at a branch of the YMCA (Bell, 1989). He would later write of the influence of Carl Rogers

on his thinking then, quoting Rogers' assertion that, "teaching was vastly *over-rated*...the aim of education must be the facilitation of learning" (Knowles, 1973, p.62).

Knowles provocative and ever-evolving work subsequently impacted adult literacy programs, continuing education, higher education, and organizational development. Knowles began using the term "andragogy" to refer to the art and science of helping adults learn and facilitating self-directed teaming (Henschke, 1997). He was not the first to use the term, having borrowed it from a European writer (Bell, 1989). When Knowles published *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* in 1973, the word *andragogy* literally exploded onto the scene and into mainstream academia (Henschke, 1997). In introducing his own theory, Knowles (1973) stated, "We have finally really begun to absorb into our culture the ancient insight that the heart of education is learning, not teaching, and so our focus has to shift from what the teacher does to what happens to the learner" (p. 41). He further asserted that the cognitive theories and researchers such as Bruner, Erikson, Getzels and Jackson supported his premise that as individuals mature so do several other needs and capacities. Knowles proposed four basic assumptions regarding adult learning:

A maturing individual has the need and capacity--

1. to be self-directing and to be seen as self-directing by others.
2. to utilize his own experience in learning.
3. to identify his own readiness to learn.
4. to organize his own learning around life problems. (p. 43)

As these capacities increase steadily, the practices of pedagogy, teaching children to learn, are increasingly inappropriate for adults (Knowles, 1980b). Knowles (1973) acknowledged that there is not a clear-cut differentiation between children and adults as learners. The process is more gradual, and the adult learner begins to need more self-directed, problem-centered learning as opposed to teacher-directed, subject-centered learning (Knowles, 1973). “Once adults make the discovery that they can take responsibility for their own learning, as they do for other facets of their lives, they experience a sense of release and exhilaration. They enter into learning with deep ego-involvement, with results frequently startling to themselves and to their teachers” (Knowles, 1980b, p. 46.)

Several of Knowles’ subsequent works delve deeper into the four assumptions, with a special emphasis on self-directed learning and implications for practice. In a brief article for *Training and Development Journal*, Knowles (1980a) explained the prerequisites of self-directed learning as well as introduces his instructional practice of learning contracts. Often for adult learners, there is a conflict to being self-directed in an educational setting because of their preconception as to what education is. Psychologically, adults have a deep need to be self-directing and essentially responsible for their own lives (Knowles, 1980a). More than a one-time event, self-directed learning is a process as is the model of andragogy that Knowles promotes (Merriam, 2001). He also acknowledges that self-directed learning may not be the best form of education in all situations (Knowles, 1980b). In concrete or introductory learning, Knowles sees the advantages of the traditional pedagogical approach of didactic instruction. However, when more complex human performances are involved, such as those requiring

judgment, insight, creativity, planning, problem solving, or self-confidence, Knowles (1980a) advocated for self-directed learning.

Contemporary approaches to adult learning. Merriam and Bierema (2014) begin their updated study of adult learning theory and practice by paying homage to Knowles, his theory of andragogy, and the assumptions. “A new label and new technology” of adult learning is how Knowles introduced andragogy to American education (*emphasis in the original*, Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Included in their chapter on Knowles are the additional assumptions he appended in 1984:

5. Adults are mostly driven by internal motivation.
6. Adults need to know the reason for learning something (p. 47).

These final two are imperative features in adult basic and secondary education and the subsequent text of Merriam and Bierema (2014). One frequent criticism for Knowles’ ideas that Merriam and Bierema (2014) reference is that although the theory and assumptions are widely applicable, andragogy does not acknowledge the array of social structures and culture that often come with adult accumulated life experience. Knowles is apolitical, to the point that he is naïve about systematic problems of race, ethnicity, and poverty (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Merriam and Bierema (2014) are not afraid to tackle these problems and a host of other topics that expand or connect to the knowledge-base of adult learning theory. Through self-directed and transformative learning, adult students can match their body and spirit, experience, motivation, and cognition (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) to their personal epistemologies (Avci, 2016) or inner curriculum (Brubaker, 2004). Where

Knowles planted seeds with each of these concepts using his own vernacular, Merriam and Bierema (2014) synthesize and provide practical application settings, what Greene refers to as networks of curriculum (Greene, 2017). Further, Merriam and Bierema (2014) thoughtfully consider the influences of current technology, culture, social justice, and other critical theories on the landscape of adult learning.

Influence of adult motivational research and models

Classical motivation theory, such as behavioral, cognitive, needs-driven, rational, social, or responsive, provides insight into adult motivation to learn (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). However, the motivational design and models of Knowles as well as critical pedagogue and adult literacy instructor Paolo Freire will be considered most in connection to the current action research study. While in their text, the authors do not select one theory or application over the other, they emphasize the important components of engagement and persistence that all motivational approaches share: the intersections of personal and social contexts on the context of learning learn (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Malcolm Knowles and adult student motivation. The andragogical model of motivation, then, is a learning process through which the teacher is more concerned with providing procedures and resources for helping learners acquire information and skills than being the source of that information or those skills (Knowles, 1973). The process is proactive rather than reactive. It involves selecting problem areas that have been identified, designing units of experiential learning, arranging them in sequence according to the learner's readiness to learn, and then conducting and evaluating those experiences

with learning outcomes (Knowles, 1980b). Knowles himself looked to the research of Allen Tough (1979) and self-initiated learning phases to validate his own process. Both authors begin with goals, and integrate those goals throughout learning, revisiting, revising, and collaborating on them as needed. Teachers are not always omnipresent, so the learner must take initiative (Knowles 1973).

The resulting component of that initiative and implication for practice in andragogy is Knowles' learning contract, one that requires both initiative and guidance. He does not posit that learners simply adopt self-directed learning and go for it on their own. Plans and processes can be taught and guided; adult learning theory should be presented as well. "I emphasize that what people learn through their own initiative they usually learn more effectively and retain longer than that (which) is imposed on them by others," states Knowles (1980a, p. 99) in describing his own training model. The role of the learner in this planning process is vital, and the results need to have an immediacy of action. The conditions of teaching and learning are optimal when the teacher helps the student set the criteria for learning, provides the resources, guides the inquiry, and helps the learner evaluate results (Knowles, 1980b). The process is based on his initial assumptions of adult learning, the work of Tough (1979), and general research in the area of learning projects, what we would now consider project or problem-based learning (Savery, 2006). Knowles' (1986) recommendation is to use learning contracts in any adult learning situation, as limited as a specific academic tenet, as focused as an organizational training session, or as wide as graduation plan for adult basic education. While sample charts are available in the book, Knowles (1986) is not married to one specific format or another. Adult basic education programs across the country have not

just adopted his theory, but they have adapted his prescriptive approach with plans and learning contracts to fit the needs and maintain the motivation of their own learners (Quigley, 1998).

Application of an andragogical model and/or Knowles' theories is present in Fitzgerald and Young (1997), Quigley (1998), and Moore (2013). Fitzgerald and Young authored an exploratory study which helps to establish a premise of the proposed intervention of the current study. The researchers drew samples from three levels of adult learners to develop an examination of a total of 44 students. The students attended adult education or literacy programs across 20 states. These programs are facilitated based on the concepts of andragogy, and the purpose of their study was to examine the general impact of instructional persistence of adult education. The students fall under three categories, ESL or English as a Second Language; ABE or Adult Basic Education; and ASE or Adult Secondary Education. While the samples are small, the study attempted to determine if instructional persistence of the teacher impacted student academic gains. Persistence is described through the teacher lens rather than student and was defined as consistent time and effort or presence in the classroom.

The Fitzgerald and Young study found that instruction was the factor of least influence on the academic gains ASE (adult secondary education) students. These students were most advanced upon entry, already scoring in the high school range of ability. They were motivated or influenced more to finish or achieve gains through their own persistence or commitment. Their goal to earn a credential and move on being more quickly achieved, it was harder to measure the full effect of instruction according to Fitzgerald and Young. Of the remaining two groups in the study, ESL (English as a

second language) students persisted longer because more hours are required longer to post-test, but the effect of instruction was measurable. For ABE (adult basic education) students, those most like the students who attend the program that is the subject of the present study, the teacher effect was measurable but small. Most importantly, Fitzgerald and Young saw hope and recommend strengthening ABE programs through more than just instructional presence of the teacher and encouraging students to attend. They advised that more could be done to impact adult student academic gains than emphasizing the teacher's persistence or simply coaching students to attend class more often. That "more" is the premise of the current study.

Moore (2013) applies andragogical principles to the design of a purposeful teacher professional development in an effort to examine the tenets of self-directed learning. While a different context for adult learning, Moore's qualitative examination and action research design connect several salient features of the current action research study to Knowles. Her study focuses on four middle school teachers who participate in designing their own learning plans for implementing technology in the classroom. The teachers self-evaluate and have observations based on a Likert scale as they interview and reflect with the researcher. Self-directed learning that is methodical and monitored turns out to be heavily favored by the participants, even if they did not feel any more confident with implementing technology in the classroom. If andragogy is a positive approach to learning for adults, then applying it in different contexts as well as using action research design can transfer to other settings, especially adult basic education.

Finally, Quigley's (1998) research based on the theory of andragogy and applying Knowles' motivational design is considered the seminal work of a leader in the field of

adult studies. An adult educator, program director, and academic for over 30 years, Quigley describes an action research project he conducted in practice that informally examined the impact of the first three weeks of instruction for adult basic education students. The premise of his research was that the first three weeks are the critical connection period to adult student motivation and persistence. Upon enrollment, Quigley and his staff placed students in four separate groups with differing approaches to their instruction for the first three weeks. The groups included regular class attendance; regular class attendance with a team approach; small class attendance; and one on one instruction. Quigley found that small class attendance resulted in the most measurable persistence, and he concluded that factors such as peer support and teacher attention contributed as well. Quigley posits that early verbal connections and teacher immediacy are his programs primary goals. He concludes that students need to feel recognized, acknowledged verbally, and included early to persist in the crucial introductory period. His study of adult student motivation is influenced by the principles of Knowles' andragogy and the dispositional factors of his students.

Adult learning and motivation, especially for those students enrolled in basic education or literacy programs, is an elusive prospect. Combining the theories of Malcolm Knowles and his motivational design is but one approach. Each of the studies mentioned so far apply Knowles' work or principles to relevant context. An additional approach that captures the essence of adult learning in a literacy model began with the work of Paulo Freire.

Paulo Freire and critical motivation. Dispositional factors of adult learners are a key priority of renowned Brazilian activist, instructor, and leader Paulo Freire

(McLaren, 2000). While Freire’s philosophic works and body of research are often called revolutionary, rare, and prophetic (Kirylo, 2013), his perspective warrants inclusion in the current research study through its connection to adult literacy, motivation to learn, and established a connection to the premise of social justice with the emancipatory power of education for the poor (Puroway, 2017; Freire, 2017). Whether the writings of Paulo Freire bring one comfort or distress, his theories revolve around the concepts of choice and power and their dynamic relationship (Flinders & Thornton, 2017). Having choice gives one power, but often those with power do not give choice (Freire, 2005). Critical praxis and reflection are fundamental rights and components for Freire (Puroway, 2016).

It is in this paradigm that Freire locates praxis, the process of reflection and action, in which (men) become self-orientated or self-aware of their critical consciousness and place in this world (Freire, 2005; 2017; Kirylo, 2013). To Freire, that means becoming more human and more engaged, and the connection to all of it, teachers and learners, is language. He felt teachers should engage students in a dialogue of equals, thereby enabling the (adult) student to connect to his own experience to build knowledge and literacy. Freire (2017) describes the process with idyllic terms and metaphors, like the “sowers of words” and the “culture of silence.” The methodology described by Elias (1975) explains it more specifically and provides an early rubric on how the words and vocabulary for adult learning were selected by the instructors of the rural and peasant literacy projects. They listened, had conversations with their prospective students, and selected words that:

1. Contained the basic sounds of the native language;

2. When organized, they should enable the learner to move from simple letters and sounds to more complex ones;
3. They should be useful for confronting the social, cultural, and political reality in which the people live. (p. 291)

Freire's coordinators developed different lists of words for each area in which they worked (Elias, 1975). The instructors had choice, and rather than turning that choice into their own personal power, the power of choice was returned to the (adult) students to learn from their own experiences (Freire, 2017).

In this way, choice and power work together to give (adult) students a capacity for expression, one of Freire's most important aspects of literacy work (Freire 2005; 2017). By giving voice to their words, Freire gave his students back their own voice. By listening to their experiences, he gave them meaning (Elias, 1975). Freire's teaching blends all major tenets of the current action research study better than any other; humanism, constructivism, and motivation combine to affect instructional design in a way that allows for persistence, success, and liberation (Puroway, 2016; Johnson, Duckworth, Applebaum, & McNamara, 2010; Espitia, 2010;).

The process of praxis and critical reflection is used in numerous studies that demonstrate effective practices to promote adult student persistence (Puroway, 2016; Johnson & Duckworth, 2010; Espitia, 2010). Counseling or advising serves as an integral process in Freire's praxis (Puroway, 2016). "Transformation in the direction of social justice can only come through critical reflection, which advising should foster" (Puroway, 2016, p. 4). In his review of literature and resulting recommendations,

Puroway (2016) examines Freirian practices that inspire critical reflection led by post-secondary counselors with adult students. The reflection includes goal setting and action. The concept of critical advising develops through Puroway's research to cultivate these habits, honest feedback, and dialogue. The result is developing of reasoning for the students and a critical relationship for both participants. In the end, the dialogue engages the student in his or her education for the long term. While not a traditional study, Puroway's view is valid to the connection of Freire's ideas and student persistence.

Freirean concepts are also examined deeply through action research (Johnson, Duckworth, Applebaum, & McNamara, 2010). In their study, Johnson *et al*, examine what contributed to the success of two adult learners in order to better support marginalized students. Through a series of online interviews and email communications, the authors dialogue with two female student high school dropouts over the course of years. The two students developed a relationship with the researcher and each other while describing their common experience. While the size of the study is small, and the two students live in two different countries, the conversations are codified for common themes, and those are shared through the impact on the students and the practice of adult literacy instruction. Both women complete their secondary and post-secondary education through the course of the study. The Freirian components of transfer, dialogue, and critical reflection are observed and deemed consequential to the success of both learners. During their conversations, the women reveal and the researchers confirm their adult education instructors also played a key role in their lives and persistence.

Issues of student autonomy, self-direction, and language development through the lens of Freire are the components of Espitia's (2010) case study of a class of adult

English language learners in Colombia. Utilizing a small class of adult learners, Espitia began his action research to resolve a problem of his practice; he felt that his students were too teacher dependent. Espitia wanted them to engage in an adult learning process that was more independent and used a language portfolio of their own experiences as an instrument for fostering, monitoring, and analyzing learner improvements. Through qualitative structure and analysis, Espitia concludes that his methods highly favor the development of adult learner autonomy while reflecting the ideas of a Freirian education. Oddly enough, none of his students appears disadvantaged in any other way other than limited English proficiency. However, the premise of his study is supported by the works of Freire and Knowles. Whether the implementation is genuine liberation and self-direction or just his own self-aggrandizing is an interpretation left to the reader.

Summary

This action research study considers the problem of adult learner persistence in the context of a rural secondary education program that serves an economically disadvantaged community. Understanding the full background of the problem and establishing a theoretical framework to address it are crucial to supporting our students with their academic, financial, and personal goals. Reviewing the literature tells us that our students face internal and external struggles that often impede or halt their success. Examining and applying the precepts of adult learning theory provides even greater insight to their experiences.

Rooted in humanism and constructivism, the basis of adult learning theory from Knowles and Freire have contributed substantially to the literature on the topic of adult student persistence (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Knowles created a framework for the

independence of adult learners (Merriam, 2001), and Freire linked that freedom to a promise of reform and equity for those adult learners who are chronically disadvantaged and under-represented (Kirylo, 2013). Subsequent motivational and instructional models further provide evidence that directed a review of current literature (Puroway, 2016; Johnson, Duckworth, Apelbaum, & McNamara, 2010; Espitia, 2010). Approaches to the problem of practice utilized by others and found in the literature support the two primary resources of the theoretical framework from Knowles (1973; 1980b; 1984) and Freire (2000; 2005); these include student personalities, teacher perceptions and instructional strategies, mentoring, and goal setting (Davis, 2012; Capps, 2012; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2012).

To a constructivist, learning is created and assessed through making meaning as opposed to acquiring it (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Learners do not transfer knowledge through memorization or mind-mapping; learning is transferred through experience, interaction, and interpretations (Harasim, 2012). In using a constructivist approach, I imposed a mental model of the primary research questions throughout the review and study: What prevents our students from learning or persisting? Why are some more successful than others? How do adults learn best and how can we support them? Hence my reflective praxis, based on the precepts of Freire (2005, 2017) and practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014), helped to create the review of literature and the supporting theoretical and methodological frameworks from the starting point of Knowles' theory of adult learning known as andragogy. The impact of action research and practitioner inquiry methodology, these foundational theorists, and my positionality on the design of the study will be fully explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

*“By good rights I ought not have so much put on me, but there seems no other way...
the best way out is always through.” --Robert Frost*

The abbreviated version of Frost’s quote, “the best way out is always through,” is quaintly familiar in motivational rhetoric. Getting “through” a situation or problem equates to the value of perseverance and not giving up when times are tough. The fuller context of Frost’s words are most appropriate when considering the problem of practice under investigation in the current study. Adult learners in literacy, basic education, or secondary credential programs frequently struggle with and succumb to barriers “put on them” that prevent their success (Quigley, 1998; Hernandez & Salinas, 2012; Davis, 2014). However, their persistence is also worthy of deeper analysis and interpretation, which might help our adult learners find their “best way out.”

Crossroads Adult Education (a pseudonym) is a stand-alone program that serves learners under this premise and provides the setting for this action research project. Closely analyzing student and staff experiences in a singular program through practitioner inquiry can impact future decisions and practice of all participants. As each experience is unique and telling their stories can provide catharsis (Davis, 2014), examining the phenomenon of adult learner persistence in our program is the best approach to effect change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey,

2016). Ultimately, we want our students to be in control of their own learning journey and for our program to positively impact their lives. The lack of perseverance shown by many of our adult learners has so heavily impacted everyone that there is no other inquiry as important for our program, our teachers, or our students (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). To that end, the specific research questions are:

1. What barriers have our students faced in their previous learning experiences, what challenges are they currently facing, and have they overcome those obstacles in our program?
2. Why are certain adult students in our basic and secondary education program more persistent and successful than others?

These questions have been connected directly to theoretical frameworks, historical perspectives, and key concepts of adult learning that, when led by practitioner inquiry, will position students and staff members with transformative knowledge (Ravitch, 2014).

In the chapter that follows, I will provide a detailed description of how I used action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015) and practitioner inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) to investigate the underlying barriers and reasons that the adult learners who attend our program persevere to complete their secondary credential. Although my focus on this problem of practice never changed, the selection of the specific methodological design was iterative. Initially, I considered a pure action research approach that would revolve around cycles of inquiry and a potential intervention that would increase persistence among the adult learners the Crossroads program. However, coinciding with a change in my leadership position that occurred during the planning

stages of this study, I realized I needed to better understand the problem as it manifested in my context. Therefore, I decided to forgo an intervention and focus on an investigation into better understanding the problem as it occurred in my setting.

Further specifying the practitioner inquiry, I chose a qualitative approach that led to a narrative style for the presentation of the data and findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I am a story-teller by nature, and as an English major in college, providing context and interpretation to events and reflection is the way I devoured characters and history in literature. Digging deep into language, meaning, and themes is psychological, but it provides the greatest background for understanding and learning from our human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After describing the setting, participants and planned data collection methods, the explanation of the research process fades into a narrative style. The process of data collection in action research and practitioner inquiry often combines and coincides with analysis, demonstrating the iterative nature of the two approaches (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

With these ideas in mind, I will begin this chapter by providing a rich description of the context of the study as well as the student participants and research collaborators. I will also further explore my positionality and its impact on the decisions made throughout the design of the study. This is followed by a comprehensive representation and rationale for how I used action research, practitioner inquiry, and a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis to investigate the problem of practice. Finally, I will explain how the data was processed and analyzed through cycles of practitioner inquiry and the use of the theoretical frameworks of adult learning.

Context, Participants, and Researcher Positionality

...That epiphany stayed with me for months. We had the obligation to see and bring out the best in our students, hence having the greatest impact on them. I wanted the teachers in my program to share the insight and the change in perspective it might bring, so we started our year with the same activity at our back to school staff meeting. Initially, it seemed to work. We redesigned our student enrollment process to include motivational strategies and goal-setting. We reviewed the components of adult learning theory during our orientation workshop. We explained to our new and returning students that in order for their academic outcomes to change for them in adult education, they, too, would have to change to overcome their barriers. Their persistence in our program, powered by their motivation and engagement, would make all the difference. They could help us help them, and the problem of adult student perseverance would begin to heal itself, at least in our program. During that same semester, I began an adult learning journey of my own to earn my Doctor of Education. A problem of practice for me to study was born. Fast forward two years. While in practice as a director of an adult basic and secondary education program as well as a doctoral student, I was promoted to another position on campus. I became the supervisor of the program and of the person I hired to replace me. My dissertation in practice, with a focus on adult learner perseverance, motivation, and engagement, would have to change. Or would it?

(Transcription, Personal Journal)

The context of these continued journal thoughts provides another introduction to the setting of the current study as well as my positionality. As described in chapter one, Crossroads Adult Education serves students seventeen and older who lack a high school

credential or literacy skills. Our adult learners are not traditional students, and in my mind, I am not the traditional researcher. The program is located in a rural area of a southeastern state that is well known for agriculture and manufacturing, not necessarily for its premiere status in public education or economic power (SCDEW, 2017; SCDE, 2017). Crossroads County (a pseudonym) suffers from many repercussions of generational poverty, economic instability, and lack of educational opportunity often found in rural areas (Smiley & West, 2011). Achievement gaps, income inequality, and modest racial undertones complete the full picture of the community, its education system, and political structure (SCDE, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

The Crossroads program has three locations that serve the main population centers in the county; one is a small city, the other two are smaller towns. There are daytime and evening classes that meet at the main site on the technical college campus, and evening classes only at the two satellites on high school campuses in those areas. At the time of the study, student registration and enrollment took place once per month, with testing and orientation sessions lasting over two days. After participating in the two-day process, students can begin classes. Most classes have a face-to-face instructor, and take place in an individual classroom with small groups. However, through their testing and orientation process, students are provided with an Individual Study Plan or ISP that helps them focus on specific academic goals.

The morning classes are divided into two blocks, one for math instruction and the other for reading instruction which also includes subject areas of science and social studies. There are online instructional support venues, but most of the students enjoy access to a teacher who is physically in the room with them. This is a distinctive feature

of how our adult education program is designed. Students use study materials provided by the Crossroads program to prepare for and complete GED testing, high school diploma courses, or career-readiness assessments. The school year lasts from August until May, with a culminating graduation ceremony for students who earn their high school diploma or pass the GED in mid-May. After a short break, the program offers a summer session, during morning hours, for students who could possibly graduate or complete the program prior to the end of the fiscal year on June 30. It is in this context that I am positioning my investigation of adult learner persistence.

Adult educators across the country struggle with understanding the barriers their students encounter and how to support their specific paths to academic and personal success (Quigley, 1998; Avci, 2016). Recent data from the Crossroads Adult Education program shows that 56% of the enrollees do not persist, complete coursework, or attend class regularly (CAE, 2017). The challenge of perseverance for adult learners in our community negatively impacts our program and perpetuates many stigmas of their status as drop-outs, primarily lack of education and generational poverty. Before suggesting or implementing an intervention to impact the problem, it seemed more logical to me to find out why the problem exists in the first place. Therefore, I chose my participants intentionally in order to glean the best possible information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

The sample is purposive, and the number of participants is twelve, thirteen including the researcher. Four participants are previous students of our program who are graduates; four are currently enrolled students who have not yet graduated; and four adult education teachers provided equally relevant points of view. All participants have attended or teach classes at our primary location on the technical college campus. Each

student selected to participate was characterized as an adult secondary learner (ASE) and their goal for being in our program was to earn a GED. These students have a specific goal in mind as they engage in our program, and their selection as participants supports the continuity and alignment of the research design. Both groups, graduates and current students, had also demonstrated persistence at the time of the study, a major construct of the investigation. Placement testing through the TABE indicated each participant functioned at an entry level of 9th grade or above in at least one area, reading or math. Demographic information for the students varies and is collected during the enrollment process for the program. Current age, last grade completed, and a needs assessment are compiled for data entry into permanent program records as well. Table 3.1 shows a breakdown of initial student participant information, with much more personal data to be discussed in orientation sessions and discovered during interviews for the study. All names are pseudonyms, and greater details will be provided in the next chapter.

Table 3.1. Basic demographic data of student participants.

<i>Student</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Age*</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Last grade completed</i>	<i>NRS Reading Level</i>	<i>NRS Math Level</i>
Todd	Graduate	37	M	AA	11 th	6 (GE 11-12)	5 (GE 9-10)
Diana	Graduate	35	F	AA	11 th	6 (GE 11-12)	4 (GE 6-8)
Mya	Graduate	17	F	AA	10 th	5 (GE 9-10)	5 (GE 9-10)
Brianna	Graduate	17	F	W	10 th	5 (GE 9-10)	4 (GE 6-8)
Jen	Enrolled	33	F	W	8 th	6 (GE 11-12)	4 (GE 6-8)
David	Enrolled	22	M	AA	10 th	4 (GE 6-8)	5 (GE 9-10)
Javon	Enrolled	18	M	AA	10 th	6 (GE 11-12)	5 (GE 9-10)
LaTonya	Enrolled	18	F	AA	NA	4 (GE 6-8)	5 (GE 9-10)

**When first enrolled in the program.*

The research collaborators are the teachers, a transition specialist, a testing coordinator, and the current program director of Crossroads Adult Education. In total, there are eight teachers among the three locations, four of whom were interviewed at length as actual participants in the study. All four of the teachers are white, and three are female. They all have extensive educational experience in a variety of settings, which will be considered more closely for deliberate reasons during the next chapter. Although one teacher served as a collaborator earlier in the process, those not interviewed were simply not available at the time of data collection as that occurred during the summer session described above. The transition specialist, who functions like a guidance counselor for our adult learners, and the testing coordinator served as collaborators as well in a formative session prior to the end of the school year. Table 3.2 shows a breakdown of initial collaborator information, with much more to be provided in the data presentation. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 3.2: Staff collaborator demographic information.

<i>Staff Member</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Years of Experience</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Years with CAE</i>	<i>Participant Level</i>
Kiser	Director	25	F	W	1	Critical friend
Conner	Transition Specialist	13	F	W	13	Critical friend
Smith	Testing Coordinator	7	F	AA	7	Collaborator
McDonald	Teacher	28	F	W	6	Interviewee
Stewart	Teacher	38	F	W	4	Interviewee
Duncan	Teacher	33	F	W	5	Interviewee
Robertson	Teacher	44	M	W	2	Interviewee
Martin	Teacher	42	F	AA	11	Collaborator

The current program director joined our team the previous summer, and she knew from the time of her interview that I was the previous director and that my research study would involve her. Her positionality is definitely connected to mine, and we share many aspects of our lives and education in common. She is a cis-gender, white female with two master's degrees who is currently working on her PhD at another university. We both taught high school English and recently moved back to the area after spending time in other states. Like me, she lives and works in the community. We have different personalities and leadership styles, of course, but many of the teachers and staff members have commented on how well we complement one another and partner together for the benefit of our campus.

While a small number of participants seem to be a part of the study, gathering rich, descriptive qualitative data from twelve other people is a daunting endeavor. A purposeful sample assumes that the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight from a specific experience of the group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because the participants represent a variety of categories of stakeholders in our program, it is a sample from which the most can be learned about the specified topic of adult student persistence (Patton, 2015). Selection criteria of the students who participate was based on factors of importance in our program, particularly time or hours of attendance, exposure to staff, and achievements earned. I would not select someone for feedback who has not been around long enough to have a valid experience. Criterion-based selection of participants in a qualitative case study is definitely supported by authorities and principles in action research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

While I began this action research study in the role of program director, but I have since transitioned into the role of campus supervisor. I am well-acquainted with the program's accountability model and the state office of adult education leaders. I worked closely with our teacher participants for three years and daily with our recent graduate participants. I was the director when three of the four current student participants began their enrollment, and the other one I knew as a high school student in the career and technology program on our campus I also now lead. At the building level, I do still have routine contact with our program attendees and staff. In brief, my positionality would be an insider working with other insiders on the continuum provided by Herr and Anderson (2015). I may not be as "inside" as I once was, but all of the participants in the study are familiar and comfortable with my role as a supporter of their adult learning goals and intentions.

As stated in the first chapter, I function in the same role as a principal of any school, a position of power and authority. I can suspend or expel adults in the same way as administrators at a K-12 school. We have a student handbook, which is reviewed during orientation, and all enrollees sign a contract agreeing to adhere to our rules and consequences. The adult learners in our program are extremely cooperative for the most part, but all of them have seen me in the role of disciplinarian more than once. Incidents still occur, no matter the age of the student. The new program director and I work in concert to establish rules and processes that best enable success for everyone. She often acts as an intermediary or handles situations prior to informing me. Her role is definitely more relationship-based to the current students as I would be to those who have been

enrolled in the program for more than a year or have already graduated. In this way, some student enrollees in our program might see me as an outsider.

To the adult learner participants in the study, I believe they see me as a great advocate and supporter of their long-term success. When I first considered my positionality, I described more personal attributes and qualities as an adult education practitioner. I related to our students and tried to connect to them with our common struggles. I wanted to be a leader and mentor for them, almost imposing my position on them. However, my position and perception of leadership also caused me to reflect on how much my influence impacts their experience, the culture of our program, and my overall perspective. As my research progressed through data collection and analysis, I began questioning just how much of an impact I was having or sometimes not having. While my problem of practice is definitely about student persistence in our program, my role as the leader and how I could influence that turned inside out. I have a vested interest in the lives of our adult learners and feel empathy for their academic and social struggles. However, my empathy was formed through my experience, not through, about, or truly honoring theirs. I will reflect further on my positionality in the final chapter. As a participant researcher and school leader who hopes to equally benefit from the collaboration of practitioner inquiry with students and staff members, the overall perspective of my positionality is exclusive and very relevant to the current investigation.

Research Design

To answer the context specific research questions previously stated, an investigation based on practitioner inquiry under an action research premise provides the

best and most authentic approach (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The final product will align with a narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which offers interpretation, guidance, and recommendations to the next steps of action as well further cycles (Herr & Anderson, 2016) of the research process involving our adult basic and secondary education program. The participants in the study combine to form its intended audience: adult education students, teachers, a new program director, and the researcher who currently supervises all of them. Practitioner inquiry is the theoretical basis of the design, or for the researcher, the “why and how.” An action research model, with a narrative style, is the “what” that will showcase the results. Through the blending of inquiry, action research, and extensive data analysis, I hope to effect change in the practice of our teachers and the persistence of our adult students.

Historical review of the methodology. The approach of practitioner inquiry provides a global perspective and natural alignment for the conceptual and methodological frameworks of the current study (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009; Dana and Yendol-Hoppey 2014). Practitioner inquiry blends teacher reflection as a best practice with a systematic deep dive into pedagogy that seeks specific new knowledge and improvement (Kiss & Townsend, 2012). Theoretically based on the precepts of adult literacy advocate Paulo Freire (2005, 2017), reflective praxis of the researcher was used to engage the problem of practice, generate the research questions, and ultimately create the review of literature that contains supporting conceptual framework and other research. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2016) identify this same process in practitioner inquiry through “wonderings” and passions that trigger investigations of classroom or local dilemmas. Through the use of practitioner inquiry, the researcher and collaborators

are able to theorize and take action (Freire, 1970). The theory of andragogy, or adult learning, promoted by Malcolm Knowles (1973; 1980) supports the context of adult learning in our program as well as practitioner inquiry. Knowles provides assumptions of adult learning that seek new knowledge based on experience, relevancy, and self-direction (1973; 1980). Practitioner inquiry unites long-standing research with contemporary protocol. In the end, educators and students benefit.

Subsequent motivational and instructional models also provide constructs that direct the inquiry with a purpose (Puroway, 2016; Johnson, Duckworth, Apelbaum, & McNamara, 2010; Espitia, 2010). Themes found in the literature, including student personalities, teacher perceptions and instructional strategies, mentoring, and goal setting (Davis, 2012; Capps, 2012; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Mellard, Krieschok, Fall, & Woods, 2012), support a dispositional, personal approach to adult basic education rather than a systematic one (Avci, 2016; Quigley, 2012). Practitioner inquiry correlated with adult learning theory and motivational frameworks can culminate in inquiry as a stance, or practitioner guiding perspective, for all participants. The experiences of adult basic education students and practitioners must intersect to address the problem of practice that is adult learner persistence. While the researcher has shared a magnitude of supporting literature, the participants in the current study will ultimately inform its design as well as the data to be analyzed through their “deep funds of knowledge” directing the inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Specific research design for the study. Practitioner inquiry can be specific to content, curriculum, pedagogy, strategy, beliefs, identity, social justice, or even one specific context and child (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The current problem of

practice troubling our adult basic education program staff is reflected in more than one of these passions. Adult learner persistence connects pedagogy, strategies, beliefs, and social justice. I believe that addressing the problem in each of these strands will provide the greatest support for both students and teachers. Collaboration with others in this setting will take on the model of inquiry support, which includes a close relationship between the researcher, the current program director, and the staff (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Inquiry practitioners can draw inspiration and data from a wide variety of sources and participants within their context (Hinchey, 2010), which pairs naturally with the format and style of a narrative case study for presentation and sharing.

A qualitative, narrative research study seeks meaning and understanding, calls for the researcher to be the primary instrument of data collection, arrives at conclusions through an inductive process, and creates a product that is richly descriptive in details (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry allows for stories and experiences of participants to be told through their lens and voice, using both words and thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) explain that while quantitative research analysis often results in “number-crunching,” qualitative research centers around “story-telling” (p. 167). Investigating and creating a narrative of our program will allow for an examination of our students, teachers, and processes that promote motivation, engagement, and persistence.

The context of our program is difficult to separate from the phenomenon of attending it, so a singular case study would permit the parameters for this deep dive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Not all adults who seek to complete their secondary education, in order to impact their future economic prospects or achieve further academic

goals, enroll in organized adult basic and secondary education programs. However, the impact of these programs must be considered in the larger economic, social, and political world. Our program is a unique situation in that the context includes a rural location, a poverty-stricken area, and a small population of students and teachers. The implications for adult students both in and outside of our program, however, cannot be underestimated.

A narrative inquiry investigating experiences in our program will also provide a vital venue for the participatory, thematic research approach advocated by sources of the theoretical framework, both Knowles (1973) and Freire (2000). Here, research and action can become a single process (Herr and Anderson, 2015). Further, the collaborative roles of inquiry of the researcher and the participants are viewed as equal when producing the critical knowledge for the social change needed by our disadvantaged and often marginalized students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The researcher and the participants will work in concert to create the basis of inquiry, interviews, and even data analysis. Student participants will examine their roles in the learning process; teachers and the new director will investigate their own perspectives with the researcher and also instigate more avenues of inquiry with the students. Once the initial data and words of participants are analyzed, the action research framework of the inquiry will provide for immediate applications, proposed strategies, new processes, and further research cycles (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Action research and practitioner inquiry are indistinguishable with these aspects. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) prefer the term inquiry only because there is less “baggage” attached to it for practicing classroom teachers. Research is a loaded term and

can be intimidating or antithetical to the process available. Action research is described as constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Efron and Ravid (2013) attempt to be as inclusive as possible when allowing for action research questions to “arise from events, problems, or professional interests that educators deem important” (p. 4). The blending of practitioner inquiry and action research in the current study supports the goals to improve or impact the problem from within, not from an outside influence or intervention. The process most clearly and effectively involves those closest to issue (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Action research also seeks to engage participants in some element of practical problem-solving (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The practical problem solving is captured in a circular six-step process proposed by Efron and Ravid (2013): Identifying a problem; gathering background information; designing a study; collecting data; analyzing and interpreting data; implementing and sharing the findings (p. 8). The most commonly used action research designs incorporate an intervention that the researcher hopes will create an impact or improve student learning (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Practitioner inquiry allows for the impact to be discovered from the participants, in this case the students and teachers. My research study will lie in the crossover; an inquiry that effects change. As it evolves into a stance, practitioner inquiry becomes a grounded theory of action that is transformative, organic, and democratic (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). By analyzing teacher and student experiences, I hope to build on the positive aspects of our adult learning program and address concerns that ultimately affect the persistence of all students enrolled in Crossroads County Adult Education. Each of these approaches

and the components of the study that connect them together is illustrated below through Figure 3.1.

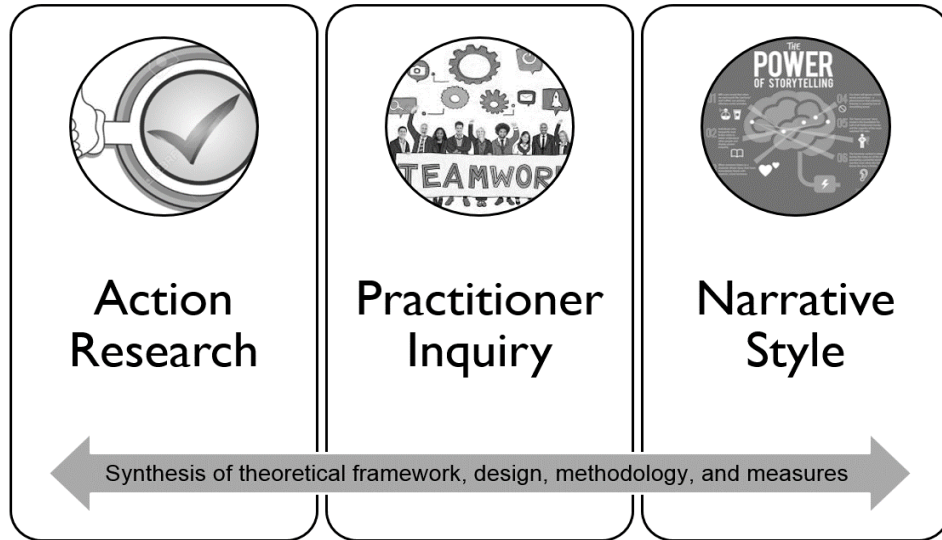


Figure 3.1: Connecting the Components: action research, practitioner inquiry, and narrative style.

Data Collection Measures, Instruments, and Tools

Collecting data in qualitative research is a bountiful exercise, particularly when participating in multiple practitioner inquiry. Experience of a phenomenon such as success in adult basic education or a lack of persistence in doing so can produce a myriad of quotes, descriptions, and behaviors that can be documented. The stories that emerge are both powerful and purposeful (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The diligent researcher must combine asking, watching, and reviewing into a study that seeks to understand these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). No one teaches or inquires in a vacuum (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

In the current inquiry, a variety of data sources were utilized to examine all aspects of our student and teacher experiences. Narrative inquiry research relies on story-

telling and human experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Numerous examples of qualitative studies found in the literature follow a similar presentation of methods and data (Davis, 2014; Espitia, 2011; Spivey, 2016; Idoko, 2018). Categories of participants will be used as both data sources and tools, beginning with semi-structured interviews. Interviews of students and teachers will be the primary data source, especially under the constructs of student motivation, engagement, and persistence or barriers to any of those three. Patton explains that the purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter into another person's perspective (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). Even the distinct language used by others to relates their perspective and heavily influences data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Conversations are intentional and present that perspective in the individual's own words (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

With a practitioner inquiry process, interviewing is used to gain insights and capture what participants are thinking about their learning. It is a cognitive process (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). At the same time, the inquiries of practitioners can systematically document their own inside perspective on questions, interpretative frameworks, changes in views over time, dilemmas, and recurring themes. The awareness of the researcher in combination with the dialogic nature of interviewing can provide the most authentic, valid interpretations later in the inquiry (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Teacher and student interviews are the most appropriate method for examining the current problem of practice as it connects directly to their experiences, insights, and dilemmas.

Participant interviews took place on our campus or another designated location, were audio-recorded, both during class time and after program hours. Interviews were

semi-structured, with a list of questions in hand to be explored and enough flexibility to follow-up natural and organic topics. After collaboration with teachers and the current program director, the final interview questions for both groups can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B. A semi-structured format allowed me “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111).

The teacher interviews were a combination of a focus group and one-on-one interviews. Topics that were discussed, with formal questions designed by the researcher and current director, were based on the specific research questions and the theoretical frameworks of adult learning. Other topics that were naturally generated by a group of educators discussing their practice were included as well. The process to create the student questions was facilitated as a focus group with the teacher participants as a collaborative pre-inquiry protocol. Using peer review as the essential strategy for creating the instruments supports their credibility and the importance of the collaborative inquiry process (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

Additional sources of data included my own notes and observations during the interviews; assessment scores and attendance data for students; my researcher’s journal. Field notes and observations capture the action of the inquiry process and what is happening without commentary (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Although the focus of the investigation is not instructional strategies or day-to-day interactions, noting the actions of participants as they observably occur may provide a valuable record leading to future insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Assessments and attendance information of the student participants will be included as demographic data and reported only as needed

or where appropriate to demonstrate themes in the data analysis. These themes will build the basis of the next cycle of inquiry, culminating in recommendations for practice by all participants.

Research Procedure

With multiple data sources and methods of collection planned for the current study, an organized and documented process was crucial. Action research is primarily about transferability of results; it desires to be replicated or duplicated in a cycle by the researcher or others interested in a similar framework (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Practitioner inquiry is practically useless to those who seek to benefit from an organic investigation if it is not methodical and logical. A systematic process is key to the sense making processes that clarify what the researcher has learned (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016). However, action research and practitioner inquiry are also situational (Efron & Ravid, 2013), responsive, reflective, and iterative (Herr and Anderson, 2015; Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). A researcher who uses these models does so with an acceptance that plans change, evolve, and grow during the process (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). The procedure I used was reflective of both action research and practitioner inquiry because it evolved over time and is difficult to relate in perfect order. In the section that follows, I describe, provide support of, and narrate the blending of these two approaches. Portions were interdependent and cyclical, but once the data was collected, the analysis brought everything together and into perspective.

Beginning with participant personal information, I took all precautions to protect the identities of participants. Informed consents of participation were given prior to any

active investigation measures. As indicated in the previous section, interviewing was the primary strategy employed for gathering data on participant experiences. Even if they are semi-structured and with someone familiar, interviews cannot happen without a list of guiding questions. While I have supported question topics with relevant literature, actual questions were designed in small group meeting with other collaborators. Teacher participants, the transition specialist, the testing coordinator, the new director and I met in a small group session in order to write the actual questions for the students. Dana and Yendol Hoppey (2014) identify this as “inquiry support” because this group would serve as critical friends. Ravitch (2014) finds critical examination of experiences with our colleagues to be one of the defining measures of practitioner inquiry as it frames both professional development and systematic change. Herr and Anderson (2015) view this level of participation and inductive process as a legacy of Freire. Since I knew that I was early in my data collection plan, I knew I had to do something to initiate that collaboration and create the climate of applying my theoretical frameworks to the process.

We were able to meet one afternoon after the students had left for the day. In a sense, it was a “pilot-activity” for what I hoped would be future collaborative meetings and inquiry protocols. Using a Google Doc and a SmartBoard, I facilitated a discussion around the question topics presented above. I briefly explained an overview of my study and the iterations it had been through over the last year. In the beginning, I had planned an intervention designed around the ideas of a formalized mentoring and advising process to be implemented in the program. When my role changed, an intervention seemed less important and feasible. In my conversations with the new director as well as my

dissertation advisor, we thought it would be more impactful to research the “why” of the problem of adult student persistence rather than the “how” to fix it. When presented with the possible design of practitioner inquiry, it was a perfect fit for our context. Getting feedback on the actual interview questions from the adult education staff was the first group collaborative effort of the process.

Once my overview was completed, I posed an intentional focus question: Is there another term that I can use to describe students who finish our program and those who drop-out? We settled on completer and non-completer, but it was also suggested that I use terms like student graduate, career student, and transient student to describe our participants. These terms will be explored further in data analysis if they arise again. The results of our collaborative session are included in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Summary of the pre-inquiry collaboration session with teachers.

<i>Question topics with students</i>	<i>My Proposed Questions</i>	<i>Student Questions Generated by Adult Education Teachers</i>
previous school experiences and reasons for enrollment in our program	Tell me about your previous school experiences...what do you think brought you to our adult education program?	Where are you coming from? What have been your positive school experiences? What about negative? (sharing positive first gets them comfortable) Why have you enrolled in adult education?
academic confidence	How would you rate your personal academic confidence, commitment,	What do you like most about school? Least? Favorite subject? How

	and performance? Why do you feel this way?	would you describe yourself as a student?
life outside of the program, including external and internal barriers	Describe your life outside of our program...who is in your family, who have been your role models, what is life like at home and (if you) work?	Tell me about your situation...living or life at home...employment...what do you think got in the way of completing your education?
relationships and available support systems	Who do you feel is most supportive of you in life? What about in the area of your education?	Who are your important people or groups or organizations in your life? How will they help you or guide you while you are enrolled in our program? What are other services you receive that support you and your educational goals?
current or recent experiences in our program; processes (or strategies) we have in place that impact or impacted their motivation and engagement	What have we done in our program with you that you feel is supportive or not supportive of your success? Do you think assumptions about you have been made by staff members? Why do you feel this way?	What was your expectation of an adult ed program vs what it is really like? What have been some positive experiences or successful strategies you have learned being in our program? What do you think has been good/bad?
growth or deficit mindsets, dispositions or personalities	How would you describe yourself, your personality and outlook on life?	Tell me about a time you set a goal and achieved it. What kinds of goals have you set for yourself in our program?

In concluding our session, a discussion ensued about the problems of students coming to our program with regular school mindset and how difficult it is for students to overcome their previous habits or perceptions of what school is. “It can often defeat them before they even start with us,” stated one staff member. “Our students struggle with independent learning versus teacher driven or guided learning,” another continued. These insights reflect the precepts of adult learning, or andragogy, as opposed to learning in K-12 under a structured pedagogy.

Already, I could see the effects of multiple perspectives as the discussion with the teachers revealed some of their major concerns. One teacher asked if I would be assuring the students that it would be safe to be honest. They, too, fear that the students will only say what they think I want to hear. There was also evidence of a distinct separation between the teachers and the students as they see it. Once I read over the questions the teachers came up with, the bias became obvious. I’ve always known it was there, and I will be honest that I included the question about assumptions myself. Although it is correct that adult basic and secondary education is very different from a regular school setting, the teacher comments and questions focused primarily on how the adjusted behavior should mainly come from the students.

However, they were very open to me asking the students about student opinions and experiences in our program. As a researcher, I was highly intrigued by the paradox, and include its description here to show the metacognitive and inquiry process that led to the final interview questions included in Appendix A. The questions for the teacher interviews, included in Appendix B were designed with the current director, after the

earlier process yielded the student questions. We were definitely influenced by what we witnessed during the teacher meeting. By the time I finished analyzing all of the participant data, the divide between student and teacher perceptions of their shared experience became one of my most distinct findings.

As school was ending for the semester soon and the odd timing of my doctoral program dissertation support classes panned out, I decided that the best opportunity to collect data would be during the upcoming summer session, a one-month, consecutive four week targeted especially for adult students who were close to completion. These students could personify perseverance almost as much as the graduates I would also locate and interview in the same time frame. The teachers I interviewed were also instructors during the regular school year, so summer session was more like an extended school year and provided no unusual variables to the context of the study. The interviews occurred in random order, as they would be isolated for transcription and then combined during analysis. Currently enrolled student and teacher interviews took place on our campus, in a private classroom and were audio-recorded using an iPad. Notes were jotted down in my journal as needed. The graduate interviews took place as I could arrange them; two of them were over the phone; one took place in my office on campus; and a final one had to happen at the graduate's workplace.

While I had initially intended for an app on the iPad to transcribe the interviews for me, that did not work out as planned. I personally listened to and transcribed each interview as the app was frequently unable to discern distinct voices or find the correct words the participants were actually using. Order of the interviews was not relevant to the procedure. In other words, a graduate student and current student were interviewed

back-to-back; each interview was considered stand-alone until data analysis began. By the time I arranged and facilitated twelve interviews, the month of June and the summer session passed quickly. Transcribing the interviews during the month of July meant that sharing a Google document would be crucial for the process of member-checking.

The overall procedure was designed to include multiple perspectives over a six to eight week process of collection and transcription. During the interview process, I found myself alternately writing in my journal or meeting with the current program director to discuss an insight. As I listened to the participants tell their stories, both live and through the recordings, I became even more intimately acquainted with their needs as adult learners and instructors. The transcription process was evocative of emotion and provocative of inquiry. I had to resist the urge to problem-solve prior to coding and true data analysis, but many of my initial impressions were unmistakable. As nearly all of the data would be words of the participants, I had to guard against assumptions and fatigue because it is most important in qualitative study for the researcher to practice accuracy and fidelity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Analysis of Data

As a large part of the data collected was qualitative, a triangulation method was used to reinforce trustworthiness of the interpretations (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Three groups of participants provided multiple perspectives, and my researcher's journal or notes provided a separate source of data on which to confirm credibility of interpretations (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Efron & Ravid, 2013). A practice of member-checking and peer review through inquiry was implemented over the course of the study to ensure that

participant experiences were fully reflected and credibility received unfiltered feedback (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Thick, rich description will again be demonstrated in study findings, using the words and stories of the student and staff participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Creswell and Miller (2000) recommend that qualitative researchers utilize a “lens framework” in order to apply the best validity procedure. To reflect the lens of the researcher, triangulation and researcher reflexivity will be used. To reflect the lens of the participants, member-checking and collaboration will be employed. To reflect the lens of people external to the study, rich description and peer debriefing are endorsed. Each of these data analysis methods and validity processes will find a place in the current study. The process of inquiry and sense making through data analysis yields essential professional and personal transformation (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016).

A system of open coding that evolved into analytical coding through the constant comparative method was implemented to develop themes in interview responses and the researcher’s journal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coding requires constantly comparing and contrasting strands of data; Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2016) recommend cutting it apart into distinctive categories and organizing units. It is both a creative and comprehensive process. Schwandt’s definition states that the procedure breaks down the data into manageable segments and then identifies or names them (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016). Again, the inductive process harkens Freire (Herr and Anderson, 2015) and the methods ascribed to him by Elias (1975). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend a simultaneous process of data collection and data analysis as the preferred

method for qualitative research; in the current study, reflective conversations with a critical friend, the current program director, produced that simultaneous action.

During review of responses, I identified categories through repeated wording, a representation from the research questions, or a framework from the literature.

Congruent with qualitative and inquiry approaches, the researcher maintained lists and organizing units to enable recognition of categories and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016). Ultimately, I created a matrix for the student interviews, displaying the patterns of the responses from the graduates and current students separately. The three-cycles of inquiry began to take shape when I realized that my interview groups each needed their own analysis, and I could directly connect them to my theoretical framework in both method and application.

As I lived through the teacher interviews more than once by transcribing them myself, the data began to tell me to look at this group in a way that would connect it to our practice and adult learning even more explicitly. If the teachers in Crossroads Adult Education were true adult learning practitioners, then I should see evidence of that in their responses during our interviews. The theoretical frameworks from Knowles and Freire provided the most obvious way for me to do just that. The awkward timing of data collection being in the summer limited my ability to lead the teachers in a practitioner inquiry of their own, so I felt compelled to do the next best thing. I led my own inquiry into their practice, using the primary sources and acknowledged experts of adult learning theory (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). I used their experience in a deductive process, similar to what I understood of the work of Knowles (1973; 1980b) and how he arrived at his assumptions (Merriam, 2001; Herod, 2012). I sought to make sense of the

knowledge, meaning of the text, and connections or conclusions that would impact the participants through an in-depth process of inquiry advocated by research, frameworks, and other literature (Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016; Katz & Dack, 2016).

Summary

Undoubtedly, the work of practitioner inquiry and action research is thorough. While a specific intervention was ultimately not proposed and subsequently analyzed for impact in the present study, leading our student and teacher participants “through” this inquiry can transform their experience in our adult education program. Although mine was the greater responsibility, student and teacher participants will be affected by their participation and ownership of the process. The qualitative design of the study is indicative of the importance of people, not just numbers, in our program. The detailed procedure outlines the collaborative approach of the interviews, and the analysis of data will be a discovery of consistent themes and a few new, unexpected ones. Practitioner inquiry that indicates a cycle of improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016) is priceless in an adult learning context that seems dependent upon the motivation, engagement, and persistence of its students. All stakeholders represented as participants in the collection of data have voice and opportunity to respond to their experience, both systematically and naturally. With participant interviews compiling the largest component of data, their words created the path of the inquiry.

Student persistence is almost the exclusive problem of practice for adult educators; literacy, career pathways, and post-secondary opportunities cannot happen if

adult learners chose not to complete or continue. This action research study considers adult learner perseverance in a very specific and personal context. The qualitative, narrative inquiry examines the experiences of students and teachers in a basic and secondary education program that serves adult learners ages seventeen and older in a rural community in the Southeastern United States. In particular, I sought to understand the various motivations of our adult students and investigate ways that they do or do not feel engaged with teachers and in the program. I listened to their stories and attempted to retell them by making sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In the process, I examined my own experience as a leader of the program and its chief practitioner (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016). Patton (2015) identifies this as the use of hermeneutic philosophy to interpret text and place it biographical, historical, or cultural experience; it emphasizes interpretation and context. Through in-depth interviews guided by practitioner inquiry, I was able to elicit responses that shared life events and turning points for our students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with the model of Freire (Elias, 1975) in my mind. With teachers, I sought their insights into practice and experiences (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016) with adult learners as I saw in my research on Knowles (1973; 1980b). In the next chapter, I will present the data and major findings through a narrative analysis of the cycles of inquiry led by theoretical framework. Getting through the process of action research in this study echoes the words of Robert Frost, “The best way out is always through.”

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

“The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.” --Thomas Edison

Students who enroll in adult basic education or secondary credential programs are undoubtedly seeking a solution to a problem they have often struggled to identify on their own. The first step of solving the problem, actually walking in the door of an adult education center or school, is the most daunting and courageous. Most who do so want help, want a better life, and want the respect that comes with finally earning their secondary diploma. Having the follow-through, the grit, and the persistence to stay around illustrates the problem of practice of this action research. Enrolling in adult education is actually a student-driven intervention; it is what happens in the aftermath that is the focus of this study. The purpose of this narrative (practitioner) inquiry has been to examine the experiences of adult basic and secondary education students and teachers in order to better understand the lack of perseverance demonstrated by those who walk away from the program and the persistence of those who stay. The conceptual framework provided for three cycles of inquiry, applying action research and the constructivist theoretical frameworks of Knowles’ andragogy (1973; 1980b) as well as Freire’s critical pedagogy and praxis (2000; 2017). The specific research questions are:

1. What barriers have our students faced in their previous learning experiences, what challenges are they currently facing, and have they overcome those obstacles in our program?
2. Why are certain adult students in our basic or secondary education program more persistent and successful than others?

In the following chapter, data from each cycle of inquiry will be presented in the form of rich narration, including extensive participant profiles, meaningful quotes, and a summary of interpretations for each participant group. The primary data collection strategy used was semi-structured interviews, conducted during the four week adult education summer school program for current student enrollees and teachers. Graduates were interviewed on their own time, but during the same time period of June and July. While the data were assembled together in categories for the purpose of analysis, participants were interviewed in no significant order. Two strategies were also employed by the researcher to validate the cycles: collaboration with a critical friend and a researcher's journal. During the interview process, my relationship with the current director of Crossroads Adult Education (pseudonym) became an integral part of processing information and formative data analysis. During the transcription and summative data analysis phases, the researcher's journal became a haven of notes, insights, and even late at night awakenings. Formative and summative data analysis in practitioner inquiry are recommended, and it is not unusual for a researcher to include both (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

Consistent with narrative inquiry analysis described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as well as Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014), the data presentation will be through the stories of the participants. Detailed narration gleaned through participant interview responses will provide the connections to the problem of practice, the research questions, and the theoretical frameworks. The organization of the chapter consists of the data presentation and interpretation, followed by an explanation of general findings based on themes drawn from the literature and participant data. A specific analysis of the data grounded in the research questions is examined through the lens of both teachers and students. The researcher's positionality and leadership lens are also considered.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

Practitioner inquiry is heralded for the possibilities it offers for illumination and empowerment of professionals in their local setting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ravitch, 2014). The stories, the data, and the evidence that emerge from a relational, contextual, and collaborative effort provide hope for serious educational change (Ravitch, 2014). To have completed the current inquiry under that description warrants the closest examination of participant interviews that can yield substantive conclusions. Three cycles of inquiry were conducted during the study and data analysis phases, using student interview responses for the initial two and teacher interview responses for the final one. The student interviews were separated into two separate cycles, graduates and currently-enrolled students, as supported by the original research questions. The use of the constant-comparative method to analyze the first two cycles began as open theme coding also based on the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recognizing smaller categories or characterizations through an emerging process is the hallmark of the

inductive reasoning promoted by Glaser and Straus (Fram, 2013). As an iterative process, it matches the frameworks of practitioner inquiry and action research as well as the theoretical foundations of Knowles (1973) and Freire (2000).

While I began with coding the interview transcripts on paper with colored ink pens, I eventually created a visual comparison matrix (see Appendices C and D) to help myself see similarities, differences, gaps, and categories that emerged from conversations. The participants in these two cycles are highlighted below, with a summary of each cycle included for understanding.

Inquiry Cycle I: Graduates. Four recent graduates of the Crossroads program were selected for participation based on their access to the researcher and known availability, one African-American male, two African-American females, and one white female. Semi-structured interviews were recorded using an iPad, with questions formulated through collaboration with teachers and the current program director (see Appendix A). Some of this data was generated well before the study began, culled from school level processes that welcome and follow up on student demographic information.

Todd. Todd is a 37-year-old African-American male who joined our program after a serious car accident forced him to take medical leave from his job. Once the injuries were manageable enough for him to handle driving and walking for long periods, Todd decided to make the most of his time off and return to school to earn his GED. Todd dropped out of high school at age 17, and faced other barriers with his mother's drug addiction, moving around a lot, and extreme poverty. He explains that he always,

“felt self-conscious going to school with other kids who had all the supplies and best clothes, and I was struggling to fit in.” Eventually, he lost interest in school.

Being motivated to be an example for his own children, and to be able to provide them, is another reason Todd returned to complete his education. Todd credits his family as his inspiration and support network. He also credits the hands-on teaching at Crossroads Adult Education as a major factor in his success. “Once I found out that you have teachers that show you exactly what you need to know and take every avenue in trying to show you where it is and how to find it, that played a big part in thinking I could do this,” says Todd. He repeated the words hands-on at least four times through the course of the interview. Other aspects of his program experience that Todd felt like worked well for him were the smaller class sizes and being able to switch to a night-time class schedule when he needed to return to work.

Additionally, Todd was also a fan of the relevant results of his placement testing. He was relieved that he “didn’t have to start from the bottom and work his way up.” His positive outlook was reflective in the role he assumed with other, younger students in the program. He recalls talking to them about being him in twenty years, and that his persistence now is a matter of swallowing his pride. He mentions his personal faith and how he had to stop comparing himself to others. Todd’s growth mindset is most evident in his statement, “It gets hard, nobody said it was going to be perfect. At times when you don’t think you can make it, it’s already made, and you just got to go through it. It’s just a journey.” His future plans include climbing the ladder at his current job, now that he has the credential, and hopefully returning to school to earn an associate’s degree.

Diana. Diana is a 35-year-old African-American female whose decision to return to school was motivated by wanting to better herself and overcome a situation in which she just felt “stuck.” She had been working as a CNA at a nursing home and knew she had to start somewhere to earn her high school diploma to move on or up in the medical field. Diana dropped out of school at age 17, after the death of her mother left her and her brother essentially homeless. They moved with an aunt, but Diana didn’t like leaving her school, and she admits to becoming rebellious. High school had not been bad for her, but she struggled with large class sizes and limited individual attention from busy teachers. “You either caught on to it or you didn’t, and a lot of times, I didn’t, especially when it came to math,” says Diana. Not returning to school for another seventeen years left Diana with significant gaps and a lack of confidence in her academics.

Once Diana made the decision to enroll in adult education, she says it was, “the best experience of her life.” Diana explains that she felt welcome from day one, and it “felt like family surrounding me from the first day.” She appreciated that the teachers were able to give her one-on-one time, and they made her feel like she mattered. The environment of the adult education program, the teachers who she said supported her, and Diana’s determination were a combination for great success. She invokes her late mother when describing her own motivation, “My mama always told me that you can’t expect things to just fall in your lap. You want it, you have to work for it.” Diana continued to work for it, and recalls a time during her GED process that she came in to take a test when she was very sick. That day helped her realize that even on her worst day, if she put her mind to it, she could do it. Her growth mindset accepts that things are going to be

hard, but she says that you have to be determined and “want to learn” to be successful in (adult) education. She repeats those words three times during her interview.

Diana has carried her persistent spirit on to college with her as she is currently enrolled in the local technical college’s allied health program, and she starts nursing classes this year. She made the Dean’s list her first semester, earned an additional scholarship, and says more than once that she would not have gotten as far as she has without the teachers and the Crossroads program. Her kids also continue to support and inspire her. When asked if she felt like her own life would have been different had her mom not passed away when she was so young, Diana agreed, but she added that she used that as an excuse for too long. Her own high expectations have been reignited.

Brianna. Brianna is 19 years old and surprisingly completed her GED a little over two years ago. She left high school on her 17th birthday and immediately enrolled in adult education. Although her high school experience was not the greatest or longest, she did not skip a beat when joining our program. “High school wasn’t really for me, the kids were very immature,” she says. Brianna faced repeating her entire sophomore year, so the decision to leave was one she awaited until she could legally leave school and not get her mother in trouble. Her parents had been divorced for nine years, and moving around with her coaching step-father had taken a toll on their relationship as well as Brianna’s interest in school. Her earlier struggles to study, find success, and make lasting friendships seemed to fade away during the six short months of her participation in adult education.

While Brianna recalls the teachers trying their hardest to make sure she stayed motivated, she emphasizes student recognition and her relationships with other students as equally important to her success. Progress monitoring sheets and awards programs allowed her to compete with herself. Her growth mindset was supported by the ability to retest when things did not go well on a practice test or section final exam. In high school, she remembers test anxiety despite trying to study and feel prepared for tests. “But on the GED test, I knew I could retake it, so it didn’t freak me out as much...takes the pressure off, for sure.” In reality, Brianna only had to retake one test, and it was her last one. The fact that she did not give up then is something she is proud of and things shows her persistence.

Immediately after graduation, Brianna enrolled in Cosmetology school to fulfill a childhood dream. She thinks she may have moved too fast and not explored enough options, because she quickly figured out that a long-term career in Cosmetology was “not for me.” Brianna is currently working full time, with plans to return to school to pursue nursing or dental hygiene. “I thought adult education was going to be way worse than what it was, and some of the people were a little scary until you got to know them. All of y’all, and even my family was behind me, and it helped me a lot.”

Mya. Mya is a 20-year old African-American female whose tough life circumstances have not dimmed her positive outlook. Currently, Mya and her three year-old live in foster care at a group home for teenage mothers. She grew up with her grandmother, she did not meet her mother until she was 18, and she has never known her father. When her grandmother found out she was pregnant, Mya was told to have an abortion and kicked out of the house.

After living briefly with relatives in another state, Mya returned home only to have a violent confrontation with her grandmother that landed her in the hospital. She was not allowed to return to her grandmother's custody, so her aunt and uncle dropped her off at DSS. She now lives at New Century Family Center, a group home for teen mothers in the foster-care system, where she feels supported and has found more than one role model and caring house-mom.

“I would say during the time I was getting my GED, I had this one house mother, her name was Miss Rita, and she pushed me to my hardest. She was also a teacher herself, so like when I left school, I would go back to school with her because she's a teacher. If I had any issues or problems or things I couldn't figure out, she was there. Even if she wasn't working that day, I could call her and do like a video chat with her. I would say how do I solve this or what do I do about this, and so I would say she was a very positive role model and very helpful.”

Because of Mya's pregnancy and subsequent moves, she lost almost an entire school year. When she returned to high school full time, she felt socially accepted but academics were a struggle. Large, noisy classrooms left her feeling out of place; Mya wanted to find somewhere she could learn at her own pace. “I wanted somebody to teach me better than the way I was getting taught at my high school,” explains Mya. She met with some immediate success when enrolling in Crossroads Adult Education, earning her work-ready credential and quickly moving up to GED fast-track classes within a few weeks. She found the teachers to be encouraging, and they would not let her give up when she eventually hit speedbumps in her journey. Something else that kept her motivated were the recognition programs that teachers and staff of the adult education

program would coordinate for students every month. She says she always looked forward to those programs, and she thought other students did as well. “I feel like y’all doing that made people, or I felt like, it made people want to work harder so they can all get an award...I was there for like yeah, I’m getting an award, I’m getting recognized for my achievement.”

Mya is currently enrolled at the local technical college, planning to earn her associate’s degree in business management. She starts her second year this fall. Ultimately, she wants to own her own cosmetology studio. With the help of DSS, she will be able to attend cosmetology school as well and earn her license. The program at her group home provides child care for her daughter while she is in school and when she is working part-time. Mya thinks that during her time in adult education she learned that, “Not everybody is out to get you. I learned that there are still some nice people in this world.” Her perspective on life was changed by attending the program and since she graduated. “I learned that sometimes it’s good to open up, and that’s not good to keep everything in. Because if you do, it never ends well,” Mya says. She also advises others to find that one person, “that one person that no matter what you say or what you do, they got your back...they are still in your corner. Y’all have a lot of those in adult education.”

Inquiry Cycle I: Summary. Although semi-structured, the format of the graduate interviews yielded a natural order to the conversations and the narration of their context. I asked questions about their previous school experiences, which led to revelations of home-life and other external barriers to their success. I asked questions about their experiences in our adult education program, and they were able to indicate both instructional and motivational strategies that they believed helped them overcome

those barriers in our program. Finally, we focused on future goals, which helped the graduates to consider their own persistence in the adult education program as well as their commitment to doing more with their education.

Among the four graduates, all of them reported barriers in their home life with Todd, Diana, and Mya facing major disruptions in living and economic situations. From divorce to drug use and even death of a parent, all four graduates lived through significant trauma or adverse childhood experiences. Their previous school experiences also indicated struggle, whether it was not fitting in like Todd or Brianna or they “just got left behind” in large classes with over-worked teachers as expressed by Diana and Mya.

The experiences in adult education described by the graduates were constructive. The teachers, atmosphere, and impact of their time were brought up by each graduate in some way. All four participants recognized the teachers in the program for their support and helpful attitudes. The two older graduates, Todd and Diana, emphasized their relationships with the teachers as being key to their grit and perseverance. Their commitment to finishing the program seem to come from a place inside them, drawn from more life experience and wanting better for themselves and their families. Brianna and Mya cited motivational strategies used by the staff members of the program that were meaningful to them as well as family members or other close supporters who were their important relationships. Since they are finished with the program, the graduates offer unique perspectives on their success. Three of them have continued their education with post-secondary opportunities, and the fourth one is considering his options to return to school. With reflection, they could see turning points and significant events that inspired

them. The hard times, the previous failures, and the sometimes painful growth experiences were all worth it.

Inquiry Cycle II: Currently Enrolled Students. Four students were selected for participation in the study based on their enrollment in a selective summer program offered by Crossroads Adult Education that coincided with the timing of the data collection process. Students who were invited to attend the four-week targeted session must be close to graduating and have demonstrated commitment to school during the previous year. Access to the students was relatively easy as my office and career center program are located in the same building. I also chose them purposively because they all knew me as their program leader at one point in time. While my direct role in their educational program changed during the course of the current study, the participants were familiar enough with me to trust me or not treat me as an outsider. My positionality remained ever present in my mind during our interviews. Two African-American males, David and Javon, one Jamaican female, Latonya, and one white female, Jenn, were interviewed through a semi-structured format. The face-to-face meetings were recorded using an iPad, with questions formulated through collaboration with teachers and the current program director (see Appendix A).

Jenn. At 33, Jenn is the oldest of the current-student participants and has been enrolled in Crossroads Adult Education the longest. She has been attending the program on and off for five years. She has only one section of the GED test to complete before earning her diploma and considers it her nemesis. Math is the subject that Jenn has “struggled with my entire life,” she says. Because of “bad experiences with some very burned out teachers,” Jenn thinks she never got the foundation in math she needed. She

does not know if she became afraid of math or if she might have an undiagnosed learning disability. She also reports strong test anxiety, regardless of the subject area. “A goal is not to be afraid of taking any tests. That’s a lot of my fear actually.” She has taken the math section of the GED test four times, often missing the passing score by five points or less. Jenn says, “It would be so easy for me to become discouraged and give up, but I have many reasons for not doing it.”

Jenn describes the high school she would have attended as the “most horrific school ever.” It was combination middle-high school, common in rural parts of our state. Jenn never made it to high school; she dropped out before entering 9th grade at only 15 years old. Her earlier school experiences were in a private school setting, but her family felt she needed more support so they moved her to public school in 4th or 5th grade. Jenn does not see where that extra help ever happened, and by 8th grade, she was struggling more academically than ever before. Her parents were also split-up, her mom was out of the picture, and her dad was struggling financially to support the two of them.

Jenn reached out to guidance counselors at her school, but the only option she says they presented her was a program called “job core.” She had heard horror stories about Job Core, and feeling like she had no options, Jenn said she just gave up. She started focusing on working, making money, and having a decent place to live. “I was not in trouble or pregnant...I was just not focused on school,” she told me. It was important to her for me to know she wasn’t what people normally pictured for a “drop-out.” Although she did not finish high school, she was eventually able to earn her CNA (Certified Nursing Aide) certification through a program with DSS that did not require

her high school diploma to enroll. She became a home-health provider and also an expert dog-groomer. Jenn admits to being in survival mode for years.

When she finally gathered her courage to return to school at 28, Jenn says she was blown away by the difference at Crossroads Adult Education and still remains so today. She describes the teachers as more professional and compassionate than any she has ever been around. “If I had had opportunities like adult education when I was younger, my outcome would have been drastically different,” explained Jenn. Strategies used by our program that Jenn cites as encouraging her persistence focus on her as a learner. She has been able to work with teachers whose style appealed to how she learns best, and she could switch if something was not working for her. She admits to becoming frustrated with the process at times, and she is disappointed with herself that she is still trying to pass math. Being able to take one test at a time and retaking tests if needed helped her peace of mind. More than anything, though, she emphasized that the teachers inspire her. Some of them have “had the same struggles,” so Jenn feels safe and supported.

David. David is 22 and has been a student with Crossroads Adult Education for over three years. While it seems like a long time to be working on a GED, David admits that the first two years he was not serious and a lack of progress was his own fault. He seemed to be doomed to repeat a cycle of “giving up easily and changing schools instead of changing myself.” David attended his home high school for only a year when he transferred to the local charter high school. He says his pattern was to do well initially, but then he would start following the crowd or getting aggravated with teachers because he couldn’t keep up. The charter high school provided smaller class sizes, but any success there was short-lived.

When he was supposed to be in 11th grade, David moved to an alternative military style program where he lived on campus away from home. He was careful to tell me he was not expelled from his high school or the charter school, but that he chose to go to this new school. Students at the “opportunity school” were enrolled in GED classes instead of high school diploma classes, so he hoped he would be more successful. He stayed the full time of the program, but gaps in his learning history and those old frustrations prevented him passing the GED while there. The school was very regimented, and students were only given one chance to pass practice tests or the entire GED at one time. David came home that summer and decided to enroll in adult education instead of his senior year of high school.

David admits his experience in the Crossroads Adult Education program has been “all over the place.” His first two years, he messed around, would do better for a while, and then he would get “stuck” on something he should already know. As a result, he would argue with his teacher or the Director, and not come to school for a few weeks. His support at home, his grandmother and aunts, stayed behind him no matter what. Their love was the biggest inspiration for David. He has lived with his grandmother since he was five. Although his mom lives close by, he is closer to his grandmother, his aunts, and great-aunts. His father has been in and out of prison, and David did not have much of a relationship with him while growing up. Eventually, his father turned his own life around, and they talk, but David relies more on his grandmother and her sisters for emotional support. They kept bringing him back, and finally, after he turned 21, something clicked. “I began listening and disciplining myself,” explains David.

He returned this past school year, buckled down, and passed his first GED subsection on his second attempt. The fact that he could concentrate on one test at time helped him focus, and he was not discouraged after failing the first time. He was so close to passing, it only challenged him to do better. His new growth mindset would make a difference. By the end of the school year, David had passed three of the four sections of the GED, and came to summer school to prepare for and attempt his final test. He was all in. “I know I’ve made mistakes. I say you have to change what you can and encourage other people. You’re going to fail, but you just gotta do it. You gotta still keep going because it’s worth it.” David thinks his own words show how much he has grown up in the last three years.

Latonya. Life after moving to new place or city is never easy, but for 18 year-old Latonya, she moved to a whole new country. Happily, she reports things have never been better. Latonya came to the United States from Jamaica a little over a year ago. At just 17, she tried to enroll in her local public high school, but they were unable to transfer her credits and recommended that she visit the Crossroads program. “It looked like a better opportunity from the moment I walked in. I liked everything I saw,” she told me. “There is no adult education program in Jamaica; you either finish as a young person or you don’t finish high school. America is the land of opportunity.” Latonya’s positive outlook shapes everything she does and has helped her to overcome many challenges in life.

School in Jamaica was much stricter according to Latonya. She had to dress in uniform, could not wear earrings, and had to groom her hair in a very “tight” style. She is athletic and played many sports, especially soccer. While she was a confident student and liked going to school, her family applied to come to the U.S. and she was all for the

idea. Her grandmother and father were already living in New York, but her mother's family and support network were all there with her in Jamaica. The disruption could have been devastating, but Latonya sees it for the best. "Here, you can change your life anytime you want. It's not like that back home." Instead of staying in New York with her grandmother, Latonya chose to come to the South and live with her mother and step-father. The separation from her father was not unusual; the two do not have a close relationship. "I don't pay him no mind," Latonya says, when focusing instead on her mother's advice and support.

Latonya's experience in the Crossroads program has been her introduction to many aspects of American culture and education. She is fluent in English, but it is not her first language and many things that would be common knowledge to a student who always went to school here were foreign to her. She has had to learn American money, the nuances of American grammar, and American history. She began studying at a pre-GED level, and took home numerous student workbooks just to become familiar with academic vocabulary. "The teachers always take the time to help me with what I need to know. But I also like working with other students in the groups. We encourage each other," explains Latonya. She mentioned student award programs and the option to retake tests as strategies or processes that have supported her persistence in the program. By the time summer came, Latonya had taken and passed two of the four subject area tests to earn her GED diploma. Finishing in summer school would help her achieve her dream of going to college and playing soccer. She has been recruited by at least five colleges and has also ready taken the ACT for college admission. She just needs to earn

her secondary credential so she can get to the next level. Helping her family with her sports talent is something she has always wanted to do.

Javon. Eighteen year-old Javon joined adult education about four months ago. He had been enrolled in high school and was taking courses at the career center on the same campus as our program. He describes himself as a good student, who mostly stayed out of trouble, but things just didn't seem right for him. After missing a week of school, and moving again, he decided it might be best for him just to find a quicker way to get his diploma and get on with his future. He made sure I knew that he had never really been in trouble, but that he just wanted to do something else with school. Javon has a lot motivating him. If he finishes his GED in the summer, he can take welding classes at the technical college starting in August. Eckerd Connects, a partner organization, supports out of school youth with tuition, books, and materials, so Javon has a plan if everything works out. His optimism about the future is crucial, given the barriers he faces.

Javon moved to the South when he was around six years old and has lived in three different cities since then. He considers his mom his greatest champion, but she has financially struggled to support him and his sisters as a single-parent. She suffers from a chronic illness, and moving sometimes became the only option for her to stay healthy. His father is still up north, and just got out of prison according to Javon. He became a father himself at age 17 and now has another child on the way. His kids provide him with inspiration, and Javon says he will do everything he can to be there for them. He doesn't want to be like his father. To sum it up, Javon says, "My life wasn't going how I really wanted it to go. Having kids made me realize I need to get it together."

His experience in adult education so far has been more than he expected. Javon came in wanting to get done quickly, but then he felt like he might “be here for years” with everything he had to do at the beginning. “Once the process got going though, it was pretty easy. I passed two tests before the end of the semester when I just came in March,” Javon says of his success. He plans to stick with it, too, admitting that giving up would have been easier and coming to summer school was not what he wanted to be doing right now. He just didn’t have enough time to get everything done before the regular school term ended. Javon also says that the teachers and their attitudes have helped him a lot. “They care more about what you want to do in life and getting you on the right path. They are very hands on, especially in math.” Math and Language Arts are the two subject area tests he has left before he can happily “begin the rest of his life.”

Inquiry Cycle II: Summary. Separating the two groups of students for the purpose of inquiry revealed numerous different aspects of the learner experiences. While related codes and characterizations were recognized in comparison with those of the graduate interviews, examining current students alone is an imperative connection to the research questions and the theoretical frameworks of the study. Their harsh situational barriers, adverse childhood events, negative previous school stories, and even their descriptions of adult education bore some similarities to those reported by the graduates. However, these participants have not overcome that final barrier, that ultimate obstacle, separating them from their peers, so their approach and interpretations of their experiences is colored by this exception. Three of the four current students emphasized during their interviews that they were not the same as other drop-outs or that they did not fit the stereotype they feared. The current student who did not worry about the stigma of

not finishing high school did not grow up with it to begin with as she is from another country.

An additional caveat, when the current students spoke about themselves or their experiences, they seemed to lack the self-reflection or self-awareness of the graduates, despite their similar ages. The seeds of a growth mindset might be apparent, but more mature insights of responsibility and empathy that were found in the graduates had not yet surfaced. Jenn blamed her fear of math on bad teachers or her father; David felt confident that he had changed but he could not pinpoint how or why this had happened. Javon and David both still appeared to carry resentment toward their absent fathers for not being there for them. Latonya wanted to do well for her family and to please her mother, but she did not reveal her own personal investment in her success. When mentioning the adult education teachers, the current students were complimentary and glad that they were helpful, but only Jenn cited specific relationships as a factor in her persistence. All four current students characterized teaching strategies as contributing to their progress, but deeper, supportive relationships with teachers and staff were not described. The current students were understandably more engrossed in their own process, which has become their burden to carry through enrollment in adult education.

Inquiry Cycle III: Teachers. Collaborating with and interviewing four of the teachers of Crossroads Adult Education completed the circle of the current inquiry. Earlier in the process, I met with a group of staff members to design the interview questions for the students. In that meeting, I began to recognize the importance of this overall project and the purpose of including their points of view. It was not because they thought they knew all of the solutions to our collective problem of adult student

persistence and had tried them; they admittedly did and had not. The teachers were very interested in what I might discover about their students. What seemed to be missing from their perspective at that time was what I might discover about them as well. Originally, I had hoped to be able to lead them through an inquiry protocol, but the timing of the data collection and analysis did not allow for those circumstances. That does not diminish the insights their data, revealed through our collaboration and my practitioner inquiry, was able to yield.

Analyzing the teacher interviews, their words that became pieces of data for the current study, required its own unique approach. One premise of practitioner inquiry is that systematic study of problems, naming them, and even celebrating them, allows for changes in both pedagogy and practice (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). It can empower teachers, produce counter-narratives, and effect greater educational impact on students (Ravitch, 2014). As a stance, practitioner inquiry provides a bridge to the primary theoretical frameworks embedded in the current study. The perspectives of the adult learners include tenets of Knowles' andragogy and Freire's praxis, but adult education teacher perspectives should exemplify them. The assumptions provided by Knowles and the critical reflection advocated by Freire are arguably the most important building blocks of successful adult learning programs. Promoting best practices and seeing adult learners as fully capable of these principles is the obligation of adult program instructors. An adult education program that serves learners who lack a secondary credential and the opportunities it can provide should be no different. Knowles' assumptions were applied as an a-priori framework to analyze teacher statements during their interviews. Additionally, indications of reflective praxis or strong relationships

advocated by Freire were also traced within the context of the teacher interviews. Table 4.1 shows a numerical summary of results of a deductive process that examined affirmative and contradictory teacher statements.

Table 4.1. Summary of teacher statements that demonstrate current practices supported by theoretical framework.

<i>Teacher*</i>	<i>Teaching Experience</i>	<i>Adult Education Experience</i>	<i>Total Statements</i>	<i>Affirmative Statements</i>	<i>Contradictory Statements</i>
McDonald	28	6	28	14	11
Stewart	38	3	23	4	18
Duncan	33	5	20	12	2
Robertson	44	2	16	13	3

*Pseudonyms

Evidence of Knowles' assumptions and Freire's critical praxis. The teachers at Crossroads Adult Education program have a combined 143 years of professional experience. Teacher McDonald is a retired high school Biology teacher; Teacher Stewart taught English and Language Arts in both high school and middle school; Teacher Duncan is still teaching fifth grade; and Teacher Robertson has teaching experience in high school, college, and even the prison system. A brief quantitative analysis of the teacher interviews provides tangible insights. Of 87 total statements in the teacher

interviews that revealed a practice of Knowles' assumptions (1973) or Freire's pedagogy (2000), 43 affirmed implementation and 34 seemed to contradict these principles. The remaining comments presented both a positive and negative side within the program. Two of the teachers, McDonald and Stewart, combined for 85% of the contradictory statements. Individually, 78% of Stewart's comments were negative about the students or their participation in the program; only 39% of McDonald's comments were derogatory. Ironically, Stewart and McDonald have the most secondary school experience. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 include a major sampling of indicative interview quotes or partial phrases from teachers without revealing the speaker.

Table 4.2. Affirmative teacher statements that demonstrate current practices supported by theoretical framework.

<i>Assumption or Practice</i>	<i>Primary Source</i>	<i>Affirmative Statements from Teachers</i>
Adult learners need to be self-directing and to be seen as self-directing by others.	Knowles and Freire	-Students really want a second chance. -I tell them to their face they are more heroes. -They show the utmost courage just walking in the door.
Adult learners need to utilize his or her own experience in learning.	Knowles and Freire	-I've become more compassionate over the years. -They can learn from each other as well as me. -Our students get frustrated with larger groups; they like individual attention to their needs.
Adult learners need to identify his or her own readiness to learn.	Knowles	-They've got to have a solid foundation to be ready for the GED. -My expectations for them are no different than for students in my regular classroom.

Adult learners need to organize his own learning around life problems	Knowles and Freire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Retaking tests is part of the process; they can do it just sometimes not as quick as they would like. -Goalsetting is important. We often focus our learning around career goals. -I do whatever it takes to make them successful. -Teaching them to think through situations is most important.
Adults are mostly driven by internal motivation.	Knowles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teacher role includes encourager and cheerleader, and you do all you can. -Family type environment -The ones that are successful are the ones who really want it. They desire to be successful and many go on to college right here in our building. -Just encouragement can be the difference.
Adults need to know the reason for learning something.	Knowles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Rigor is present because the tests mandate rigor.
Adults should practice critical self-reflection.	Freire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It's helped me grow as a teacher to find ways to reach them. -Most of our students are searching...they know they need to do something. -I want them to be citizens who can take care of themselves and be productive. -They are willing to accept help. -I need to make (testing) more positive. Do something to encourage them and make it more fun afterwards.
Positive relationships with leaders and other adult learners is a key support.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Female students who are like daughters. -This is a dream job...it is so rewarding. -You have to build a relationship with people and that's one way...start talking about their lives. -Students know the instructors care. We want to do everything we possibly can to help them.

Table 4.3. Contradictory teacher statements that breach current practices supported by theoretical framework.

<i>Assumption or Practice</i>	<i>Primary Source</i>	<i>Contradictory Statements from Teachers</i>
Adult learners need to be self-directing and to be seen as self-directing by others.	Knowles and Freire	-Amazed at the number who need a credential -Tracking of students into low, medium, and high categories -Young adults become parents too soon or get in trouble in school -I still hope that they will be able to achieve the same things as traditional students.
Adult learners need to utilize his or her own experience in learning.	Knowles and Freire	-Problem children: we know what could happen if they are not with us. -I see a lot my former students; they should have listened to me back then.
Adult learners need to identify his or her own readiness to learn.	Knowles	-Students can't learn in a traditional fashion. -Small proportion of high achievers. -No documentation of obvious learning disabilities.
Adult learners need to organize his own learning around life problems	Knowles and Freire	-Life just gets in the way for many of our students. -We have a very high population of illiterates. -The world the live in and the culture of the community...they don't see the free opportunity they are given here. -They struggle to think on their own and just want to be shown how to do it once then get it over with.
Adults are mostly driven by internal motivation.	Knowles	-Some of our students have made horrible choices, and some of them life has just dealt a bad hand. -We have students who are required to be here by the penal system or DSS. -Sometimes my expectations are not their expectations.

		-Their desire is different compared to other students.
Adults need to know the reason for learning something.	Knowles	-Students frequently ask how long the process is going to take, they think it's going to be a quick fix. -They do get discouraged with the testing and enrollment process taking so long.
Adults should practice critical self-reflection.	Freire	-Missed opportunities with students who start strong and don't return. -I don't know what the answer is.
Positive relationships with leaders and other adult learners is a key support.		-(Their lack of persistence) has to do with family values. I don't think it is us, I really don't.

Inquiry Cycle III: Summary. Essentially determining the positive or negative attitude of professional educator is not an easy task. The context of a semi-structured interview allowed for natural conversations, and the intent of the discussion may have been different than the words reveal. It was during this specific analysis process that I questioned the impact of my positionality the most. As a school leader, I want all of my teachers to see their students for their potential and for their challenges. As a researcher, I wanted to remain objective. Regardless of my current position, I feel a sense of ownership of the Crossroads Adult Education program as I left it a little over a year ago. All four of the teachers were “my teachers” at that time. While the new director is a colleague and friend, I question whether the teachers and their viewpoints are a reflection of my leadership. Did I use my power and influence to advocate for our students or did I falter when it came to having crucial conversations? To that end, I decided to create

Tables 4.2 and 4.3 without teacher names. I included the numerical breakdown above so that I could interpret findings, but the teacher comments needed to speak for themselves.

Combining the data in to the specific topics of the framework and the subsequent qualifying categories was both formative and summative to the inquiry process. I could “see” where our program is correctly executing best practices and where those are lacking according to my own theoretical framework. Based on the teacher comments of either length or depth, there is room for improvement toward more effective implementation. There is an obvious disconnect between how some teachers view our students’ self-direction and their role or impact on the student’s progress. Knowles’ asserts (1973; 1980b) that adults need a reason to learn something, but rigor on a standardized test is a weak reason from a global perspective. Real-life problems do require thinking and making plans but should also include discussion of the actual problems. If a supportive relationship is an important practice advocated by Freire (2005; 2017) and numerous other contemporary researchers, then no teacher should contradict that essential truth. Had I not used the a-priori framework of Knowles and principles of Freire, I would have walked away from this analysis disappointed and frustrated. Instead, I have the framework to empower teachers and impact their professional growth as well as the educational outcomes for our adult learners.

Findings and Themes Concurrent with Research Questions

The image of a research cycle through practitioner inquiry or action research is best shown through visualizing a circle. It is an iterative problem-solving process for a setting and data that involve both students and teachers (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014;

Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2008). Like a circle, the beginning and end merge together when one cycle leads naturally to the next. While the current study included three cycles, the problem of adult learner persistence is not completely solved. It is now better understood, and more cycles of inquiry can generate from the findings. The diagram below, Figure 4.1, demonstrates the themes that surfaced during this specific study.

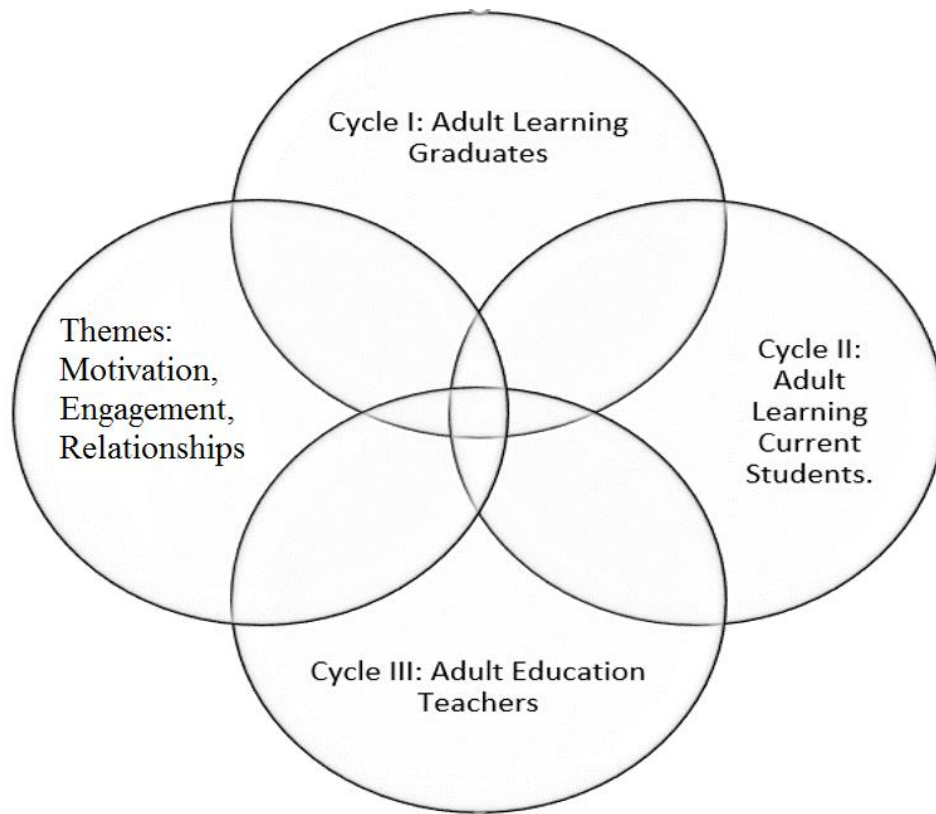


Figure 4.1. Emerging Themes. The themes illustrated about impact learner persistence in my practitioner inquiry.

The discovery of these major themes resulted from an equally iterative data analysis process. As indicated in the methodology, the interviews that served as the major sources of data were not conducted in any particular order. During the summer session and the weeks following it, I collaborated with the adult education director in anecdotal discussion and kept a researcher’s journal that included notes and memos of

recurring ideas in my conversations with students and teachers. My original constructs of motivation and engagement were taking on new meaning, influenced by the changes in my understanding of how to view and interpret the adult education or learning experience. As I transcribed each interview myself, listening to and typing the words of my participants, it gave me intimate knowledge of their voices and passions. I knew something more important was emerging. During the final cycle of analyzing teacher interviews, where I imposed a defining a-priori framework, the third theme of relationships became imperative. The themes are not new to me; they blend well with my original research questions and the literature surrounding adult learning. However, the critical insights explored through the themes as offered in this study heavily impacted my perceptions and will greatly inform the recommendations and action plan presented in the final chapter. While I thought I possessed an enlightened, educated worldview, I discovered that my original interpretations of how these themes applied to our adult learning program were almost all wrong.

Motivation. Getting beyond life's barriers, bettering oneself and family despite circumstances, and finishing or completing a major goal were aspects of motivation highlighted by all adult student participants during their interviews. All three aspects show strong internal motivation of adult learners proposed by Knowles (1984) and researched by Avci (2016). Divorce, home disruption, death of a parent, economic instability, and other adverse childhood experiences pepper their revelations about their lives. However, they share that they do not want these experiences to define them or their future. Knowles' assumption that adults want to be self-directing is supported by graduates like Todd, Diana, and Mya, and several of the current students want to be seen

as self-directing by others. Jenn, David, and Javon worried about the stigmas associated with being a student in adult education; they did not want to be seen as been like “those others.” This self-direction and desire to finish something is further supported in the theoretical literature by Freire (2017) and the more current research of Merriam and Bierema (2014).

When I began writing this action research study, I repeatedly presumed that our adult students lacked motivation. To the contrary, adult learners in our program, despite their obstacles, possess strong motivation. When I asked them, instead of assuming a lack of it contributed to their shortcomings as a learner, they told me about what motivated them. Their motivation is just different than the way I was defining it as a career high school educator. I did not realize my deficit thinking until I examined the harsh words of two of our teachers. They do not believe in the student’s motivation either because it is not reflective of traditional motivation to learn. If the role of our program is to be the bridge between an unsuccessful past and a successful future for our students, than we should be providing pathways to fully understand and utilize their motivation rather than judging it. Several of the younger graduates and current students remarked on our student recognition programs as being a strategy that motivated them. Those events and other engagement processes are a good place to start. Capturing adult student motivation to learn can begin externally (Avci, 2016; Purroway, 2016). Uncovering this disconnect and recognizing this discrete deficit mindset is a crucial first step.

Engagement. My original premise that students who are more highly motivated and effectively engaged will persist longer in our adult learning program is not invalid; it is just limited to a definition from my perspective and positionality (Bourke, 2014;

Dugan, 2017). Engagement comprises more than just student involvement; it is myriad of processes and strategies that regulate our program and provide parameters and guidance for our students. In their previous school experiences, students revealed that a lack of power and choice often left them out or left them behind. Large class sizes, overwhelmed or disengaged teachers, social or academic anxiety caused many of our students to check out of their prior schools. Something didn't fit or feel right to them, and they could not correct the issues on their own. Their enrollment in adult education was their way of taking both control and responsibility for their learning. Hence, engagement becomes the collective responsibility of the adult learners, educators, and program staff. It incorporates our student's readiness to learn, monitoring their own progress, utilizing their own experience, and transforming their mindsets (Knowles, 1973, 1980b; Freire, 2005; Avci, 2016; Brubaker, 2004; Dweck, 2007; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Graduates Todd and Brianna as well as current students Jenn, David, and Javon all agreed in some way that our personalized assessment procedures, self-tracking charts, and relevant, hands-on learning contributed to their own persistence. Brianna and fellow graduate Mya benefitted from testing strategies of focusing on one subject area at a time and being able to re-test to curb test anxiety and one-shot consequences. The acceptance of failure as mode of learning, a transformational mindset, impacted all four current students. Ultimately, the graduates have a greater appreciation for and capacity to reflect upon their own turning points, but all of the students could pinpoint when they made the decision to fully invest in their learning. The processes of our program helped to facilitate many of these changes. When long-term engagement becomes self-regulating,

the emotional, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts are liberating (Freire, 2005; 2017). Teachers who perceive and appreciate these efforts make the greater connections. Unfortunately, lingering bias and stereotypes continue. Whether implicit or explicit, teacher perceptions of their student's ability to engage or achieve success hampers their student's progress. It hurts relationships, the basis of motivation, engagement, and persistence for many of our adult learners.

Relationships. Leadership and education guru James Comer is often quoted via motivational websites that, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." TEDx alum Rita Pierson tells her audience that, "Every child deserves a champion." What seems like contemporary rhetoric and fluff, however, holds true in the context of this study. The theme of relationships was overwhelmingly in the data for our graduates, current students, and teachers. Every student could identify someone who supported them and what relationships were most important in their lives. All of the teachers could identify a student success story built around a positive relationship. The theme is equally apparent in the literature.

While Knowles (1973; 1984) is able to use relationships as an underlying tenet of several of his assumptions, Freire (2005; 2017) qualifies positive learning relationships as emancipatory tool. Trust and respect are vital to coaching self-direction or facilitating critical reflections. Love her or mistrust her, Ruby Payne (2005) identified education and relationships as the pathways to escaping poverty. Davis (2014) builds a community of authentic, supportive relationships while incorporating participatory action research into ethnodrama about adult education students. The vulnerability of the students with their teachers and each other is a great example of relationship balance. Purroway (2016) and

Capps (2016) create programs that help facilitate relationships that transform adult learners. Sipe (2002) argues that mentoring programs for young adults work because they need the confirmation and support provided by positive relationships.

In the current study, graduates Todd and Diana express the deepest connections and impact of relationships with adult education teachers. Current student Jenn identifies with several of the teachers because of their shared struggles. Mya dedicated her graduation to the house mother at her group home “who always had her back.” David, Javon, and Latonya cited family members as their greatest supporters. All of these relationships are built on mutual respect and empathy, and the adult students in our program deserve as much. Most of our adult education teachers provide encouragement and positive feedback necessary to hook our students. Identifying and recognizing their already existing support networks is also vital for student success. Teachers and staff who marginalize our student’s families, for whatever reason, will probably not create meaningful relationships. They will continue to be superficial, perfunctory, and originate from a place of judgement instead of sincerity. The students and the program suffer if relationships are not given the environment to fully develop and flourish. Focusing on connections with our adult learners, building relationships that are real and transparent, can liberate us all.

Summary

Personal, practical, crucial. Implement, facilitate, liberate. Absent the hyperbole and urgent action, this chapter emerges as the most important of this action research.

Using the conceptual framework of practitioner inquiry and the theoretical frameworks of

Knowles (1973; 1980b) and Freire (2000), the data presented and analyzed finds unexpected answers to the research questions. I would expect nothing less from a constructivist point of view. The three cycles of inquiry, produced from semi-structured interviews with graduates, current students, and teachers in an adult learning program, demonstrate that learning truly comes from making meaning of experience. Dewey's (2017) primary principle is illustrated over and over again by student revelations, teacher responses, and the researcher's critical insights. Themes of motivation, engagement, and relationships were redefined by the current context and experience of the adult learners.

Interrogating my positionality and how it affects my perspective and worldview allowed me to examine my original research questions for their bias. In order to better support our adult learners, my perceptions of what barriers our students faced, how they have overcome them, and why some students seem more successful than others had to change as a result of my findings. I would not have understood this process nearly three years ago when I originally wrote the first chapter and began the journey into examining adult learner perseverance. The final chapter will reflect on the key findings, practitioner inquiry as the study design, and limitations as well as implications for my future practice. Because the audience of this action research also includes the adult education teachers and new director of the Crossroads program, an implementation plan with recommendations will be proposed.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

“We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.”

--John Dewey

The summer of 2019 was supposed to bring graduation for Jenn, David, Latonya, and Javon. Each of the currently enrolled students at Crossroads Adult Education profiled through their interview responses were only one or two final GED subject area tests away from completion when the study was conducted. The brief summer session specifically targeted their needs, and each one attempted his or her tests during the four weeks of June. None of them earned a passing score. Disappointed but determined, David, Latonya, and Javon returned for the new school year in late August. Unfortunately, Jenn is no longer a student.

Jenn came back for the 2019-2020 school year with high hopes, but two days into her enrollment, she yelled at her math teacher during a lesson, argued with the adult education director, and left campus in a frenzy. She sent a message to another student that she would not return again and left negative comments on the program’s social media page. The conflict seemed to result from Jenny’s frustration in math class as well as her discomfort with still being in the program among other younger and what she called “more troubled” students. We may never know for sure, but it would not surprise any of us if Jenn returned again in a few months. She would be welcomed back.

Overview of Study

Jenn's story painfully illustrates the problem of practice under investigation through this action research. Adult learner persistence reveals both triumph and struggle, and the study shows there are multiple contributing factors to both outcomes. In our context of a secondary credential adult learning program, the struggle for our students to persevere is often exacerbated through barriers experienced by students, both internal and external. Given the premise that enrolling in adult secondary education is an intervention learners initiate on their own, I wanted to find out why it might work better for some participants and not others in our program. An intense action research investigation, framed by practitioner inquiry, was the best fit for exploring the phenomenon and making meaning of it locally (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of adult learners and teachers in order to better understand the lack of perseverance demonstrated by those who walk away from our secondary education program before completion or graduation. The primary research questions were:

1. What barriers have our students faced in their previous learning experiences, what challenges are they currently facing, and have they overcome those obstacles in our program?
2. Why are certain adult learners in our basic or secondary education program more persistent and successful than others?

The conceptual framework provided for three cycles of practitioner inquiry with my participants, applying action research and the constructivist theoretical frameworks of

Knowles' andragogy (1973) as well as Freire's critical praxis (2000) consistent with how the two theorists approached their work.

As is often the case with practitioner inquiry, the results were personally meaningful (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). I began this research process with my own definitions, or perceptions, of the concepts of motivation, engagement, and persistence in an educational setting. I assumed that my background knowledge, advanced educational and leadership degrees, and over twenty years of experience in the field qualified me to be an expert on how to motivate and engage learners at any level. I assumed that lack of motivation and engagement had to be a piece of the puzzle concerning adult education students, how they ended up in our program initially. I spent eighteen years in a high school English classroom developing relationships with students, to motivate and engage them as well as help them persist, so I felt that there had to be a connection in adult learning as well. The major findings of this study definitely incorporated the concepts of motivation, engagement, and relationships, but turns out, my initial assumptions about these constructs and how our students experience them in our program were mostly wrong. While I did not find a definitive common thread among the persistent students who participated, I did find themes and contributing factors to a positive experience. The work of Knowles (1973; 1980b; 1984) and Freire (2000; 2005) guided me through the investigation, and I will use their frameworks to initiate the next steps of action research.

While I initiated this study to examine the experiences of our adult learners and teachers, I learned as much about myself and my practice. I was a little more gentle with myself in the previous chapter, using words like "interpretations" or "perceptions," because I did not want to fall prey to the adage, "you know what happens when you

assume...” Now, in writing my final chapter, I am not shy about it. My assumptions about our adult learners and how we could best help them were part of the problem. The clarity that this research has given to my positionality as an educator and school leader is humbling and will influence my future practice in profound ways.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss my reflections in greater detail and lead to a plan of action proposed for myself, the new director, and the teachers of Crossroads Adult Education. My reflections on the key findings will include transferability and implications for practice. My reflections on the research design and methodological framework of practitioner inquiry will lead to an examination of the study’s limitations. Finally, I present a plan of action for next steps will include my own practice as well as other participants in the study.

Reflection on Key Findings

The first draft of the review of literature included in chapter two was written with the same theoretical framework but a different methodology in mind. Originally, I planned a mixed methods action research project where I would propose an intervention that I hoped would impact adult learner persistence in our program. The intervention would incorporate major tenets of adult learning as well as a motivational connection between students and teachers. I would measure the effects of my intervention through qualitative student perceptions and quantitative success criteria that are imbedded in our program. I never actually wrote that methodology. When my supervisory role with Crossroads Adult Education changed, and I looked deeper into how this research would affect my future practice as a leader, I had to rethink my design. However, the goal of the overall study would not change. Supporting adult learner perseverance remained the

most important concern, and examining student and teacher experiences in our program would reveal the data and findings. Placing the actual study in the literature on adult learning theory with the methodology of practitioner inquiry was not a difficult revision.

However, a complete reorganization took place as my theoretical framework would now help me examine and fully understand my problem of practice as it exists and how it manifests in our program. I was no longer proving that a proposed intervention would be a valid plan of action to address the problem; I actually had to research and use participant experience as data (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to find out what the students needed or positively responded to in support their persistence in our program. The principles of adult learning from Knowles (1973; 1980b; 1984) and Freire (2000; 2005) became not only my theoretical framework but the basis of my inquiry cycles as well. Practitioner inquiry provided the best opportunity for me as a researcher and has proven to me that inquiry as stance can be fiercely impactful in creating change (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Equity and the problem of practice. Adult learner perseverance in our small, rural program as examined through practitioner inquiry provided the greatest insights into the democratic and emancipatory opportunities completion or graduation can provide for our students (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Smiley & West, 2011; Payne, 2005). The big picture was not lost on the graduates or the current students, whether it was possibilities of economic freedom and independence, social mobility and the loss of a stigma of failure, or a connection to their self-direction and critical ability to reflect on their learning (Knowles, 1973; Freire, 2000). Their awareness of equity was more subtle than my earlier assumption that living in a community of poverty would make them blind

to their potential. Our students have dreams, plans, and less resentment of social structures than some of our teachers.

Teacher perceptions that some of our students do not value education because of the culture of the community or their drop-out status was a blatant bias that will impact my action plan for teacher professional development. School leaders and teachers, myself included, have to reexamine our need to evaluate student life experiences like we do assessments. Our perceptions of equity, often founded in implicit bias and a skewed sense of moral entitlement, is reflected in the data and the findings. We have to see a bigger picture, too, one that allows our students to be their best selves according to their definitions not just our dominant one. The definitions that I used of terms like motivation, engagement, and even success reveal a limited perspective from my educator positionality and white-middle-class life. Neither the findings nor the study delved into issues of racial bias or inequity, but I felt cultural conflict during data collection of the interviews. Inferring it would not have been appropriate at this time, but cultural relevance and responsiveness is a layer of inquiry that should be explored during a future cycle.

Connections to theoretical frameworks and the literature. The construct of motivation was presented in the review of literature through research on common barriers our adult students face and the adult learning theories of Knowles (1973; 1980b; 1984) and Freire (2000; 2005). Getting beyond life's barriers, bettering oneself and family despite circumstances, and finishing or completing a major goal were features of motivation highlighted by all adult student participants during their interviews. Each shows strong internal motivation of adult learners proposed by Knowles (1984) and

researched by Avci (2016). Knowles' (1973) theory that adults want to be self-directing is supported in the findings as motivation toward their own success.

The self-direction and desire to finish something shown by our graduates and current students is further supported in the theoretical literature by Freire (2017) and the more current research of Merriam and Bierema (2014). Capturing adult student motivation to learn can begin externally (Avci, 2016; Purroway, 2016) as our younger students sometimes showed us. Ultimately, our graduates show that the internal motivation of a problem-posing, relevant education will eliminate barriers and ignite a passion for learning (Freire, 2005). As an educator, there is no higher goal for your students, but I cannot ignore that I initially was defining motivation only from my point of view. It was not that our students lacked motivation and we needed to do more to foster it; I needed to define it their way. They had motivation, whether it was their families or their strong desire to do better for themselves. I discovered through my conversations with our students, and leading them and myself through a process of making meaning, that they knew exactly what their motivation was and how they could capture it. Our program can do more to foster motivation, as long as we incorporate the student's perspective and not just force our own upon them.

While I also mistakenly limited engagement to a definition from my perspective and positionality (Bourke, 2014; Dugan, 2017), engagement comprises more than just student involvement; it is a myriad of processes that regulate our program, provide parameters, and guidance for our students. The findings demonstrate that our students recognize the importance of these strategies, and thus engagement becomes the collective responsibility of the adult learners, educators, and program staff. Engagement

incorporates our student's readiness to learn, monitoring their own progress through data and learning plans, utilizing their own experience, and transforming their mindsets (Knowles, 1973, 1980b; Freire, 2005; Avci, 2016; Brubaker, 2004; Dweck, 2007; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). When long-term engagement becomes self-regulating, the emotional, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts are liberating (Freire, 2005; 2017). Our role as adult educators is to provide the skills practice because self-regulation is not an easy or automatic task (Knowles, 1973; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). After reflection, I realized that I should have included this type of outcome in my definition of success as well; completing the program is not the only goal of our students. They might use different language to articulate their success, but it is just as meaningful in the long-term and outcomes after they leave us. Teachers who perceive and appreciate the efforts of our students also make the greater connections. Unfortunately, lingering bias and stereotypes continue. Whether implicit or explicit, teacher perceptions of their student's ability to engage or achieve success hampers their student's progress. It hurts relationships, the basis of motivation, engagement, and persistence for many of our adult learners.

The theme of relationships was overwhelmingly in the data for our graduates, current students, and teachers and is equally apparent in the literature. Every student could identify someone who supported them and what relationships were most important in their lives. All of the teachers could identify a student success story built around a positive relationship. While Knowles (1973; 1984) is able to use relationships as an underlying tenet of several of his assumptions, Freire (2005; 2017) qualifies critical relationships as an emancipatory tool. Trust and respect are vital to coaching self-

direction or facilitating critical reflections. Accept her work or mistrust it, Ruby Payne (2005) identified education and relationships as the pathways to escaping poverty. Davis (2014) builds a community of authentic, supportive relationships while incorporating participatory action research into ethnodrama about adult education students. The vulnerability the students revealed with their teachers and each other is a great example of relationship balance. Purroway (2016) and Capps (2016) create programs that help facilitate relationships that transform adult learners. Sipe (2002) argues that mentoring programs for young adults work because they need the confirmation and support provided by positive relationships.

All of these relationships are built on mutual respect and empathy, and the adult learners in our program deserve as much. However, when I found a disconnect between how our adult learners saw their relationships with their teachers and how some of the teachers viewed them, I became sad and annoyed. The graduates definitely attributed a portion of their success to the support they felt and relationships they had with the teachers. The teachers praised them specifically as well. With the currently enrolled students, though, when considered as a group, there seemed to be more of a tone of disappointment coming from some teachers. They seemed to characterize these relationships differently. The teachers showed great pride when speaking of graduates, but there was almost frustration with those students who are in the midst of trying to finish. I do not see those descriptions as critical in a growth sense, rather they are simply critical of the students.

Freire promoted critical relationships and what he called a “dialogue of equals” (Elias, 1975). Most of our adult education teachers provide encouragement and positive

feedback necessary to hook our students, but treating them with equal bearing is a challenge. The desire to help them out of their situation can become a limiting mindset; some of our teachers see themselves as saviors. Worse, there are teachers who sit in judgement of a student's background or learning history, and view themselves as somehow better people because of what they see as better decisions and life circumstances. In these instances, the students are not given what Freire valued most, power and choice (2005). The truth was sometimes ugly. Teachers and staff who marginalize our students or their families, for whatever reason, will never make connections. The students and the program suffer if relationships with staff or their other support networks are not given the opportunity and environment to fully flourish. My action plan will include suggestions to improve this aspect of our adult learning program.

Transferability of findings to additional contexts. When I reflect on the major findings of my investigation, I know the inward lens of practitioner inquiry (Dana) provided me with insights that will impact me as a school leader for years to come. More specifically, the action research process allowed me to fully examine my practice as the director of an adult learning program as well as the experiences of students and teachers in the program. Although I no longer hold that position, my current supervisory role still matters to the program and the reflection on that time in my practice as an educator matters to me. The “outward” significance of traditional research is not the primary goal of practitioner inquiry nor its claim to valid, reliable findings (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Ravitch, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Validity and generalizability in practitioner inquiry are quite different from conventional criteria (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Efron and Ravid (2013) define

validity as the “degree to which the study, the data collection tools, and the interpretations accurately represent the issue being investigated” (p. 218). What happens in qualitative research, like action research and practitioner inquiry, is that the data itself comes from the participants, and it must reflect their views (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Internal validity goes from how the findings match reality in the traditional research context to the trustworthiness of the inferences in practitioner research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). External validity that usually generalizes the findings of traditional research to a larger population becomes transferability to other contexts with practitioner research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Practitioner inquiry and action research seek transferability, the ability of a colleague or other educator to understand and assess the way your action research might inform their practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). Transferability relies more on other educators who read the research than the original practitioner, drawing inferences from similarities and assessing the overall quality of the research project (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). I will reflect on my own quality and the process of practitioner inquiry in the next section, but neither one is easily accomplished (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

With these understandings, the transferability of my findings to other contexts and future implications include my now current practice as a career and technology program director on the same campus and in the same community; my future goals as a district or higher education administrator; and the practice of the new Crossroads director and other adult education program directors in contexts similar to ours. I am now working with high school students again as the principal of the career center that is located on the hybrid campus of the technical college. I balance that with being the director of the

campus, which includes financial and instructional leadership and the politics of being a community liaison. What I focus on are the opportunities available to all of our students, and I want to channel this deep level of inquiry toward problems of practice I have subsequently discovered in my new role. The climate of the new program I inherited is deeply flawed, and I have spent much of my time working through teacher misconceptions about their students, their perceived lack of motivation, and assumptions about the effects of our setting. The leadership implications that I can apply are strong, but I would also like to facilitate the process of practitioner inquiry with my current staff. I think it would also be beneficial to me and the students to cross reference some what I have learned about career preparation in my current role into an inquiry in the adult learning program as another cycle of research. In my experience with Crossroads Adult Education, we spend so much time preparing students for their academic goals and assessments, we would sometimes neglect personal and professional ones.

While I enjoy my current position, I would like to move into a district or higher education administrative position, supervising curriculum and teaching. The process and findings of my action research can impact professional development for teachers or instructors I would like to develop in such a role. As I consider my positionality and the significance of my study, I think my findings can transfer directly to the practice of the teachers who participated in the study. While I have not shared all of the findings and reflections with them personally, I have shared them with my critical friend and now program leader, Director Kiser. I do believe that the teachers and staff who participated in the study could benefit from recognizing their implicit bias and how their expectations

are sometimes harmful to adult student persistence and success. I will follow-up with this implication in my action plan presented later in the chapter.

Reflections on Practitioner Inquiry and Action Research

I selected the design of practitioner inquiry for this study after a change in my leadership role with the program at the heart of it led to greater reflection on how to address the problem of practice we had been experiencing with adult learner persistence. While the intervention I had originally planned was based on what I saw as a valid idea, conversations with my dissertation advisor and critical friend Director Kiser helped me to realize that understanding more about the problem from the perspective of the students would help us to address it based on their needs and not our hope of what might work. Practitioner inquiry, under the premise of action research, provided the best avenue for an intense, iterative investigation (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) of a singular program or phenomenon (Herr and Anderson, 2015; Efron and Ravid, 2013).

Action research provided the initial framework for the study because I wanted to research a problem of my practice in a systematic, legitimate way and take advantage of my skill set as an educator and school leader (Efron and Ravid, 2013). Including the teachers and students in the process and generation of new knowledge, an element of recommended for both action research and practitioner inquiry, meant that the findings would be immediately relevant and applicable at Crossroads Adult Education (Herr and Anderson, 2015). Further, because of the context and setting of our adult learning program, using practitioner inquiry became a tool of personal, social, and community transformation even on our small scale (Ravitch, 2014). That detailed context and the

convincing case surrounding the dilemma we face with our learners fulfills the first two quality indicators of practitioner inquiry provided by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014). I believe my study also meets the others: the design has multiple sources, what I learned is supported by the data, and the implications for practice include my own and others (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

Respecting the life experience of our adult learners, promoting their personal motivation, engaging them with strategies and processes that foster engagement, and building meaningful relationships is the framework that can best support the persistence and ultimately the perseverance of our students. Reaching these findings through the sense-making process supported by practitioner inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) will effect change for our students and teacher participants. I might not have found a single solution to the problem of adult learner persistence, but I uncovered ways to address it supported by their experiences and the theories of two foundational adult learning theorists, Knowles (1973; 1980b; 1984) and Freire (200; 2005).

As I reflect on the cycles of inquiry, I can see now that the deductive and inductive processes I applied were not as clear cut as my design may have intended. As a researcher, particularly one examining participant experiences in the way that I did, it becomes difficult to discern when evidence emerges through consistent language or if it is found through recognition of already known concepts. My decision to narrate so much of what went on in my research process and data presentation is validated by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey's (2014) most common descriptors of practitioner inquiry: personal and detailed. What happened to my practice, my approach to and perspective on our

community of learners, is perhaps the greatest reflection of the iterative nature of the two approaches I employed (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Herr and Anderson, 2015).

Reflections on Limitations

While numerous goals of action research and the quality indicators of practitioner inquiry were met through the research design, limitations existed. Creswell (2012) defines limitations as weaknesses that the researcher can identify on his or her own. I am very transparent that this was not a perfect study. In the first chapter, I was able to identify limitations that presented as challenges during the research process, concerns about my methodology or aspects of the data I did not pursue, and alterations that occurred to some of my specific plans. One challenge that I faced was how to confront my positionality and its impact on the participants and the overall study. Initially, I do not think I was realistic about or critical of my own practice. When I realized that I was contributing to my problem of practice, it hurt my feelings as an educator. Another challenge I alluded to in chapter one was the timing of when I collected data. A variety of factors led to this decision, including the schedule of my dissertation support classes and my change in methodology. I wish I had recognized sooner that this major shift needed to happen, but completing other coursework left me little time to consider it earlier in the process.

Within my methodology and data collection, some participants were dropped because of logistics and timing. I did not include any adult learners who had left our program, except as it turns out Jenn. I could not determine why they were not persistent or successful; I had to focus on those who had persevered or nearly so at the time of the

study. As the researcher, I wanted to include voices of students who were not only ready and willing but also persistently invested in the program and themselves. Since I was not able to interview all of the teachers and staff who participated with me as collaborators earlier in the process because of their unavailability in the summer, it is possible that their missing perspectives might have tempered my reaction to some of the teacher responses in the third inquiry cycle. I do not believe these missing participants ultimately affected my findings, but I do wish I had been able to facilitate a true inquiry protocol with the teachers as I had planned. The insights I gained into our student experiences through the inquiry cycles I did on my own would have been extremely valuable if the teachers had been a part of a similar discovery. Consequently, a teacher inquiry process is where I begin my recommendations and action plan.

Action Plan

The most honest statement I found from Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) regarding the purpose of their work speaks to its next steps, “The point of doing (practitioner) inquiry is for implementation and change” (p. 9). Herr and Anderson (2015) identify reflection and future planning as their final steps in action research; Efron and Ravid (2013) recommend an application of the knowledge gained that will lead to new questions and perhaps a new cycle of research. I can see all of that happening in Crossroads Adult Education based on the following recommendations: a purposefully facilitated teacher inquiry protocol or session based on the student interview responses obtained in this study or their own collected data on another problem; professional development on implicit bias and cultural sensitivity; implementing curriculum that addresses learning gaps of students fused real life problems; fostering supportive

relationships through needs assessments, engagement processes, and mentoring or advising strategies utilizing all staff.

The value of inquiry to investigate a problem facing real practitioners has been presented throughout this study (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2010; Ravitch 2014). The teachers, staff, and students of Crossroads Adult Education could benefit tremendously from undertaking the process to investigate the problem of adult learner persistence for themselves or another problem that has occurred since I left my direct leadership role. The paradigm shift that could occur would be remarkable and is definitely supported through the work of Knowles and Freire. I would recommend that these two primary sources provide the initial theoretical framework of any study by this specific program, primarily because the teachers need to become greater experts of their true context and practice with adult learners.

Additionally, an unexpected but frustrating finding of the study resides in the primary avenue for equity and social justice that the program provides. The teachers and staff, myself included, made numerous assumptions about the lives and motivations of their adult learners. Some were harsher than others, but several of them revealed an implicit bias and cultural divide that I found unsettling. The bias may or may not have stemmed from racial or cultural misunderstandings, but I felt a pattern of marginalization of our adult learners. The perspective gave our students a “less than” status regardless of the origin. I believe our staff and teachers need to deconstruct what ideologies and dominant structures they might represent in order to reconstruct more equitable ways to facilitate learning for all adult learners (Dugan, 2017). For me, it was a humbling experience. Professional development on educator or implicit bias and an adoption of

practices with cultural awareness could help mitigate the assumptions that are a barrier or counterproductive to the success of our students (Amstutz, 1999; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011).

The final two elements of my action plan are specific program facilitation and reflect the theoretical frameworks of adult learning of Knowles and Freire. One of the barriers identified by our adult learners is the gaps that exist in their school experience that have produced gaps in learning and academic understanding. The current curriculum used by Crossroads Adult Education does assess students on their academic placement in math and reading based on a high school level of functioning, but these are limited in scope to how they apply to common core standards and the GED test. They are aligned with high school standards, and account for pedagogical standards of critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning. However, because they are geared for high school equivalency, these assessments become the primary focus of instruction, not the gaps or current problems. More relevant instruction, connected to adult life and problems, needs to be included in classroom practices. These should include career pathways, soft skills, mental health, and goal-setting.

These recommended practices can lead into the fostering of equitable and meaningful relationship that are based on valid engagement processes not just empathy. A comprehensive needs assessment should be designed and implemented during registration and orientation, so that teachers and staff are more aware of student barriers and experiences. The needs assessment should be a combination of formal survey data for accountability measures and conversational interviews where students feel comfortable sharing personal information. Individual instructional plans need to

acknowledge the barriers and include both academic and personal goals for overcoming them. Finally, for those students who reveal in their needs assessment that they are missing a support network or significant relationship, the program can provide a mentor through staff members or outside resources. The mentor process can be regulated or organic, as long as the adult learner needs are met. Each of these elements were shown in the findings of the study to have contributed to the persistence of the student participants; the next step is formalizing them into cohesive practice.

Conclusion

Consistent with the quality indicators of practitioner inquiry and the goals of action research, the primary findings of this study have significance to me, the adult learners and teachers in our program, and other educators who work with this unique population of students (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Herr and Anderson, 2015). I was impacted most profoundly by the examinations of my positionality and practice as a school leader. I have been an educator for 28 years, and I have always thought I was one of the good guys, one who accepted student differences and tried to stay abreast of cultural trends and current events that affected the lives of our students. I thought of myself as open-minded and fair. Based on my experience, I probably was by all appearances and language. However, when I examined the experiences of our adult learners, I realized that my perceptions and understandings were limited to the way I had experienced the world and it was not the same. Empathy for experience is not the same as the respect and autonomy our adult learners deserve. I wish this amount of reflection and insight for them as well as the teachers and staff that allowed me to enter their world

during this study. I believe this research, founded in theory but best suited for practice, can support the perseverance of our adult learners and impact their lives for the better.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

My Proposed Questions

*Tell me about your previous school experiences...what do you think brought you to our adult education program?

How would you rate your personal academic confidence, commitment, and performance? Why do you feel this way?

*Describe your life outside of our program...who is in your family, who have been your role models, what is life like at home and (if you) work?

Who do you feel is most supportive of you in life? What about in the area of your education?

What have we done in our program with you that you feel is supportive or not supportive of your success? Do you think assumptions about you have been made by staff members? Why do you feel this way?

*How would you describe yourself, your personality and outlook on life?

Questions by Adult Education Teachers

*What have been your positive school experiences? What about negative? Why have you enrolled in adult education?

*What do you like most about school? Least? Favorite subject? How would you describe yourself as a student?

Tell me about your situation...living or life at home...employment...what do you think got in the way of completing your education?

*Who are your important people or groups or organizations in your life? How will they help you or guide you while you are enrolled in our program?

*What was your expectation of an adult ed program vs what it is really like? What have been some positive experiences or successful strategies you have learned being in our program? What do you think has been good/bad?

*Tell me about a time you set a goal and achieved it. What kinds of goals have you set for yourself in our program? How would you describe your own personality?

APPENDIX B

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your teaching background as well as your work history with adult education.
2. What words would you use to describe students who enroll in adult education in general and in our program specifically?
3. What are your expectations of students who enroll in Clarendon County Adult Education?
4. What are some specific strategies used by our program that help retain students? Is there anything more that can be done or anything we might be doing that is harmful?
5. Are there specific strategies or activities you utilize in your classroom to provide guidance and support to students?
6. Other topics generated through inquiry and discussion

APPENDIX C

GRADUATE STUDENT MATRIX OF RESPONSES

	(Todd) – dropped out at 17, did not return until 37	(Diana) – dropped out at 17, did not return until 35	(Brianna) – chose to leave school at 17 and enroll in adult ed	(Mya) – chose to leave school at 17 and enroll in adult education
Barriers	Mom got addicted to drugs, moved around a lot, did not have money for school supplies and clothes; no mention of father; car accident; had to get job and attend night classes after attending day classes during medical leave;	Mom passed away; didn't have set place to live; no mention of father; moved around a lot; became rebellious, just didn't want to go back; years later, "felt stuck"...house fire after graduation	Parents divorce; moving; limited relationship with father	Grew up with grandma; no mention of father, mother not in picture until she was 18; pregnant at 16; moved around after grandma kicked her out; ended up with DSS, living in foster care; father of baby much older and in/out of life
Previous school exp	Different schools every 3 or 4 months, lost interest, not his thing because he	Changing schools; classes were packed, not much time	Struggled to be able to study...it wasn't for me...the kids were very immature...held	A lot to focus on and classes were big...peopl

	<p>didn't feel like he fit in, made bad decisions</p>	<p>for teachers who cared to try to help students; I didn't catch on to everything, especially in math; we just didn't have time to learn the right way; I was actually a good student and on the honor roll until I dropped out; didn't know how much I missed until I came back to AE.</p>	<p>back one year...didn't make it to junior year; would study for a test and would freak out over one shot deal</p>	<p>e get left out...busy and noisy...fast paced, you gotta catch on or you just get left behind; socially, it was good, but I ended up a grade behind</p>
<p>Adult Ed exp</p>	<p>Teachers – hands on, actually help; take every avenue...show you exactly what you need to know Process – books and computer; small classes Testing – find level and go from there; no retakes Expectation/Perception – that adult ed would start you at the bottom, not</p>	<p>Teachers – made me feel like I mattered; “we’re going to figure this out” Environment – “It felt like a family surrounding me from the first day.” Process – best</p>	<p>Teachers – always tried their hardest to make sure I was doing good and to motivate me to keep going; always helpful; Process – GED seemed faster than trying to get HSD; Expectation/perception: thought it was going to be way worse; some of the people were a little scary and</p>	<p>Recognition – awards programs, I looked forward to that Teachers – very positive...you got this, keep pushing you Impact – it’s worth it!</p>

	test you to find out where you are; I didn't want to go through all of that	experience of my life Impact – could not have gotten as far without AE; ready to learn even more...went straight from AE into college, made Dean's list, credits AE Testing – pushed herself to finish; no retakes	intimidating at first; Recognition Testing – retesting made a huge difference...takes the pressure off.	
Support	Wife and kids	Relationships with teachers; children	Teachers; tracking sheets helped...I would always try to do better than I did before; friendships; surprised family was behind her...look down on not finishing high school; PYC	New Horizons; Miss Rita...positive role model; teachers always being positive; not everybody is out to get you; DSS and PYC
Motivation	Kids – to be able to help them out and pushing them to graduate;	Determined. You have to want to learn. Used	Teachers were so helpful...gave me like a push to keep going; pleasing	I wanted to go somewhere to work at

	getting back on track; “at first it was just an idea, then the idea turned into promises; getting to be too much but “they would say don’t quit, you already made it this far.”	mother’s death as an excuse for a long time, but it was just an excuse, and it became motivation: “It’s time to get off your butt and do something”; passing a test when sick showed me I could do it and I put 110% into after that.	family and having a more positive future...all of y’all were behind me and it helped me a lot	my own pace...have somebody teach me better than the way I was getting taught at my high school; I am a determined student; I know I have people standing behind me
Success/goals	Climb the ladder, qualification; considering pursuit of assoc. degree;	Working on RN at CCTC;BS in Health Sciences ultimate goal	Originally enrolled in Cosmetology school, but now working full time and wants to go back to school for nursing or dental hygiene (something with benefits)	Currently enrolled at CCTC, started right after AE graduation; working on AS in business management; wants to own her own business; plans to start cosmetology school soon (DSS

				paying for it)
Mindset	Stayed in SC to “Find my path...”; education is first and foremost; “trying”; it gets hard nobody said it was going to be perfect; stop comparing self to others	Things are going to be hard, believe me....you can’t just sit there; even on the worst days if you put your mind to it it’s possible...that’s when I knew.	Retesting and competing with yourself	If they have a positive attitude, I have a positive attitude, now I can keep going; I’ve learned to let things go and forgive people; good to open up and not keep everything in
Persistence	Other family - They were amazed I did it; you got to have a will to do it; swallow your pride and just go back and do it; “Swallow all that stuff, chunk it up, and do what you gotta do.”	Mom always told me that you can’t expect things to fall in your lap; you want it, you have to work for it; things are going to be hard, but you have to work for it.	Didn’t give up at the end when she had to retake her final test	Just keep going...I’ve been there; find that one person that no matter what, they’ve got your back, they are in your corner;
Other	Faith in God			

APPENDIX D

CURRENT STUDENT MATRIX OF RESPONSES

	(David) – 22, enrolled in AE for three years, left school at 18 to enroll in AE	(Jenn) – 33, enrolled in AE for five years, dropped out at 15	(Javon) – 18, enrolled in AE for four months, left school at 18 to enroll in AE	(Latonya) – 18, left school in Jamaica at 17, enrolled in AE when she arrived, ESL
Barriers	Didn't live with mom after he was five when brother was born; father not in life, in prison but did turn his life around...still limited relationship, too little too late;	Never made it to high school; struggle whole life, self-diagnosed LD in math...didn't get foundation; wanted to have money because of living situation; no mom; father not supportive; kicked her out of the house; he became chronically ill in her 20s, she has been taking care of him every since; "men are better at math"	Moved from NY to SC at age 6; moved more while in SC; moved to Manning and now Sumter; Dad is still in NY; hardly ever talk, he has been in and out of prison. Mother has chronic illness; has one child of his own and another on the way.	English not her first language, but very fluent; did not attend American high school at all; different culture; lives with mom; parents not together; not a close relationship with father ("I don't pay him no mind")
Previous school exp	Got in some trouble but no expelled; grades were low; hanging with wrong	"most horrific high school ever" now closed; no other opportunities or options given,	Liked HS in Manning, but struggled with certain subject; stayed out of	School at home was much more strict; history and teaching styles are different; we

	crowd, admits bad attitude; didn't like going; changed schools to smaller class size but trouble followed; chose to leave and go to WLG; attended high school through 10 th grade	so just gave up; not in trouble or pregnant; not focused on school; bad experiences with some very burned out teachers...don't know if she became scared of math or if the LD is real; reports test anxiety	major trouble; I liked to do hands-on things and not waste my time...that didn't always happen; loved welding class; not a people person, didn't like all the kids...just want to do what I gotta do and go home	wear uniforms and have to groom hair, no earrings; could not transfer credits from school in Jam; good student and confident
Adult Ed exp	At first, same attitude and behaviors, not taking any major tests, finally figured out he had a lot to learn (gaps); Teachers – Process – Retesting challenged him to do better Recognition – giving out awards made me want to keep doing it Perception – I thought I would just come here and do a little	Atmosphere – more professional; just blown away Impact – if I had opportunities like AE when I was younger, my outcome would have been drastically different (did have...she just was not informed); love yourself and do good in life; don't settle Perception – came in scared to death	Teachers – care more about what you want to do in life and getting you on the right path; hands on, especially in math Perception – felt like I was going be in here for years at first because of everything you had to do at the beginning Process – once it got	Perception – liked everything she saw from when she first came here...looked like a better opportunity; no adult education programs in Jam...American is the land of opportunity. Teachers – take time to help Testing – retaking tests gives opportunity to figure things out; didn't get upset

	work, and then I would test.	Teachers – grateful that she has been able to switch around and find what worked for her; inspire her because some of them have had the same struggles Process – taking one test at a time was helpful and the other things like TABE and WorkKeys got me a lot more comfortable with taking tests; would like materials to share with others;	going, it was pretty easy Testing – taking one test at time motivated me to keep going to the next; being able to retest was actually an advantage	Recognition – likes the fun programs that acknowledge you when you move up Strategy – group activities; encouraging students to take time to help each other
Support	Grandmother and aunts...I put them through a lot but they kept on; church and other extended family	Me and teachers in the program; my dad will say he is but he is not. He made me scared of math...people will say they support me and they will help but they never do.	Mom, been mother and father to me...big influence on my attitude...she fought and helped with everything I had to go through; adult teachers and making	Mom, anytime you want you can change your life, not like that back home; follows mom's advice.

			sure I understand my work; hooking up Eckerd connects program that pays for GED tests and eventually the welding program	
Motivation	I'm trying not to worry about the little stuff now, just the important stuff; support of auntie; when I took a retest and passed, it motivated me even more	Economic – sees GED as path to a better life; not going to get pulled down...I'm tired of watching other people bypass me or sink because of drugs; just get up and do it	My life wasn't going how I really wanted it to go...having kids helped me realize I need to get my life going; don't want to be like my father...have multiple kids and not take care of them; welding class inspired him because he found something he could be really good at	Wants to play soccer in college...five colleges are recruiting me, one in Canada; I want to be able to do better in life and go home and help my family (economic)
Success/goals	Finish – one test left; Plans to go to work and possibly go back to school when he	Get GED so I can use my certifications and get a real job; “a goal is not to be afraid	Most likely go to a technical college for welding; make some good money	Play soccer in college and become a coach; move back home to help family; I

	figures it out; get your goals accomplished and everything else is going to come to you.	of taking tests...that's a lot of my fear actually."	and just build up, houses and cars;	like to help people
Mindset	I have grown up a lot...trying to get out and trying to help other people; I know I've made mistakes, change what you can and encourage other people; just gotta do it (decision); decided it was going to be different; retesting challenged him to do better instead of giving up; You're going to fail...	Deficits: fear of math, no one supports her, but she is not going to get pulled down. Admits to feeling sorry for self and that school was something selfish. Laziness. People pleaser; aware of what works for her and has learned to advocate; so many excuses not to...school is not fun for everybody and sometimes it's a struggle; see impact under AE	Positive outlook, eager to do certain work; you are more likely to pass the second or third time	I don't get upset when I do things wrong because I know I can go back and fix it; I've made up my mind I want to be something in life; <i>just make up your mind and do what you gotta do (repeated twice)</i>
Persistence	Has attended program for three years, could have given up many times but says he has done that too often	Environment keeps me coming back; find what works for you; just get up and do it no matter what	Only been in program for four months, but would not have passed all that I already have if I had given	The pace I am going now is helping me a lot...I don't want to go fast because I might miss stuff I don't know and

	<p>in other situations; “I used to give up on everything”; says that he has changed in his three years, I began listening and disciplining myself; after the second year, something clicked, I just gotta do it; many times I wanted to quit; you gotta still keep going because it’s worth it.</p>		<p>up easily...you just have to stick with it.</p>	<p>I might use it later;</p>
Other	<p>“All this stuff going on, I used to stress about it. But now I just pray about it.”</p>			