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RETURNING TO SCHOOL: NARRATIVES OF “HIGH SCHOOL LEAVERS” AND
HOW THE GENERAL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA AFFECTS FINANCIAL
STABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by

Lauren Tarantino

B.A. Louisiana State University, May 1991
M.ED. University of New Orleans, December 1999

May 2004

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Abstract

Narrative analysis of high school leavers' individual backgrounds examines both positive and negative reasons that; students terminate their secondary education and experiences, and return to pursue a GED- General Equivalency Diploma. This analysis examines goals for the future of these students including extended education, career choices and family situations. The goals of this study are to determine why informants leave high school before graduation and to examine these reasons across racial, cultural and gender lines. This report analyzes why students returned to receive their GEDs and how they believe the receipt of the GED will affect their goals in regards to education, family and career choices.

Five themes about “high school leavers” are evident: Reflection - Why the students dropped out of school; Outside Forces - the negative and positive forces that influence the decisions the student makes; Focus - why the students finally decided to go back to school; Emotion - the role that self esteem played in relation to job status prior to and following the receipt of the GED and finally; Collaboration - the support systems that were available for the individual participants.

This research follows the efforts of nine students in their struggle to understand why they became candidates for the general equivalency diploma from their reflection on leaving school, their understanding of the outside forces that aided them in their flight from high school, their focus on opportunities life offered assuming they returned to get a general equivalency diploma, the collaboration of family and friends required to ensure

their future success and the overall emotion of achieving the general equivalency diploma that would awaken in them a new reason for life. In the end, it would be the general equivalency diploma that would change them and the lives of their families forever.

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Problem

According to the General Equivalency Diploma, the GED¹, 1990 statistical report, the population of individuals 25 years and over reached 158,868,436. Of this number, 75.2 percent or 119,524,718 persons, were high school graduates or higher. This includes those who received an equivalency. The same GED statistical report for 2000 indicates that the population of individuals 25 years and over reached 182,211,639. Of this number, 80.4 percent, or 146,496,014 persons were high school graduates or those who had received an equivalency. While this shows an increase of 5.2 percent of people who have earned a high school diploma or higher and indicates successes in the educational system, the question is what happened to the other twenty percent or 35,715,625 people reported by the 2000 census report who failed to receive a diploma or an equivalency. (See Table 3 and Table 4).

For many students, and especially this twenty percent of America's population, there is a discrepancy between the way education should be practiced and the way it is practiced. A new vision of education is needed in order to continue the work currently being done and change the educational system for those who may fall or have fallen through the cracks. In order for educators today to fully understand what needs to be changed and what commitments to our

¹ The GED is referred to as both the General Education Diploma and the General Equivalency Diploma in a variety of sources. The term General Equivalency Diploma will be used in this text.

future are necessary to make these changes, educators must reflect on their experiences with their own education to inform them of curricular and instructional policy changes that would benefit the entire student body. While this vision cannot be summed up in a few words or ideas, the first step, as always, is to understand the problem. Why do high school students become “high school leavers”?

For some students, going back to school and getting a GED is immediate. After finding that the traditional high school format is not for them, they choose either to be home schooled or to attend adult education classes and get their GED as a way of entering college (Boesel, 1998). For others, achieving their GED is less immediate, but is pursued in a matter of years. These students find themselves getting their GEDs in night school adult education classes, job related employee assistance classes and even jailhouses. Still others find themselves many years later walking up the front steps of schoolhouses to study for and receive their GEDs prompted by years of low self-esteem and even lower job status of financial stability.

Students, who leave high school and return to receive a GED, either immediately or years later, return for as wide a variety of reasons as they left for. In the decision making process to receive the GED, there is the thought of future goals and aspirations whether they be educational, career minded, financial or family oriented. The reasons for leaving school and returning to school are the keys to better retention policies in high school and better understanding of the needs of a segment of society for which school may not be one hundred percent appropriate. Unfortunately, for this group, voices are not heard and their feelings continue to be disregarded as their stories remain untold.

The purpose of this investigation is to interview adults who were “high school leavers” and returned to get their GED and then pursued higher education. By cross analyzing these

interviews, it may be possible to determine similarities and differences in lifestyle, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds that underscore the reasons “high school leavers” have abandoned traditional schooling as well as the reason they decide to return to school.

In this chapter, the researcher looks at the introduction to the problem and includes six additional sections: the purpose of this research, the method of investigation, the need for study, the rationale and significance of the study, the definitions used in the study and the limitations of the study.

Purpose for this Research

The purpose of this research is to highlight the reasons students leave high school and their reasons for returning to receive a GED. It is to give a voice to those who feel they have had no voice in their educations, their lives, their families, or their futures. Included in these narratives are discussions about the time period in which the students returned to school, the experiences, both negative and positive, surrounding their return to get their GED and how they felt after receiving their general equivalency diploma. The research looks at their career trajectory immediately following the receipt of the GED diploma, their ideas on educational and career opportunities and how they feel they have changed following receipt of the GED. The objectives of this research, therefore are:

- *to learn about why students, including women and minority students, leave the traditional high school scenario for other opportunities.
- *to contribute to a body of information about career choices and the effect of having a GED on choosing a career.
- *to collect stories, experiences and narratives about education and different tracks men and women, regardless of ethnicity, may follow other than the traditional high school to university trajectory.
- *to analyze these experiences and stories in an attempt to locate common reasons for leaving high school.

*to analyze these experiences and stories in an attempt to locate common reasons for returning to the education arena to receive a general equivalency diploma.

*to discuss how receiving a GED has changed these students and if it has influenced their career opportunities positively or negatively.

*to discuss the theoretical framework which supports and stabilizes the grounds for this research.

Theoretical Framework

In searching for a framework that would accurately describe the work I wanted to accomplish and the information I had researched, I looked for a model similar to the one Comings' (1999) had used in his work on "Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students." A theory of the way adults learn, their reasons for returning to school and the experiences they incorporate into their education as they make their way back into both the educational arena and the career arena can be satisfied through Lewin's theory of adult learners. This theory would place the adult learner in a centralized position in which he would be subjected to both negative and positive influences. Lewin, a sociologist, placed the adult learner in a position that both supports and inhibits action (Lewin, 1999). The study indicated the ways the students overcame the negative forces or used the positive forces to further their education potential. Understanding these influences, both negative and positive, and identifying the strongest and weakest determinants and thus the ones that are most easy to manipulate could give an indication of how to help someone move toward their desired goal, and in the case of adult basic education, toward the goal of literacy. McClusky's (1970) theory of margin similarly places the adult learner at the center of a series of positive and negative influences that the learner must learn to negotiate in order to be successful. McClusky theorized that increasing the positive influences and decreasing

the negative forces would be the key to the learner's education. Comings' use of Lewin's (1999) theory of adult learners was quite similar to one that I wanted to focus my own study on and therefore I adapted it for this study on "High School Leavers."

Method of Investigation

The methodology of the research is that of Bruner's (1990) description of narrative. Narrative is the words of the subject incorporating the ability to mark what is culturally historical but also to account for cultural deviations. It is a method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings. It is a study of human plight, of myths and of analyzing and cross analyzing accounts of incidents or events. It is the human ability to share stories of diversity and to make interpretations relative to the divergent moral commitments and institutional obligations that prevail in our culture.

Narrative allows the story of the speaker to be told in the words of the speaker. It is this style of narrative writing that I plan to incorporate thus giving voice to the individual stories and allowing the readers to form their own opinions and ideas about the background of the interviewee.

This style of narrative allows the voices of the informants to come through as they are – unchanged, undeveloped and raw giving way for a more emotional story to be told. The potential for narrative goes even further than just the story that is told however. It carries on through the perspective of the reader, the writer and the interviewer. The informant sees and understands the interview and the story differently thus each story is understood on vastly different levels because of perspective. This however is what makes the writing and the reading of narrative so much richer and more vibrant and tells a far greater story than the research could without it.

Narrative is a method of inquiry that blends a variety of features including case study,

vignettes, and the narratives of a life's history. It is a mix of esthetics in an effort to capture the feelings, emotion and true sense, dynamics, experiences and lives of the participants of a research study. Narrative marks the stories of individuals and their relationships with their families, communities and schools (Lawrence –Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Through this relationship and because of this relationship, narrative was chosen for this research as the absolutely critical understanding of the lives of these participants and what brought them to the decision to leave school, the reasons they chose to achieve the GED instead of a high school diploma and the reasons for their career choices following achieving the GED. Narrative is the words and feelings and descriptions of the speaker that allow the reader to see the informant as a person. Narrative is the story of the teller told in the words of the interviewee as the story and experiences of a lifetime (Lawrence –Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).

The use of the poetry inside of the story is called poetic transcription. Here the researcher fashions poetry from the words of the interviewees (Glesne, 1997). The writer attempts to get to the heart of what is said and the emotions expressed. This forces the researcher to focus on the most important point of the interview and to express it with few words but lots of feeling. It is a third voice created by not just the researcher and not just the interviewee but a combination of them both. It also dissolves the barriers of separation between the interviewee and the interviewer.

This style of commentary allows for a mix of literary principles with art and science in order to create the most well rounded view of the life of the participant and to see it alongside others who shared similar feelings, experiences, emotions, backgrounds, cultures, and lifestyles. It also allows for a greater sense of the writer to “become” in the research itself.

Whether the style is strictly narrative or first person in which the researcher uses text taken from the narration to strengthen the writing, the style is distinctive and dramatic and promotes a better understanding of emotion than any other style and methodology available.

The procedures for carrying out the proposed research are very specific. The research was conducted in a mid-sized urban city. Nine people were interviewed for the purpose of this research. The interviews were between thirty minutes and two hours long. This allotted the interviewee ample time to speak and to express their stories and feelings without much interference from the interviewer. Bell's (1988) approach of open-ended questions was incorporated, "Listen with a minimum of interruptions and to tie questions and comments...by repeating their words...whenever possible."

The narrative research of each individual began with an interview that initiated follow up interviews. These interviews were analyzed for common traits and threads shared by the interviewees and then synthesized along with a pre-published body of knowledge that helped determine the answers to the research questions and to satisfy the goals of the research project. (Cone and Foster, 1993; McMillan and Schumacher, 1997). Additionally, each interview is "member-checked" by the interviewee after transcription of the interview. This allowed the interviewee to comment on words or phrases that were used to further clarify and describe their experiences. Each interview was read by other educators in secondary education and post-secondary education to "peer debrief" and to look for additional concepts in the interview that were missed. Finally, follow up interviews are used to ascertain further information and clarify unanswered questions.

Those interviewed in this project were students who returned to school after a period of

time in order to receive their GEDs and students who left school and then returned to receive the GED. All participants in the project were involved in some form of higher education after receiving the GED. These informants were influenced by socio-economic factors as well as an educational system that did not or could not recognize their need for help or their need for alternate education. This study also includes students who were considered “push-outs” , a tactic employed by some high schools who do not wish their rating to be decreased due to students who left school as “drop outs” or did not succeed as well as they should have. These students were not academically advised that the standard educational track was not right for them and that the GED or other form of alternate education would perhaps have been a better idea (Gnanadass, et. al., 2002). This is not to say that education itself failed them, but the participants recognized that they were allowed to slip through the cracks in the system and regardless of their feelings on education understand that without it, their future possibilities are limited.

Need for Study

In determining why students make the choice or are in some other way forced to leave high school, educators may begin to understand how to retain them instead. There seems to be something that is missing from the high school career for students who have chosen to leave and seek other venues that those who do continue and receive a high school diploma cannot share or understand. Educators need to understand why these students felt out of place, not wanted, not needed, not challenged, not appreciated, not helped in the school system and why they felt forced to withdraw for one reason or another. It is equally important to understand the reasons for receiving the general equivalency diploma as well as how the GED affects career goals and how these goals affect the financial and family structure of the student.

Males and females from a variety of ethnic backgrounds were studied. All those who

participated fell between the ages of 20 and 30. Participants over the age of thirty fell into a gray area prior to what we considered the standard education of today. The GED itself has changed four times since its origins during World Wars I and II reflecting changes in America and the economic trends that America was following. Participants younger than twenty may still be influenced by parental guidance and may be taking the GED as an end result to home schooling that would skew the findings of this study. Also, this age group reflects the students who fall in the average age of students, 25 (Boessel, 1998), who return to school to receive the GED. Additionally, the GED is meant for students at least one year out of high school, although some students report taking the GED immediately after being suspended from school and thus being allowed to graduate at the same time as their high school graduating class. Initially, women were considered a major source of information as women display a concept of “caring about themselves” as described by Noddings (1984). However, in preliminary interviews with men, males also display this concept of “caring” about themselves, about their families, about their future and maybe most significantly, about their children. This is not to say that women did not display these feelings, simply that men did as well and therefore should be included in the study in regards to their feelings and experiences that they bring to this topic.

Rationale and Significance

This project is significant because it listens to the students themselves in determining why they left school as well as looking at overall national averages of students who have left school and the numbers associated with why, when, and how they returned. It is important to understand the reasons why these informants left school, especially students who, for one reason or another, felt that they did not fit into the educational system than it is to note the fact that the student left school.

Reporting on the stories of these students brings the experiences of “high school leavers” into better focus. The term “high school leavers” is used in the place of “drop out” because not all students who leave high school prior to receiving a high school diploma have done so because they were forced to drop out. Many students who have left high school prior to graduation did so to search of a job, start a family or because they felt that high school education was not beneficial to them and sought education in some other fashion. Some perceived that they were not challenged, were not cared for, or not accepted and just “faded” from the school system with no one to stop them and at best, a vague suggestion that they would do better elsewhere (Gnanadass, et.al., 2002). Their narratives help to better understand these negative and positive influences which forced them to leave school and return at a later date for an alternate form of education – the lack of job opportunities or the ability to find jobs after leaving high school, the desire to return for a GED and the improvement of job opportunities or even the view of “no change” opportunities upon receipt of the general equivalency diploma.

This project can further assist educators in identifying students who may be considered at risk for leaving high school and enable them to help students receive the education that is the most beneficial to their future career or educational choices. In studying why students pursue their GEDs at some extended period of time after leaving high school and how this affects their career choices and educational opportunities, educators will be challenged to devise alternative methods of education.

Studying why students decide to return to get their GED can help educators look at the larger picture of what is wrong with our educational system and what could be changed in order to benefit those students who slip through the cracks of the system. There is a need to look at

how education is failing many students; what influences, positive and negative, play a part in their return for continued education, and why receiving a GED and hopefully continuing their education past the GED stage can impact careers and even change the job trajectories of students.

Definitions

The following definitions are based on the key words used in researching the subject of the proposal as well as any vague or unexplained terminology used in the abstract or in the research paper.

*accountability – responsibility of the student, family and friends and the educational system

* adult education – students who are returning to school after having left school or have been out of school for a period of time

* andragogy – literally means “the study of mean, to teach man”, meaning any adults regardless of gender or ethnicity. Andragogy takes into consideration that adults have a variety of experiences that they are coming to the learning arena with and these experiences, backgrounds and narratives may influence the way they learn as well as their career choices and feelings about education.

*ethnic - also ethnicity, any of the multiple cultural backgrounds located in an area including but not limited to African American, Hispanic American, Asian American or Caucasian.

* General Equivalency Diploma - GED; a certificate obtained by students after having left high school for any one of a variety of reasons. Similar to a high school diploma but issued by the state instead. This term is used alternately with General Education Development. In order to obtain a GED, a student must return to a testing site, take the appropriate classes and then be tested to determine educational levels.

*high school equivalency programs - the programs a student must go through in order to receive a General Equivalency Diploma. This may include night school or some other program sponsored by a vocational-technical school, which is a school designed to teach vocational or technical careers like mechanics, nursing, automotive, early child care, electronics or one of a variety of other careers, the individual’s employer, or a community college.

*high school leavers - students who have left high school prior to graduation in search of a job, starting a family or who felt that high school education was not beneficial to them and sought education in some other fashion. This does not constitute the same “high

school leavers” who have left high school after graduation and did not go on to receive further advanced education in the college, university or vocational - technical systems but opted for another career trajectory.

*narratives - any stories that the interviewee may have in regard to his or her education, background or life experiences and told in the informants own voice

*portraiture – the artistic retelling of a person’s life including experiences, lifestyle, and background as told by the researchers point of view

*socio - economic - economic status based on where someone lives and the social status that they were born into, i.e. lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class and upper class.

*stigma - the socio-historic and socio - economic stereotypes for having done something or received something like a General Equivalency Diploma. Generally regarded negatively.

*student - anyone in high school, vocational/technical training, university or college setting or adult learning returning as a student to receive a general equivalency diploma regardless of gender, ethnicity or socio-economic background.

Limitations

Five limitations of narrative have been identified: positive images versus negative images, the researcher’s bias when choosing what to include in the transcription of the story, the “halo effect”, “tangential confidences” and sharing confidences as therapy.

Through its very definition, narrative casts a positive image instead of a negative image on the stories the participant chooses to tell. The participant wants to be cast in a positive light and wants the reader to believe that anything that happened negatively to the participant was not a direct result of any action taken by the participant. This makes it difficult to determine what the “truth” really is. The researcher then has to assume that what the participant shares with the researcher is the “truth” although the “truth” is translated often depending on who is telling the story and how that person perceives the events.

The second limitation is the researcher’s bias about what to include in the transcription.

This means that the researcher chooses not to transcribe slang, dialectic nuisances, or redundant information in an effort to make the transcription “cleaner”. It also means that the researcher chooses to include only parts of the narratives of the participants, thus taking them out of context of the original narrative, instead of using the narrative in its entirety. Either way, the narrative becomes an immediate interpretation of the researcher’s concept of the “truth” and of what he believes the participant has said.

The third limitation is called the “halo effect”. This involves the participant telling the researcher what he or she thinks the researcher wants to hear instead of answering the questions directly. For this reason it is often better not to prep the participant with the research questions in order to make the answers to the research questions more spontaneous.

The fourth limitation is best described as a “tangential effect”. Here the participant breaks off onto a tangent storyline that remotely involves the action of the narrative but does not directly involve answering the researcher’s question. Often, the tangent storyline is so compelling that the researcher does not break into the narrative to guide the participant back on track of answering the original question. The tangent storyline then becomes a part of the narrative and the researcher finds himself or herself analyzing bits and pieces of other storylines in an attempt to answer the original questions.

The final limitation is therapy as a narrative. It is important for the researcher to draw the line between asking the questions and seeking the stories that can help to define his or her final question and asking questions that do not pertain to the research. Often these types of questions are asked for personal curiosity and have no place in narrative research.

Understanding these limitations makes it possible to determine the style of portraiture and narrative research to be used in this study. The complete narratives of the participants are used to

tell the stories of their experiences, careers and lives. This allows the reader to experience the “truth” the participant wishes to share instead of the “truth” the researcher understands the story to express.

The organization of the study itself consists of the viable and necessary literature discussing the census statistics of the GED as well as the ideas, theories, concepts, beliefs and research of others who have studied the phenomena of high school leavers. It then presents the methodology of the study followed by a series of narratives of the informants. These are the stories of the participants, spoken in their own words, about their decisions to leave high school, the rational behind returning to school to receive the GED and finally how they feel about their lives, careers and job opportunities and how they feel the GED has affected their educational stance. Following these narratives is a series of analysis of the narratives with a final conclusion and summary of the research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

For one fifth of the population (GED 2000 Statistical Report: 2001), the concept of finishing high school is a remote one. These individuals either do not have the will or the desire to stay in school or are forced to exit before the graduation date for a variety of reasons. Some feel that working in a specific field provides a better opportunity for income or can give them more concrete training experiences than a high school education can afford. Others find that working full time to meet family financial requirements is far more important to their immediate needs than a high school diploma (Brouillette, 1999). Still others leave high school due to negative influences such as a lack of encouragement from families, starting families of their own, boredom in classes that do not challenge them enough (Engel, 1994), or feelings of failure in classes that are too far advanced. Many fall under the influences of drugs, alcohol and gang related violence (Brouillette, 1999). These individuals, are pressured by the lack of a nurturing, caring environment and strong positive forces to join groups or gangs that provide what the student presumes to be a caring atmosphere.

Many students who leave school later reflect on how different their lives may have been had they opted to finish high school and get their diplomas. Those who left to join apprenticeships, vocational-technical tracks, merchant marines or some other career track may have had the opportunity to follow other fields as job markets change and other employment opportunities became more enticing. Those who left to help support families found that having a diploma from high school would have been more advantageous to future career opportunities

than they had once thought (Engel, 1994). Others whom had previously left school due to negative forces such as the lack of encouragement from families and friends discovered a new support in the positive, strong influences of new relationships. Those who left school due to boredom (Engel, 1994) or feelings of failure found that alternate forms of education offered advantageous that learning made learning not only easy but fun and interesting as well. Those students who left high school to start families of their own often found their families have grown up, have gone off to high school and maybe even continued onto college. Their low self-esteem due to their own lack of education may have prodded them into returning to school. Finally, those students who were “school leavers” based on the negative outside influences of drugs, alcohol and gang harassment might have kicked the habit or overcome the feelings of meaninglessness and hopelessness (Brouillette, 1999) and discovered that going back to school or getting some form of certification such as a GED could possibly have been a part of the recovery they sought (Boesel, 1998). Engel refers to these students as “school leavers” because they were not necessarily all students with a fixed time of leaving school. Some “faded out”, gradually, over time, now and again absent and some were “push outs” who left under the harassment or continued non-encouragement of administration, peers or parents. (Engel, 1994, Brouillette, 1999).

This review of literature is divided into twelve sections including why students leave school as well as the way the educational system instructs returning students and adult education students. The following is a list of sections included in this chapter:

- the origins of the GED
- the causes for dropping out or becoming a “High School Leaver”
- the drop out rates as well as “Push-Outs” rates

- who is taking the GED
- types of GED students
- a profile of selected economic characteristics for 2000
- why GED students are less likely to go to college
- what roles states play in adult education
- adult education in other countries
- the role of persistence in adult education
- how we can increase students' chances in college in theory and in practice
- educational and vocational training
- career trajectories and adult economic success
- high school leavers, GED starters and GED completers
- the effectiveness of current GED programs and school intervention

The review of literature is organized chronologically beginning with the origins of the GED and ending with implications of adult education and career goals. Along the way, it discusses the general practices of high school compared to adult education, reason why students become “high school leavers”, why they return to school and the statistics of those who do return to school. The review ends with a look at preventative measures and the possibilities of how to keep students in school.

Research on the GED

Origins of the GED

According to Boesel (1998), the GED program was originally initiated by the United States Army as a way to qualify soldiers for the GI Bill that they could receive only if they had a high school diploma or the equivalent. During the 1930's and 1940's, many men were being

drafted who had not had the opportunity to complete high school or even to enter high school.

The army initiated a program to help these men obtain a high school education so that they might enter the job market at a higher status or attend college without having to return to the high school setting. By 1947, with the introduction of a state diploma program, New York had transformed the GED from a national assessment test to a high school credentialing program (Auchter, 1998; Murnane, 1999). By the 1950's, the GED program was becoming more and more available to the public, and any one who was in need of a high school equivalency test in order to qualify for further education sought the GED as a means to an end (Boesel, 1998).

The validity and credibility of the tests changed only according to periodic review. Between 1942 and 1998, the test itself had changed only three times (Auchter, 1998) although Andrews (2002) notes that a further update of the GED test went into practice in January of 2002. In 1942, the GED reflected an industrial era when having a high school education meant that almost any job was available to the owner of the diploma. This test was the longest standing of the three generations of the GED when over forty percent of the test takers took the test for employment reasons. Thirty –seven percent of those who had taken the test by 1977 indicated that they had planned to continue on with further education (Auchter, 1998).

By the mid-1970s, changes in the way Americans viewed education had forced changes in the GED as well. The test, following the end of the industrial age, shifted from factual knowledge to conceptual knowledge in science and social studies. The test assumed prior knowledge of certain subjects. It continued to emphasize designated high school outcomes but introduced life context information into many of the questions including material that adults would encounter in their daily lives. For example, it included reading schedules and understanding newspaper articles (Auchter, 1998).

By the mid 1980s, society had turned almost completely from an industrial age to an information age. Technology became more and more commonplace in schools, not just university settings, but also Pre-K through high school. Technology was not just for those who could afford it, it was for the masses. By the end of the 1980s, it was evident that “keeping up with the Jones” in education meant understanding the technology that was being used and that would be incorporated into the universities and job markets over the next ten to twenty years. Without skills in educational and job related technology, those who had not had the proper training were being left behind. These changes were affecting many adults, thus four changes were put into effect: the GED incorporated a direct writing sample, it increased emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving skills, it reflected the changes of diversity of adults in society and it increased the contextual setting relevant to adults (Auchter, 1998).

Since 1993, more than ninety percent of those who took the GED took it to further their educational or occupational skills; the remaining ten percent, statistics show (Murnane, 1999), took it for personal reasons. Since 1997, seventy percent of those who took the test took it to continue their education. This more than doubled the number of students who took the test to continue their education in the mid-1970s, approximately 231,000 in 1971 to more than half a million in 1998 (Murnane, 1999). Today, more than ninety percent of colleges in the United States admit GED graduates (Auchter, 1998) and one seventh of the young Americans who report on government surveys that they are high school graduates are actually recipients of the GED and obtained their GED after leaving high school (Murnane, 1999).

Ironically, one might suppose that, since postsecondary institutions are welcoming students with GED credentials, the military would do likewise, especially since it was the military that instituted the first GED program for returning World War I veterans. However,

since the mid-1980s, the U.S. military has set a limit of 10 percent for new recruits who have GEDs . It has also instituted a three-tier policy that places GED recipients in the second tier. These decisions were based on evidence of GED recipients' high attrition rates (Brown, 2000).

Now the General Equivalency Diploma is widely regarded as a second chance for high school dropouts. These dropouts, as Engel (1994) notes, just left one day and never came back. Gnanadass terms them as “pushed out”- students who were forced to leave due to internal or external conflicts or “faded out” - students who started cutting class one at a time until over time they simply thought it better not to attend (Gnanadass,et.al, 2002). Sessom and Taylor (1997) add that the GED program is meant to award the GED to students who can pass an examination to prove knowledge that is at least equal to that of a high school graduate. Where these students go after graduating with a GED diploma and why they chose that particular career course is the purpose of this project.

The GED is a substitute for the high school diploma and is accepted as the equivalency to a high school diploma, however, it does not satisfy every aspect of education that the high school diploma satisfies. Although skill level does appear to be similar, academic knowledge does not appear to be quite as high for GED students. (Boessel, 1998). High school graduates accumulate 2.1 years more of core curriculum classes than GED students and the GED does not measure knowledge recall, a measurement inconsistent with its progressive origins (Boessel, 1998). The thirty hours of time on task work that a GED recipient must perform as a prerequisite for achieving the GED does not equate to the additional core curriculum classes that high school graduates must receive in order to achieve a high school diploma (Boessel, 1998).

Causes for Dropping Out or Becoming a “High School Leaver”

Causes for dropping out of high school, as mentioned by Brouillette (1999), are often external but relate more to the family situation. Many families feel the need for an additional paycheck in order to survive and the student becomes that source of income. These students may also be encouraged by their parents to leave school as their parents might see an immediate earning potential as better than one worth waiting for. External influences also include unplanned pregnancies and addiction to drugs and or alcohol. Other reasons for dropping out of school center on internal factors like not knowing which direction to turn for help in a confusing or demanding situation, feelings of hopelessness, loneliness and fear.

It is helpful to understand that this phenomenon of “dropping out” or becoming a “high school leaver” is not solely a racial or ethnic phenomenon. Deyhle (1992) points out in her study of Navajo and Ute “school leavers” that the phenomenon exists across cultural and racial borders and geographic regions. The phenomenon is widespread but the concepts of why and when are very similar. In her descriptions of Navajo and Ute “school leavers”, the students talked about alcoholism, financial instability, family crisis and the importance and power of families sticking together. All of these were the same themes that surfaced again and again in similar discussions with students in both urban and rural communities, males and females and in varying ethnic backgrounds.

Deyhle (1992) notes that the students spoke of academic and social marginalization quite like students from other social and ethnic backgrounds. “It was just like they wanted to put us aside...they didn’t tell us nothing about careers or things to do after high school.” This quote by a Navajo student reflects the same feelings of frustration and lack of hope that MacLeod (1995), Noddings (1984) and Rose (1990) all note in similar studies of minority students, female

students and students in both urban areas and students from the American Southwest and their feelings about their own education.

Deyhle (1992) adds that in mainstream research, the blame of failure is often placed in the hands of the student and never associated with the teacher, the parent or the community. Students who leave school, are often described as “deviant, dysfunctional or deficient because of individual, family or community characteristics.” However, these characteristics are not bound to one race or ethnic group as Rose (1990) describes in his narratives of Mexican and Latin American students and as MacLeod (1995) discusses in his experiences with street kids in Chicago. The decision to leave school can then be seen, in part, as a “rational response to irrelevant schooling, racism, restricted political, social and economic opportunities, and the desire to maintain a culturally distinct identity” (Deyhle, 1992) Although this does not explain the student’s decision to return to school, it does help to explain the reasons for leaving and indicates that the actions are not defined by one population or gender or determined by one social class or ethnic group.

Exact reasons for leaving high school often vary, but the themes are usually very similar. Nearly all dropouts say that school is boring, that teachers do not care for them and that school will not help them to accomplish what they want or need in life (LeCompte, 1987;Engle, 1994). Racial and economic relations in the community and school, child rearing patterns and cultural integrity and resistance often become part of the problem. The negative feelings of dissatisfaction with schools, mistrust, alienation, and academic difficulties form the basis that supports larger socio-cultural structures.

Many “school leavers” claim that classrooms and learning were dominated by lectures, seat-work and tests. Three of the nine students interviewed for this research concluded that there

was no reason to stay in school because it was boring and they already knew everything they were going to learn, that high school in effect only rehashed everything they had already experienced in grade school and middle school. Engel (1994) notes that students felt that teachers only dispensed subject knowledge and that they told students what had to be learned. Students then repeated what they memorized and were given grades based on memory skills.

What was absent then was student participation and involvement in the learning process. “Good” teachers engaged the student. “Bad” teachers dispensed knowledge to the student. Students then gained no sense of meaning and this led to cutting classes or “fading out.” Eventually so much work was missed and so little was understood that when the students did make the effort to study or succeed or pass, the odds were greatly stacked against them. Many reported feeling stupid and found it easier not to pay attention. They were bored and eventually left high school altogether (Engel, 1994). Other students reported conflicts with students and high school personnel (Engel, 1994). Some cited harassment occurring off campus that led to fights inside the school building.

This research shows that the phenomena of “high school leavers” is not bordered by ethnicity, socio-economic background, culture, geographic location, gender or environment and that those faced with the decision to leave high school or stay make those decisions because of other factors – factors which are similar despite their obvious differences.

High School Leavers- Drop Out Rates

Between 1972 and 1996, approximately seventeen million people took the GED test. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1986). Ten million people, or sixty percent, of those that took the test received a high school equivalency based credential.

The high school completion rate represents the proportion of 18- through 24-year- olds who have completed a high school diploma or an equivalent credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) credential. The high school completion rate is based on the population of young adults ages 18 through 24 who are not still enrolled in high school or below; the status dropout rate is based on the population ages 16 through 24. Thus, the age range of the status dropout rate is 2 years wider, and those 18- through 24-year-olds who are still enrolled in a high school program are excluded from the calculation of the high school completion rate. Because of these differences, the status dropout rate and the high school completion rate are not the simple inverse of each other.

Despite the increased importance of a high school education, the high school completion rate for the country has increased only slightly over the last quarter of a century. Between 1972 and 1985, high school completion rates climbed by 2.6 percentage points, from 82.8 percent in 1972 to 85.4 percent in 1985; since 1985, the rate has fluctuated around 85 and 86 percent. This net increase of about 3 percentage points over 28 years represents slow progress toward achieving the national goal of a 90 percent high school completion rate (National Education Goals Panel, 1999).

Table 1

High School completion rates of eighteen through twenty- four year olds not currently enrolled in high school or below by race and ethnicity, October 1972-October 1999.

	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Black, Non- Hispanic</u>	<u>White, Non- Hispanic</u>
1972	23	29	35
1975	25	29	35
1977	24	30	35
1979	24	30	35
1981	23	31	35
1983	24	30	35
1985	26	31	35
1987	25	32	36
1989	23	32	36
1991	23	33	36
1993	24	32	36
1995	24	33	36
1997	24	32	36
1999	24	32	37

National Education Goals Panel, The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners, 1999 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999).

High school completion rates analyzed within each racial/ethnic group have shown somewhat similar patterns over the past 28 years. Whites exhibited a positive trend in their high school completion over the last quarter of a century. Specifically, high school completion rates for white students went from about 86 percent in the early 1970s to about 90 percent in the 1990s. Since 1990, white completion rates have fluctuated around 90 percent. The high school completion rate of 91.2 percent for white young adults in 1999 was higher than their completion rates in every year before 1990 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

Table 1 also shows that young, African Americans adults also made significant gains in completing high school education over the last quarter of a century. The 1999 African American completion rate of 83.5 percent is significantly higher than their completion rates in every year before 1984. This shows that a greater proportion of young African American adults are now completing high school than they were in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since 1990, African American completion rates have fluctuated around 83 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

In addition, a low percentage of Hispanic adults complete high school programs. In 1999, 63.4 percent of all Hispanic eighteen through twenty-four year olds had completed secondary schooling. The 1999 rate was significantly higher than the completion rate in 1972 of 56.2 percent. Completion rates for Hispanics increased between 1980 and 1985, and then remained at the same level between 1985 and 1999. The 1999 completion rate of 63.4 percent indicated no

significant difference from the 1985 rate of 66.6 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

Along the lines of age and sex, young adults ages eighteen to nineteen that were no longer enrolled in high school were less likely than older adults to have completed high school. In 1999, approximately 83.8 percent of adults eighteen to nineteen not currently enrolled in high school had completed their secondary schooling, compared with 87.4 percent of young adults ages twenty-two to twenty-four (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

As might be expected given their relatively lower dropout rates, females age eighteen to twenty-four who were no longer enrolled in high school were more likely to have completed high school than their male peers. In 1999, 87.1 percent of young female adults had completed high school compared with about 84.8 percent of young male adults (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

According to region and state, young adults in the Northeast and Midwest had higher completion rates than those living in the South and West. Eighty-nine to 90 percent of young adults in the Northeast and Midwest completed high school compared with 84 percent in the South and 82.5 percent in the West (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

“Leaver” rates were also compared for high school completion on a state-by-state basis. These data show considerable state-by-state variation. Using the 1997-99 three-year average, the national completion rate was 85.5 percent, with the average completion rates ranging from 74.5 percent in Nevada to 95.3 percent in Vermont (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

With drop-out rates and “high school leaver” rates as they were, the government looked at why students were choosing to leave high school, how to retain them in high school or how to

further their education after high school or after dropping out so that they might become more economically viable to a growing, changing country and to themselves.

The implications for this may be a change in the way the educational system in the United States is operated. Currently, students feel that they must finish high school and then move on to college and attain a college degree. This may not be the case as all students are not cut out for the university track and find that training in a certain field is more appropriate toward their aptitude for learning and career placement. This supports the phenomena of why students go back to high school after “leaving” to receive a high school diploma or GED.

This allows for the concept of making a choice. Many students might choose not to enter high school if given the choice between high school and alternate education that could include vocational or technical training. Another choice might be an abbreviated high school career followed by two years of vocational or technical training depending on the interest of the student.

Push Outs

“Dropping-out” or “leaving” high school is only half of the problem. The other half of the problem is “push-outs.” These are the students who schools know will not be able to meet the criteria of rigorous standardized state assessments. Some schools “push” them to other programs so that school test scores will not be lowered and dropout rates will not be reported as increasing. Many are pushed to the GED program even though they are still adolescents (Gnanadass et.al.,2002).

Gnanadass reports incidences where counselors in high schools pushed students to alternative educational programs (Gnanadass et.al, 2002). This scenario of students being “pushed-out” of high school is becoming increasingly common and once removed from high

school, the student's progress is often not followed. Many end up not receiving the GED or any other form of certification.

Unfortunately, during the last two years, the population of the youngest GED certificate seekers, ages sixteen and seventeen, has increased. The rapid increase of young people leaving high school and enrolling in adult literacy and GED courses poses serious questions to both policy and program not only for the GED and adult literacy classes but also for the students, employers, and traditional educational institutions (Gnanadass et.al, 2002).

Issues concerning the increasing number of younger students attempting the GED include the need for a substantial level of social and support services for adolescents, the lack of awareness of the full range of alternative programs available to students, a lack of understanding about the skills needed to earn a GED, how the GED is perceived by universities and employers, and the demand of the workplace for more sophisticated skills to gain access to better jobs (Gnanadass et.al, 2002).

Tables two and three separately look at the census 2000 in comparison to the census taken in 1990 in reference to the educational attainment of students in the population of the United States 25 years and older. Table four shows both tables simultaneously. This profile is limited by those who actually took part in the census and may or may not reflect death rates or birth rates of the population.

Table 2**Profile of Selected Characteristics: 1990**

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		
Population 25 years and over	158,868,436	100.0
Less than 9th grade	16,502,211	10.4
9th to 12 th grade, no diploma	22,841,507	14.4
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	47,642,763	30.0
Some college, no degree	29,779,777	18.7
Associate degree	9,791,925	6.2
Bachelor's degree	20,832,567	13.1
Graduate or professional degree	11,477,686	7.2
Percent high school graduate or higher	75.2	(X)
Percent bachelor's degree or higher	20.3	(X)

GED 1990 Statistical Report, (1991) American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

Table 3**Profile of Selected Characteristics: 2000**

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		
Population 25 years and over	182,211,639	100.0
Less than 9th grade.	13,755,477	7.5
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	21,960,148	12.1
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	52,168,981	28.6
Some college, no degree	38,351,595	21.0
Associate degree	11,512,833	6.3
Bachelor's degree	28,317,792	15.5
Graduate or professional degree	16,144,813	8.9
Percent high school graduate or higher	80.4	(X)
Percent bachelor's degree or higher	24.4	(X)

GED 2000 Statistical Report: (2001) "Who Took the GED?" American Council on Education,

GED Testing Service.

The following is the comparative look at the educational attainment among United States citizens between 1990 and 2000.

Table 4

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	2000 – Number	2000 - Percentage	1990 - Number	1990 - Percentage
Population 25 years and over.....	182,211,639	100.0	158,868,436	100.0
Less than 9 th grade.....	13,755,477	7.5	16,502,211	10.4
9th to 12th grade, no diploma.....	21,960,148	12.1	22,841,507	14.4
High school graduate (includes equivalency).....	52,168,981	28.6	47,642,763	30.0
Some college, no degree.....	38,351,595	21.0	29,779,777	18.7
Associate degree.....	11,512,833	6.3	9,791,925	6.2
Bachelor's degree.....	28,317,792	15.5	20,832,567	13.1
Graduate or professional degree.....	16,144,813	8.9	11,477,686	7.2
Percent high school graduate or higher.....	80.4	(X)	75.2	(X)
Percent bachelor's degree or higher.....	24.4	(X)	20.3	(X)

GED 1990 Statistical Report, (1991) American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

GED 2000 Statistical Report: (2001) “ Who Took the GED?” American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

Along with this profile is the set of economic characteristics from both census years.

These corresponding profiles show a relationship between educational attainment and employment status for the national population.

These figures indicate a decrease in educational attainment and an increase in the numbers of students who have achieved either a high school diploma or a GED. Unfortunately, they also show a drastic increase in the number of students who have enrolled in colleges and universities and have not received a diploma.

This reflects a change in the educational system and the educator's ability to retain students and graduate more students from the high school level who eventually go on to post high school education in the form of two year or four- year colleges. However, it ignores the concept that many students may be following the wrong high school career track depending on their interests and that alternative forms of high school should be investigated.

Who is Taking the GED Test?

In 2000, there were more GED test takers in the sixteen to nineteen age groups than any other age group (Table 5). Individuals aged twenty to twenty-four accounted for the next largest percentage and as age increased, the percentage decreased. Eighteen percent were between thirty and forty-nine years old and three percent were fifty years or older. The GED test is an option for many people who are preparing for jobs or post-secondary education as indicated by the following tables (Table 5 and 6).

Table 5
Age Distribution of GED Credentials Issued

	Credentials Issues, 2000	16-17 Years	18- 19 Years	20-24 Years	25-29 Years	30-49 Years	50 and Older
United States	486,997	16%	29%	25%	10%	16%	2%
SREB	200,755	19	17	24	11	17	3
Alabama	7092	10	35	26	12	16	3
Arkansas	7105	31	21	19	10	17	3
Delaware	661	20	23	27	12	16	2
Florida	29,312	11	37	26	9	15	2
Georgia	18,703	17	34	23	10	14	2
Kentucky	13,211	12	24	26	12	22	4
Louisiana	8373	26	27	23	11	12	2
Maryland	6,200	15	28	26	11	18	2
Mississippi	6660	-	-	-	-	-	-
North Carolina	14, 858	24	24	23	10	17	3
Oklahoma	8,096	19	23	24	11	19	3
South Carolina	5,654	22	24	25	11	15	2
Tennessee	13,742	23	26	21	10	17	3
Texas	46,148	22	24	23	11	18	2
Virginia	11,386	20	28	22	10	17	3
West Virginia	3,554	15	30	24	11	17	3

Table 6**Age Distribution of People Taking the GED Tests**

	Number Tested, 20002	16-19 Years	20-24 Years	25-29 Years	30-49 Years	50 and Older
United States	811, 2000	43%	25%	10%	17%	2%
SREB	324,327	44	24	11	18	3
Alabama	11,646	41	27	12	17	3
Arkansas	8,578	52	20	10	16	2
Delaware	853	41	28	11	17	3
Florida	45,148	45	27	10	16	2
Georgia	33,761	46	25	10	16	3
Kentucky	17,838	37	26	11	21	5
Louisiana	11,136	51	24	11	13	2
Maryland	11,704	38	27	11	22	3
Mississippi	13590	-	-	-	-	-
North Carolina	23,270	44	23	10	19	3
Oklahoma	11,599	42	24	11	20	4
South Carolina	8,472	45	25	11	16	3
Tennessee	21,330	47	21	10	18	3
Texas	82,132	44	23	11	20	3
Virginia	17,586	45	21	10	20	4
West Virginia	5,684	40	24	11	21	4

These results vary according to gender. Male GED recipients tend to work less than dropouts and have more job turnover than female recipients who work more and have less job turnover. However, when compared to high school graduates, GED recipients are less likely to be employed, have higher job turnover and earn less according to the American Youth Policy Forum (Boessel and Alsalam, 1998).

These statistics should encourage students to stay in school, to receive a high school diploma or achieve the GED in order to further their education and career opportunities and diffuse the high job turnover stigma associated with high school leavers. For many, achieving the GED, meant the difference between low income and moderate income, no education to an open door to education and no job opportunities to increasing job opportunities. This further defines the support system of the student and gives meaning to words like encouragement, support, self-esteem and structure.

Types of GED Students

There are many types of GED students just as there are similarities among “high school leavers.” The first type of GED student is the student who leaves high school and immediately attends a GED program in order to remain with his or her class and enter into higher education. These students may leave high school in an attempt to leave a violent situation although Brouillette’s (1999) report in the Kappan notes that less than half of the students interviewed had been involved with gangs. Or, these students think that school is not teaching them what they need to know, they are not learning what they need to learn or they wish to seek their education elsewhere (LeCompte, 1987). A third aspect is that they may not be receiving the challenge or the encouragement they need in order to “want” to stay in school. Brouillette (1999) reinforces

Deyhle's (1992) study that many of the students felt that school was useless and that the adverse feelings of hopelessness and uncontrollable circumstances that many felt by remaining in high school could be avoided by leaving school and seeking education elsewhere. Brouillette (1999) does mention that the GED is associated with positive benefits derived from a better association between students and instructors. The GED was not simply a rite of passage but also represented a change in the way students viewed education and their futures.

The second type of GED students appears to be adults who return to school after some hiatus to fulfill the requirements necessary to enter into a two or four year program. This group of students is further separated into two categories: those who go on to higher education in the school system and those who are looking toward the vocational, technical, merchant marine or other such field.

Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics: 2000

Although receiving the GED as an alternate form of the high school diploma and improving one's financial status and job related marketable skills is the primary reason for taking the GED test, studies show that those receiving the GED still earn less than those who have received a high school diploma. The 1996 Census Bureau reports that GED recipients age fifteen and older received fifteen percent less than high school diploma recipients. This same study shows that GED recipients and the number of dropouts without GED certificates are the same (Andrews, 2002).

Murnane (1999) claims that changes in the American economy over the past twenty years have been unfavorable for high school dropouts (Murnane, 1999). Between 1979 and 1996, earnings for males between twenty-five and thirty-four fell by twenty- eight percent. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that the percentage of eighteen to twenty-four

year old Americans who left high school without a diploma increased from 21.2 percent in 1994 to 25.3 percent in 1998 (Murnane, 1999).

A central point here, critical in understanding the GED, is that the outcome, economically speaking, is much like achieving the high school diploma. The labor market value of the GED is different for students who leave school with very weak cognitive skills than it is for students who leave school with stronger skills. Students who leave school with weak cognitive skills tend to have a more difficult time in today's job markets (Murnane, 1999). This may result in large periods of unemployment speckled by short-term blue-collar jobs. This type of track record makes a "high school leaver" very unattractive to job placement agencies and employers. However, receiving a GED changes this record with employers who see that the "high school leaver" has matured and has acquired at least a minimum set of cognitive skills. This allows them improved access to jobs and the all too important work experience (Murnane, 1999). Employers believe that GED holders are more productive employees than are dropouts who lack the credential. Hence, employers may sometimes use the GED as a sign of hard to observe attributes such as motivation, dependability and commitment. Thus students with the GED credential could expect to be hired and given better wages than those without the GED or high school diploma (Tyler, 2003).

For those who leave high school with strong cognitive skills, the GED does not improve labor market outcomes (Murnane, 1999). Overall, the GED allows low skilled "high school leavers" in their mid-twenties to earn about as much as high skilled "high school-leavers" who don't possess a GED (Murnane, 1999). GED holders are not the labor market equivalents of high school graduates (Tyler, 2003).

For students with weak cognitive skills, studying for the GED can lead to an increase in skills that can be valuable in the job market. For those who receive the GED, there is a direct correlation between time spent studying for the GED and the amount of human capital accumulation (Tyler, 2003).

Students who drop out of high school and earn a GED do not do as well in the job market as those who stay in high school and earn a high school diploma (Murnane, 1999). GED holder's quarterly earnings were estimated to be \$285, \$326, \$330 and \$336 more than the quarterly earnings of "drop-outs" without a GED. This represents a fifteen percent gain in earnings for a successful GED candidate (Tyler, 2001.) "It does not appear that the GED is an economically valuable credential for dropouts, but only for those who leave school with weak cognitive skills. There appears to be no payoff to a GED for dropouts who leave school with higher [cognitive] skills (Tyler, 2003)." This may be noted in Tables 7 and 8 that represent the employment status of the population over 16, and compares it to the population over 16 of females only, as of the 1990 census.

There is another aspect to the impact of the economy due to GED diplomas. "In fiscal year 1999-2000, federal funds for adult education programs authorized by the adult education and Family Literacy Act of 1998 totaled \$365 million. The bulk of these funds benefited GED preparation programs offered by public high schools, community colleges, community based organizations, prisons and other organizations involved in adult education" (Tyler, 2003). The economic effect of the GED is not only felt by those who choose to receive the GED but also by those who choose to pay for it.

Table 7**Profile of Selected Characteristics:2000**

EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Population 16 years and over	217,168,077	100.0
In labor force	138,820,935	63.9
Civilian labor force	137,668,798	63.4
Employed	129,721,512	59.7
Unemployed	7,947,286	3.7
Percent of civilian labor force	5.8	(X)
Armed Forces	1,152,137	0.5
Not in labor force	78,347,142	36.1
Females 16 years and over	112,185,795	100.0
In labor force	64,547,732	57.5
Civilian labor force	64,383,493	57.4
Employed	60,630,069	54.0

GED 1990 Statistical Report, (1991) American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

Table 8**Profile of Selected Characteristics:1990**

EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Population 16 years and over	191,829,271	100.0
In labor force	125,182,378	65.3
Civilian labor force	123,473,450	64.4
Employed	115,681,202	60.3
Unemployed.	7,792,248	4.1
Percent of civilian labor force.	6.3	(X)
Armed Forces	1,708,928	0.9
Not in labor force.	66,646,893	34.7
Females 16 years and over.	99,803,358	100.0
In labor force.	56,672,949	56.8
Civilian labor force	56,487,249	56.6
Employed	52,976,623	53.1

GED 1990 Statistical Report, (1991) American Council on Education, GED Testing Service.

Why are GED students less likely to go to college?

Even though many use the GED to further their employment prospects, many others use it to further their education aspects. Students who earn a high school diploma however, are more likely to go to college than those who earn the GED. Among high school sophomores with strong cognitive skills, 20 percent of those who earned a GED completed at least two years of college. This compares with 64 percent who received a high school diploma (Murnane, 1999). Those who receive the GED tend to come from lower income families than high school graduates (Murnane, 1999). Additionally, their parents were less likely to have completed high school as well. Another possibility is that success in the GED does not guarantee success in college. After examining the validity of the GED diploma, several educators have compared results of the GED and those taking the GED test to the results of the high school diploma and those that have received the high school diploma instead of the GED. No significant differences were reported between grade point averages or ratios of credits attempted to credits passed (Auchter, 1998). Receiving a high school diploma does not guarantee success in college but the odds of having a high school diploma and doing well in college seem to outweigh the odds of having a GED and doing well in college (Murnane, 1999).

Brown (2000) notes, however, that although universities do accept students who have received the GED as opposed to a high school diploma, most universities accept them only on the basis of acceptable ACT or SAT scores. This may be why most GED students have grades that are comparable with the grades of high school students while in college (Brown, 2000).

Boessel and Alsalem (1998) believe that the GED should not replace the high school diploma at all. Compared to the GED recipient, a high school graduate gets 861 hours more of core curriculum, or 2.1 more years of education, than those who receive the GED. Recognizing this, high school students below the age of sixteen are not allowed to take the test (American Youth Policy Forum). However, Murnane (1999), and Boessel and Alsalem(1998) believe that the GED is a second chance to improve education and many schools develop GED and Adult Basic Education programs as a “leaver” prevention strategy.

One of the reason why scores are similar among students who have received high school diplomas and students who have earned a GED is that the average age of GED recipients is twenty-five instead of the average age for high school diploma recipients which is eighteen (Brown, 2000). Those who receive the GED most likely have more real world experience than high school graduates which can contribute to positive test score outcomes.

Brown (2000) agrees with Murnane (1999) and Boesel and Alsalem (1998) that GED holders do lack certain employability skills that seems to extend from a lack of a high school diploma.

Once again, this research shows that achievement of the high school diploma enables a student to attain a higher level of education as well as a better career opportunity and better financial aspects than those students who have opted for the GED although recipients of the GED have a better opportunity at receiving greater career skills and increased financial potential than students who have left high school and not returned for either the high school diploma or the GED.

For the purpose of this study, this implies that students who made the decision to return to school made the active choice to improve their education thus making the choice to improve

their financial stability and job opportunities. Regardless of why they chose to leave school, the decision to return was an active one that had positive influences on job ability and finances. These positive and negative influences reflect Lewin's theory of the adult at the center of a series of positive and negative influences which can affect the way the adult learner participates in their own education.

What Roles Do States and Other Countries Play in Adult Education?

A majority of the states primarily serve as administrators of federal and local funds for supporting adult education and literacy. They provide matching funds, organize distribution of the funds and seek out local contributions. Many states exert their power to an even greater extent by combining their funds with other states. Finally some states set goals and performance measures and then look for funds and resources to meet their goals (Chisman, 2002).

In 1986, only 2.15 percent of those who needed to take the test in Chicago actually took the test (Center for Impact Research, 2000). Higher percentages tried for the credential in three other cities – Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Miami. Only sixty-four percent of those taking the test in Illinois in 1996 passed the test, thus ranking Illinois number forty-two on the list for overall rankings (Center for Impact Research, 2000).

The Center for Impact Research noted that there are four reasons why students either do poorly in taking the GED tests in some states or why they do not take the test at all: lack of diagnostic information to help adults decide whether or not they are ready to take the test, length of prep classes, long waits to take the test and low numbers of assessable testing sites. In answer to many of these problems, many of the states who have experienced one or more of these situations have opened more sites, implemented public service announcements to allow students more preparation time, and notified them of upcoming testing dates.

Tennessee conducted their own research in Adult Basic Education (Bingman, et.al, 1999) that showed that some adults reported improvement in their daily lives following receiving the GED as part of their continuing education. The findings of the Tennessee report supported the conclusion that adult basic education is a positive factor in employment. Additionally, adult basic education leads to increased self esteem, better job opportunities, and increased financial and family stability (Bingman et.al, 1999).

In Colorado, adult literacy follows a strict line of accountability by tracking age, race, gender, level of education and ability. Performance measures are documented by improvements in literacy skills in reading, writing and speaking English, numeric skills, problem solving, and language acquisition. They are also documented in reference to placement, retention and completion in post-secondary education, training, employment or career advancement. Receipt of a high school diploma or other certified form of diploma such as the GED is often equally recognized (Colorado Department of Education, 2000).

The majority of high school non-completers in Wisconsin earn a high school credential by passing the GED. Since 1960 over 100,000 persons have earned GED high school equivalency credentials. It has become increasingly difficult to pass the GED test in Wisconsin however. In 1978, passing the GED test entailed nothing more than having a sixth grade reading level. In 1981, additional time was given for taking two of the five GED tests. Because of this, by the fall of 1979 through the fall of 1984, GED holders, as a group, had low retention rates in college. Only four percent of the 294 freshmen enrolled in 1979-80 had earned college degrees by spring 1985. Eighty-four percent had left school without graduating. Of the 1,982 GED holders in the study who left college before graduation, thirty-five percent had earned no credits,

and eighty-five percent did not reach their sophomore year (Powasarat et.al, 1986). GED holders, as a group, performed worse than high school graduates.

Due to Wisconsin's problem with testing rates and retention rates, Wisconsin raised the minimum age GED testing to eighteen and one-half years. This forced the mandatory education age to a higher level as well as added two years of experience called "life experience" to those students who chose to take the GED. Additionally, GED students had to show at least a tenth grade reading and math level as opposed to the previous sixth grade reading level. Wisconsin also began to require that GED certificate seekers had to go through career counseling prior to taking the GED. Wisconsin's steps towards improving their adult basic education system for "high school leavers" has increased their standing in literacy rates to be equivalent with other states in the United States (Powasarat et.al, 1986), thus supporting the premise of basic adult education.

The phenomena of "high school leavers" is not based on where the student lives, the students ethnic or cultural background or the economic level of the student. Students from varying environmental and regional backgrounds may become "high school leavers" and either opt to become "GED achievers", "alternate-tract" achievers or non-recipients of the high school diploma or the GED.

Adult Education Elsewhere

Adult education is not just a phenomenon of the United States. Canada has also taken up the concept of further training for adults and incorporates their own assessment and evaluation for basic education of adults. By the 1980s, literacy work had gained visibility and importance, along with a strengthened organizational infrastructure, although it remained and still remains a

vulnerable part of the field. Changes in labor force and social security policy have reshaped the opportunities available to adults who complete the adult education programs.

Canada comprises ten provinces and two territories, where powers for education are shared within the federal system. Furthermore, the Canadian government has passed two acts that entrust to the Northwest Territories and Yukon the responsibility for education, while funding is provided federally. Each of the provinces and territories has created a ministry or department of education, and directs the provision of educational services.

Education in Canada differs slightly from that of the United States especially following high school. Many students do not choose to attend the university setting but instead choose from a variety of settings including vocational training. Apart from this, education in Canada is similar to education in the United States. Students in Canada can obtain Bachelor's Degrees, Master's Degrees and Doctorate Degrees each of which are similar in requirements in time spent to degrees conferred upon students in the United States (Council of Ministers of Education, 1997). Canada is ranked among countries that invest the most in education, especially adult basic education, and has one of the highest post-secondary participation rates in the world (Council of Ministers of Education, 1997).

Reasons for continuing education in Canada are quite similar to those reasons for continuing education in the United States. Students who enter adult basic education programs enter these programs for the same reasons: better employment opportunities, increased financial opportunities, self improvement, increased self esteem and the desire to aid in their child's education.

Since the mid-1980s there has been a noticeable increase in Canada in adult participation in education and training. In 1983, one out of five adults, or about nineteen percent, took part in training activities during the year. In 1993, according to a 1994 study by Statistics Canada, more than one in four, or about twenty-eight percent (twenty-seven percent in 1991) participated in some type of education or training. In other words, participation in adult education in Canada increased by 330,000 people since 1991. That corresponded, in 1994, to more than 5.8 million people age 17 and over, excluding those adults who were enrolled full-time in a training program but who were included in Statistics Canada's calculations. Participation was at 7.2 million adults. This may be noted in Table 9.

Table 9**Adult Education and Training in Canada Registration Full-time and Part-time - 1994**

Adults:	20.8 million
Not currently enrolled:	13.6 million
Currently enrolled:	7.2 million
Part-time:	5.8 million
Full-time:	1.4 million
PT distance:	0.4 million
PT Traditional:	5.4 million
FT Distance:	0.1 million
FT Traditional:	1.3 million

Source: Adult Education and Training Survey, 1994

When one compares participation rates by province, it becomes clear that participation was lowest in the Atlantic provinces, particularly in Newfoundland, at nineteen percent, and in New Brunswick, at twenty percent, and highest in British Columbia at thirty-five percent.

Participation due to work-related goals is twice as high, twenty percent, as the rate for training motivated by personal interest at twelve percent. This is especially the case for self-training, those with no support from the employer. Participation rates for women are fourteen percent and for men, nine percent. However, in employer-supported training activities, participation rates are almost the same for women at twenty-one percent and men at twenty percent.

Table 10

Participation rates: Adult education and training, by province, Canada, 1994	
<i>Provinces</i>	<i>%</i>
Newfoundland	19
Prince Edward Island	25
Nova Scotia	25
New Brunswick	20
Quebec	24
Ontario	29
Manitoba	30
Saskatchewan	27
Alberta	34
British Columbia	35
TOTAL	28

Sources: Statistics Canada, Survey on Participation in Adult Education, 1994

This information in regards to Canada's educational system is significant because it proves that although the GED is credited to the United States military, its usage has spread to other countries as a form of alternate education for many "high school leavers". Adult education and training has increased in other countries partially due to the increase in availability of post high school diplomas as well as an increased awareness in the necessity for education availability for students who have chosen to become "high school leavers." This also indicates that the United States is not the only country faced with the dilemma of student retention. The educational system has to be reconsidered not just across state lines but across country borders as well. This means that the education problems that many feel plague the United States causing the United States to fall behind in world standards are not truly problems of the United States alone and exist not just across our borders but overseas as well.

The Role of Persistence in Adult Education

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL, 1999) reports that it is vital in adult continuing education for an adult learner to be in contact with others who have finished adult basic education and have either continued their education in a college or university setting or who have gone to better job opportunities or better financial opportunities.

The NCSALL also reported that structured funding and accountability systems had to be in place in order to support persistence of adults in basic education programs. (NCSALL, 1999).

One of the findings of the NCSALL was that immigrants over the age of thirty and parents of teenagers or grown children were more likely to persist in their studies than others. These findings seem to point to older students persevering longer in their education because of maturity that comes with age and because they no longer have the responsibility of dealing with small children (NCSALL, 1999).

Two other aspects seem to be associated with persistence. First, adults who have been involved in previous efforts at basic skills education, self study or vocational skills training were more likely to continue their education than those who had not. Secondly, adults who had a specific goal in mind, like helping their children to learn or getting a better job were more likely to endure than those who had no goal in mind or had mentioned that they were pursuing their education “for themselves” (NCSALL, 1999). These relationships suggest that motivation supports persistence.

Four other supports to persistence included:

- management of the outside effects that help and hinder persistence
- self-efficacy
- establishment of a goal by the student
- progress towards reaching that goal

A need for a better education, improved financial status and a desire to help one’s children are forces that positively increase steadfastness in adult learning behaviors. On the other hand, lack of free time to study, lack of adequate transportation and lack of sufficient child-care are negative forces that cause an adult to drop from an adult basic education curriculum.

Intervention to increase persistence must strengthen the positive forces and lessen the negative

forces. This can be done by determining what factors act on the individual and then determining which of them are significantly deterring the individual and which are significantly aiding in the adult's education (NCSALL, 1999).

Self-efficacy is all about adults reaching their goals. This is based on the adult's feeling of being able to achieve the task set before them. Adults must have mastery experiences that allow adults to be successful and to have evidence of that success. Adults should also have vicarious experiences that allow them to come in contact with other students in GED classes who have succeeded in such classes. Additionally, adults should have social persuasion that includes support from family, friends, co-workers, teachers, staff and fellow students. Finally adults should address emotional states and psychological status that would help them deal with high emotion and stress levels (NCSALL, 1999).

Establishing a goal by the student is another way of increasing persistence in the student to finish or further their education. Goals for furthering education may be sparked by children entering school, co-workers losing jobs or co-workers getting promotions. The main goal seems to be the adult role of worker, family member and citizen (NCSALL, 1999).

The final support is progress toward reaching the goal of the adult. Students must be able to measure the progress that they are making in their own education and these students must be supplied with assessment procedures to measure their progress (NCSALL, 1999).

Dropouts or "leavers" who leave the adult basic education programs are difficult to contact and often make the measurement of reasons why students leave adult basic education programs imprecise. Additionally, "leavers" of adult basic education are those defined by NCSALL as those who have left the program. Many of these students return the following year or even a few months later to complete their education. Some choose to join other programs in

different locations. A study of ESOL students in California showed that twenty-five percent of those who were considered “leavers” had actually left the program to join other programs (NCSALL, 1999). This could prove that the current view of high school and what is commonly considered acceptable education must be reconsidered in order to accommodate the standards we set for our students and to make their standing in society more profitable both for themselves in education and jobs and for the economic and educational front of the country itself.

How Can We Increase Students Chances in College?

Murnane (1999) describes four goals that should be attained in increasing student’s chances of doing well in college: provide another opportunity for students with weak skills and employment records to make up for losses; improve access for GED recipients in post-secondary education; minimize the incentive for students to drop out with the intent of obtaining a GED; and finally, to minimize the incentives for counselors to council students who drop out and pursue the GED.

Brown (2000) points out that in a study of students entering two year colleges it was found that more GED recipients than high school graduates were placed in developmental English, reading and math courses. This can again be attributed to the number of hours devoted to study. GED students spend one hundred hours of instruction for a one-year gain in reading ability. This can be compared to high school students who spend over four hundred hours in high school core curriculum classes.

Another reason for relatively low scores for GED recipients is that many GED students lack the discipline for a strong work ethic, good interpersonal skills and perseverance (Tyler, 1998). Additionally, other life experiences lead students to drop out including pregnancy, marriage, family problems and poverty which all pose barriers to an ability to perform

successfully (Brown, 2000). Brown believes that the road out of poverty and to economic security is linked to continuing education (Brown, 2000).

As a group, GED recipients may not achieve more than high school graduates, but they do realize comparable outcomes when they apply themselves. However, GED policies must not make it easier for high school students to drop out as such action can have unintended negative consequences. Staying in school is always preferable to dropping out. In this information age, when wage inequality is increasing and education is a key to successful employment outcomes, the GED is a vital educational option that can help high school dropouts improve their labor market potential (Brown, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

Theory in Practice-

Lewin's Theory of Adult Learners at the Center of the Educational Arena

In searching for a framework that would accurately describe the work I wanted to accomplish and the information I had researched, I looked for a model similar to the one Comings' (1999) had used in his work on "Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students." Comings' (1999) use of Lewin's (1999) theory was quite similar to one that I wanted to focus my own study on and therefore have adapted it to this study on "High School Leavers." A theory of the way adults learn, their reasons for returning to school and the experiences they incorporate into their education as they make their way back into the academic arena and the career arena can be satisfied through Lewin's (1999) theory of adult learners. This theory places the adult learner in a central position that would allow the student to be the focus of negative and positive influences and shows how the learner either overcame the negative forces or used the positive

forces to further their education potential. Lewin, a sociologist, places the adult learner in a position that both supports and inhibits action (Lewin, 1999). Understanding the influences, both negative and positive, and identifying the strongest and the weakest and the ones that are most easy to manipulate could give an indication of how to help someone move toward their desired goal, and in the case of adult basic education, toward the goal of literacy.

Some positive influences include available day care for children, financial aid, job availability and encouragement from family members and friends. On the other hand, negative influences can include lack of day care for children, lack of finances to enroll in school, difficulty finding jobs that can be scheduled around school, and lack of encouragement from family and friends.

In the case of adult education, the learner is the central character with both positive and negative forces being applied to the learner that either aid in the learner's persistence toward education or inhibit the learner to some degree toward getting an education. The negative forces try to push the learner away from the goal of education. Positive forces help adult learners to persist in their education. Outside of the context of education, these forces may not even be seen as forces acting toward or against the adult learner in achieving their goal of education. In other words, parenthood for most people might be seen as a very positive experience. On the other hand, for the adult learner who is attempting to go to school, study and complete their education, parenthood may have quite the reverse effect and even negatively influence the ability for the student to continue in his or her education (Lewin, 1999).

Another way to look at this example is to overlay the theory on children in school. Children are compelled to stay in school until the age of sixteen in most states. Thus the legal mandate for children staying in school until the age of sixteen is a positive influence. They

persist in their education because they understand that it is the “right thing” to do. They may or may not have other positive forces that aid them in their persistence in their education but they stay, for the most part, because of legal mandates. There may in fact be negative forces that act on these students. These negative forces can include incompetent teachers, feelings of hopelessness, lack of parental involvement, and the irrelevancy of the school curriculum or the need to earn money (Lewin, 1999).

After sixteen, the drive to stay in school is largely a response to a particular culture or influence of society. These forces include peer groups who are still in school or include family the influence of society. These forces include peer groups that are still in school or family persuasions and values that assume high expectations for their children. These same positive forces however, may also influence negative behavior, depending on the viewpoint of the child. Too much pressure to achieve can actually frustrate a student and cause him or her to give up. For most however, positive forces outweigh the negative forces (Lewin, 1999).

It is the narrative stories of the experiences of the participants that can give first hand information as to these positive and negative influences. Reading and attempting to understand the ideas and narrations of the participants helps to determine the “identity” of the participants. Thus, narration again becomes the best method for learning helps focus on the choices that shape and mold decisions for leaving school and the choices that must be made in the years that follow as a result of leaving school.

For adult learners, the positive forces may include the need for better jobs, increased financial stability or the desire to help their own children succeed in education. These forces aid in the persistence of education. For the adult learner, positive and negative forces continue to act on the learner until the learner reaches the level of education that is their goal. Any intervention

by outside sources meant to increase the positive influences in the adult learner's life must also decrease the negative influences.

The first step is to consider what acts upon the individual. The next step is to consider which forces can have a positive aspect and which can have a negative aspect in acting on the adult learners persistence in their goal of education. The stronger aspects in the individual's life must be made stronger and the negative aspects must be made weaker. These aspects are ones that are continuous; they vary in degrees of strength and weakness as opposed to categorical which are either present or not present. These barriers might include low anticipation of success, previous negative educational experience or continued lack of enthusiasm and encouragement from parents or other family members. On the other hand, positive supports are listed as good training for a future job, increased financial standing, self-improvement, desire to aid children and increased economic stability. This theory looks at these positive or negative outside controls that the adult learners see as influencing their lives, and determines which of these strongly affect persistence (Lewin, 1999).

Additionally, there is a concept of teaching adults as adults instead of as older versions of children. Andragogy or, teaching man – as Knowles(1980) described it, assumes that adult men and women come to the learning arena with both positive and negative forces, strong and weak, affecting them, their well being, their feelings, emotions, and the lives they choose to live based on the experiences they receive and the circumstances which they may not choose but ultimately become a part of their lives. This is grounded in a theory of education about teaching adults that Knowles (1980) introduced and that Lewin (1999) backed in his concept of positive and negative forces. It is not a theory but an understanding of how adults learn. It is this set of circumstances,

these experiences, these situations that guide adults to the decisions they make either by their own choice or what they feel is their lack of choice. It is a belief in their own educations and in the desire to learn that brings each one of these people to the goal of the GED as an alternative to high school in preparation for future education, better opportunities, extended careers, improved pay and greater self esteem.

The social stigma of attaining a GED has far reaching effects. Some students simply do not wish to pursue a GED because of the implications attached to it - of not being able to achieve a high school diploma, of not being able to “stick it out” in high school or of simply not being smart enough to get the education they needed in high school. This stigma is a social - historical stereotype. In the past, GED students were considered to have a “lesser” education than students who completed high school. This stigma of the educational experiences of GED students is being overcome by the overall involvement of more educators in the system and a better understanding of learning styles and capabilities as espoused by such men as Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). Additionally, Knowles (1980) draws numerous “implications for the design, implementation and evaluation of learning activities with adults...andragogy has changed the role of the learner in adult education (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991).”

Initially, Knowles’ theory of learning for the adult student created a lot of controversy. Knowles’ originally claimed that andragogy characterized adult learning and that pedagogy characterized childhood learning. This seems at first to reflect Freire’s (1970) theory of education in which he employs metaphors to explain the differences between pedagogy and andragogy. Freire uses the metaphor of banking for pedagogy, i.e. that children are empty receptacles for depositing sums or amounts of education into, and the metaphor of “problem posing” for andragogy- give an adult a problem to solve, give him the tools he needs to solve the

problem and then let him solve that problem on his own. Later Knowles' position was clarified stating that "andragogy-pedagogy represents a continuum and that the use of both techniques is appropriate at different times and in different situations regardless of the learner's age (Knowles, 1980; Merriam and Cafarella, 1991)."

Additionally, Merriam and Cafarella (1991) note that Hartree (1984) observes that it is not clear whether Knowles presents a theory of learning or a theory of teaching and whether adult learning is different from child learning. Knowles' assumptions are stated as what an adult learner should be "like" instead of what an adult learner really "is." Although it seems to be a good practice, the theory itself is not valid.

Additional theories anchor themselves in adult life situations that include experiences, background, and responsibilities. McClosky's (1963) theory of margin situates the adult in a time of growth, change and integration where the adult seeks balance between the amount of energy needed and the amount available. McClosky calls this the "margin of life... margin may be increased by reducing load or increasing power. Or it may be decreased by increasing load and/or reducing power (1963)." The energy needed is the positive energy that is received that motivates them toward a goal. The energy that is available and going out is negative energy that holds them back from their goals and may deter their focus. McClosky's theory of margin applicable to learners who are leaving high school is two fold. First the negative energy that holds them back from their goals and deters their focus is the lack of encouragement and guidance that they need to remain in school and complete their education, thus starting them on a path of little success and low self esteem. Examples of negative energy may include alcoholism, abuse or relationship trouble. Secondly, there is a positive energy that motivates them toward their goal. This is encouragement from family and friends and successes at smaller ventures that

eventually lead to a larger goal. This theory is similar to the components of Schlossberg's model for counseling adults by accessing relative strengths of four factors: situation, self (internal strengths), external support, and strategies one has developed to handle stress. These four relative strengths also support the validity of themes for coding and understanding the stories and narrations of students who are considered "high school leavers."

Knox's (1980) proficiency theory is also based on adult life situations and adult learning. (Merriam and Cafarella, 1991). Knox states that adult learning is important because of the position of the adult learner at the center. Lewin's (1999) theory of adult learning reflects this same concept. Knox's theory is that of the capability to perform, i.e. vocationally and financially, if given the opportunity to do so. This theory helps to explain motivation and success in learning capabilities and life roles including parenting and employment. Knowles' theory, stated plainly, is - give the adult a chance to learn and he will do so.

Another theory of adult learning is offered by Jarvis (1987). It begins with the adult's life situation and experiences. "Even miseducative experiences may be regarded as learning experiences...all learning begins with experience." Jarvis' theory relies on nine responses to an educational experience in a given social situation. Three of them are non-learning responses – presumption, nonconsideration and rejection; three are non-reflective responses – preconscious, practice and memorization; and three are reflective responses – contemplation, reflection and experimentation. The reflective responses call for involvement of the adult learner in his own education.

These concepts additionally suggests Cross' framework (1981) which places the barriers toward education as either situational, having to do with the life of the adult, institutional, having

to do with the program that the particular adult finds himself in, or dispositional, having to do with the overall attitude of the learner as he or she enters the learning arena.

Thus, each individual learner finds that the forces that affect him or her in the persistence toward education can be categorized as personal experiences, motivations toward education, or likes and dislikes; life-forces, such as transportation, day care, and outside support; instructional history such as tutoring, teacher and student support and the availability or lack thereof of curriculum and materials; and availability of programs like counseling, setting, and scheduling.

Knowles (1980) wrote about his concept of adult education (andragogy) and distinguished it from pedagogy that he defined as simply “education” although its literal translation is the education of children. Knowles (1980) published on adult education and andragogy over twenty years ago and yet the concept of his theory is still a solid one. Knowles’ theory takes into consideration the learners concept of learning, the role of past experience on learning, the learner’s readiness to learn and their own orientation to learning. This theory plays a significant part in studying adult students who return to school to get a GED as it aides the educator in better understanding the needs of adult students. Although andragogy specifically translates into the education of man, the theory applies to both men and women alike and is especially useful in the education of women and minorities as it allows for the past experiences and understandings of these ethnic and gender groups to become a part of the learning experience. Too often women and minorities take the back burner in their own education, even in classes specifically designed for these minorities such as “Women in Film” or “African American Literature.” “Andragogy”, as a theory for education, allows for these minorities to have a voice in education, a “voice” that many students feel often goes unheard. Although this concept may seemingly not be applied directly to GED students and “school leavers”, it is

significant in that the reason for their leaving in the first place may be directly associated with how they felt their education was processing.

In 1993, Gardner challenged the concept of all education and built on Knowles' concept of teaching. Gardner claimed that all students are different and thus learn in different manners. Educators cannot expect that all students learn in the same way and therefore must tailor their lectures, classes, educational experiences, and teaching styles to fit a variety of student's needs and capabilities.

Although Gardner's theory (1993) comes from special education and the neurobiological factors in learning and understanding, it is important to associate Gardner's theory with Knowles' theory because Gardner's (1993) theory deals with learners understanding concepts in different manners. Regardless of why they understand educational concepts differently, the fact of the matter is that they do. In like manner, Knowles discusses why adult education and child education must be approached differently. Regardless of why these sets of learners understand differently, the fact of the matter is that they do. Gardner (1993) added to the concept of learning by further dividing how we as human beings learn into seven categories or "intelligences." These intelligences describe different ways that students learn and acknowledge that no two students are alike and therefore neither are their learning styles or learning abilities. These intelligences include the Visual/ Spatial, the Logical/Mathematical, the Verbal/Linguistic, the Musical/Rhythmic, the Bodily/Kinesthetic, the Interpersonal/Social, and the Intrapersonal/ Introspective. Knowledge of these "intelligences" has become the basis for a new pedagogy, one in which educators teach children based on the child's appropriate learning styles. If this pedagogy is so important for children, why then would it not be similarly useful in Knowles' andragogy? Gardner (1993) describes the differences in education for women and minorities

much like Knowles does. Gardner (1993) acknowledges that these minorities learn differently from the typical “white male” student learner and therefore must be given the opportunity to experience education as such. Knowles concept of andragogy discusses quite the same material but spins it for adult education instead of a pedagogy that is quite useless in teaching adults. This clarifies that no two students are capable of the same objectives in high school and that what is right for one may not be right for another. This is especially true when discussing and planning education of groups other than white males who have predominated the learning arena. With this in mind, it is important to remember that the “high school leaver” rate may have nothing to do with how well the student is doing or did in high school but instead with how that student feels he or she was being taught. This theory does not reflect on career analysis but does help us to understand why students learn or fail to learn in a particular manner and thus may aid us in understanding why students return to high school at a later date in order to finish their GED if they do indeed return at all.

Finally, MacLeod (1995) analyzed how social status and education are reproduced from one generation to the next thus causing a downward cycle in socially and economically impoverished neighborhoods. MacLeod (1995) studied social interaction and the impact on education in Chicago’s low-income neighborhoods. This concept of the “reproduction theory” in education, or the lack thereof, is mirrored in Deyhle’s (1992) discussion of Ute and Navajo Indians in America’s Southwest and in their educational backgrounds.

MacLeod (1995) studies social interaction and economic poverty associated with gangs in both rural and urban areas. His study follows gang members into adulthood from their often violent and “hopeless” teenage years and compares their lack of education with future job and earning potential. These “high school leavers” and gang members often feel the same aspects of

rejection and hopeless attempts at education that students from other ethnic, cultural, racial and gender based backgrounds often feel. The reasons for and how educators teach to these students are the same on the base line as Gardner (1993) describes in his pedagogy and Knowles' in his andragogy. The reasons are the same, only the names have changed.

These concepts of education are significant to the research because they show that alternative education is often more appropriate for many students. These are the students that education sees as "falling through the cracks." Gardner (1993) proves that all students learn differently and that methods of learning vary depending on circumstances and the student. This being the case, not all students should be in high school because high school may not be the definitive education for all students. Unfortunately, due to the economic and educational set up of our society, without a high school diploma or some form of equivalent diploma, students have very little potential for furthering their education, for better jobs, for better financial situations and for improved self-esteem.

Theories of adult education seem to be speculative at best. Educators all seem to have the same concerns for adult education, but each differ in opinions concerning how adults learn. What this implies is that we can assume that there is no single theory that can be correctly used and therefore we must identify individually with each adult learning experience. "No single theory fares well when all of these criteria are brought to bear. Each has strengths and weaknesses...some reveal more about the learner's characteristics, his life situation and desired outcomes. These theories help us to understand the learner and his motivation, they do little to advance our understanding of the learning process. Some focus on learning itself...but only one explains learning that is unique to adults. Until there is more empirical support, the criterion of

universality, or how well predictions arrived from theory hold up, is a moot point...only Knowles' andragogy has been widely applied in practice (Merriam and Cafarella, 1991)."

Education and Vocational Training

Conrady (1997) takes the theory of learning opportunities a step further, setting up partnerships with business and schools for on site assistance in helping GED students determine what their job opportunities are after receipt of a GED. Of the students she studied, 18 of them went on to receive jobs or entered into further training programs. Her study was limited though because it did not review the attitudes and experiences of the student upon completion of the program. As a matter of fact, most of the literature available in reference to students who received GEDs and GED testing is predominately quantitative. Very little of it takes into consideration the feelings, stories and experiences of the students themselves and how the students either went on to job placement after they got their GED or their experiences that led them to returning to school to receive their GED.

Conrady (1997) mentions combining educational and vocational training in order to succeed in both and this may have been what her interviewees were seeking even as they were leaving school in search for something more. This is reflected in Boessel's report (1998) as well. Conrady's report (1997) is further significant because it implies that by combining employment, further training and self fulfillment goals, students can develop positively, thus decreasing the number of "school leavers" and increasing the number of students who stay in high school or receive their GEDs.

Career Trajectories and Adult Economic Success

Determining the actual job opportunities that are available once the GED has been received or what the GED recipient views as job opportunities and if the student associates receiving a GED with getting a better job were a few of the difficulties that Conrady (1997) discussed in her literature. It could be that the students believed that having a GED was simply a step that he or she had to fulfill and that it had no direct bearing on whether or not he or she obtained a job or what kind of job it was. Conrady's report (1997) centered on this problem and therefore focused on self and career awareness, counseling and job site mentoring for students while studied for the GED diploma. During the program, partnerships were formed with schools, businesses and organizations for training and career exploration.

The GED does open the door for post-secondary education for "high school leavers". The GED is accepted in the place of high school diplomas by a multitude of colleges. This was reflected in the 1980's when over half of the students receiving the GED diploma received some education or training after high school in colleges, trade school or job training programs. According to Boessel (1998), one-third enrolled in two year or four year colleges.

GED recipients were also examined in colleges in relation to high school diploma recipients. In colleges, GED recipients received grades that were close to that of high school graduates. In vocational programs, the average grades were the same. However, Boessel (1998) reports that GED recipients are less likely to finish college programs than high school graduates. Graduation rates are similar in vocational programs while those GED recipients in Associate Degree programs are only half as likely as high school graduates to attain them. Those who seek

Bachelor's degrees are very unlikely to attain them – around 2%. These students tend to have more family responsibilities and be on their own financially as they are typically students who delayed entry to college. These attributes tend to work against persistence in college.

In regards to the labor for career trajectories, the performance of those who have received the GED in relation to those who receive high school diplomas has been mixed. (Boessel, 1998). Having a GED increases a “high school leavers” chance of getting a full time job but high school graduates still enjoy higher employment rates than those of GED recipients. Male GED recipients work fewer hours and have higher job turn over rates than “high school leavers.” This however, would be the reverse for females because they tend to work more and have lower turnover rate.

GED diploma holders are paid 8% higher than other “high school leavers” and 12% lower than high school graduates. However, time on task accounts for some of these differences. Unfortunately, “time on task” is still represented by starkly varying numbers of hours spent in attaining the high school diploma as opposed to attaining the GED.

The GED may not necessarily be the equivalent to the high school diploma but it is an improved option over no high school education at all. GED students involved in post secondary education, be it university or vocational/ technical, have a better chance of improved job opportunities and financial stability than those who receive no high school or equivalent education but less of a chance at improving these career aspirations than those with a high school diploma. It further shows that the right education for many of the students involved in the study may not necessarily have been high school education although some high school education would have been beneficial. Instead of assuming that all students need a high school education,

maybe educators should consider alternative forms of education involving high school and vocational training.

High School Leavers, GED Starters and GED Completers

Baldwin's (1995) study on GED testing revealed a variety of findings, most importantly, that adults whose educational attainment was a GED credential had the same average literacy skills as those whose highest level of attainment was a high school diploma. This should help to ease the stigma often associated with achieving a GED and should reinforce the benefits the GED merits as it influences educational and career opportunities. Much like Conrady's (1997) argument and report, Baldwin's article (1995) is more quantitative than qualitative and leaves much to be desired about the questions of "why?" and "how?" although it sufficiently answers the questions of "when?" and "where?" and "how much?"

Kaplan's studies (1995) included students who were given the tests for Adult Basic Education and did not pass the GED test. The report did find that GED completers did perform better on literacy tests than did "high school leavers", that race and ethnicity were the most important predictors of literacy performance followed by mother's educational attainment; that newspaper reading was a significant determinant of higher literacy performance; and that females' performance was higher than males. The conclusion to the report was that participation in GED programs was beneficial to helping students gain literacy skills that are valued by employers and that it would be premature to abandon GED programs. Like Baldwin (1995) and Conrady (1997), Kaplan (1995) was interested in the statistics more than the learning experiences of the student and how those experiences impacted the learning skills and career opportunities after receipt of their GED.

A review of the census for both 2000 and 1990 fails to reveal statistics for the number of GED recipients, the number of “high school leavers” who attempted to get a GED and did not receive it or the numbers of students who received the GED and then went on to complete degrees in higher education. The census also fails to reveal a comparison of general equivalency diplomas in comparison to economic trajectories. On the other hand, Boessel (1998) reports that about three quarters of a million students take the GED tests and that about a half a million of these students pass and are awarded the GED diploma by their states. Boessel (1998) also reports that the GED makes up about one-sixth of the high school completion credentials awarded each year. Boessel (1998) notes, however, that these numbers may be slightly skewed because those students who do not pass the test the first time may retake the whole test or any part of the test until they pass and are allowed to receive the GED. Brouillette (1998) also mentions that students returned and enrolled in GED programs two or three times until they were able to pass the test. This time on task increased reading skills and cognitive learning skills. Students self esteem increased as students began to see themselves as people who could learn and who could be successful in the outside world.

But, to what extent do these students achieve their goals and how do they perform in relation to other “high school leavers”? Do they do as well in continuing education or other job fields as other high school graduates? What role does the GED play in these outcomes if indeed it has any effect at all? GED recipients have the same basic cognitive and literacy skills as those of other high school graduates and considerably stronger than “high school leavers” who did not return for the GED. These students also fall between high school graduates and “leavers” in socio-economic status and parental education. They also tend to have fewer capital assets than high school graduates but more than other “high school leavers.”

Effectiveness of current GED programs and School Intervention

Today the path of “high school leavers” is to receive the GED, apply for financial aid and then to enroll in a community college or vocational school. Vocational schools tend to be the biggest draw because GED recipients tend to do well in them and these skills pay off in the labor market. The GED supplies the opportunity for education and training but is not a substitute for it. It should be a starting point, not an end in itself.

Brouillette (1999) mentions that receiving the GED is a rite of passage. The GED allows students to look at their own experiences in education in a new light. For many students a substantial benefit derived from being involved in the GED program resulted from the relationship between instructor and student. The relationship is characterized as adult to adult rather than adult to child. Engel (1994) notes that for many students, school administrators - specifically principals and vice-principals - appeared to play little or no positive roles in their lives. School counselors were similarly only background figures, un-noteworthy and unknown. Most students could not even describe what a counselor did except for making class schedules. Principals, Engel says, were mostly known as “hallway walkers” and kept order but had little or nothing to do with the life of the student. Vice-principals dished out penalties for disciplinary infractions. The cracks in the woodwork increased and those students who kept to themselves managed to slip through and disappear into the growing numbers of “high school leavers.”

Conclusion

The literature reflects a vast set of ideals and concepts that are studied in order to determine why students choose to leave high school, receive a GED at some point after their high school years, and return to school in order to increase opportunities for them and their families either through better education, career promotions or financial improvement. This is

only half the story. The other half of the story is the narratives of the people who lived these experiences – the narrative that their lives have become as seen through the perspective of the artist, the researcher and the reader. To these informants, the statistics are very real life.

To complete that half of the story, a style of narrative can best express the emotions, experiences, conflicts, ideals, hopes, dreams and even nightmares of those who once called themselves “high school leavers.” It is the position of the researcher to assume the role of the portrait artist and to paint the picture, to tell the story that frames the narrative of what it means to be a “high school leaver” and at the same time to allow the narratives of the “high school leavers” to be expressed as the story unfolds.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this research. Methodology is an outline of procedures used by a researcher to accomplish a goal. This section includes the Research Stance, the Guiding Questions and Hypotheses for Examining the Phenomena, Procedures and Trustworthiness.

Research Stance

The methodology that is specifically addressed here is that of the art of narrative (Bruner 1990; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). The narratives of those interviewed become the vignettes and stories on which the analysis and conclusions are based. The stories and ideas of each of the participants are so rich and personal and emotional that they become the research. The perspective that can be gained by the reader, the writer, the interviewer and anyone involved in the process of listening to the participants as they express their thoughts, feelings and emotions becomes more of an experience than that of the story told from someone else's point of view (Bruner, 1990; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

This type of research or study has also been described as “folk research” or “folk human science” (Bruner, 1990, 67). Human beings, when naturally interacting, develop a background that gives meaning and helps to frame the stories they tell each other (Bruner, 1990). These

stories help make the individual experiences more lifelike and provide for a more complete

cultural meaning that allows for wider interpretation of the perception of the experience (Bruner, 1990).

Bruner also notes that this method of interpretation allows for negotiating meanings based on the experiences and perceptions of the individual reading or hearing the initial narrative. It is the myths, cultural plights and cultural heights that help to develop the experience of the individual thus creating a richer and more complete narrative experience, the “portraiture” of the individual and the narrative, and that without these experiences would leave the reader or perceiver of the experience with only half of the story told or understood (Bruner, 1990).

Many disciplines contribute to this type of study. Anthropologists use the ethnographic approach to describe the experience of a whole culture or subculture. This “anthropological narration” (Bruner, 1990) is apparent in MacLeod’s (1987) style of research in which he employs narrations to tell the stories of the gangs on the streets of Chicago. The narrations draw a picture of the lifestyle and culture experiences of the individual, thus creating a more complete “portraiture” of gang culture and increasing the scope of the perception of the individual reading or listening to the stories being told. In education, researchers typically use narration to relay an experience, an event, a story, a history, or a theme in order to teach the perceiver about people from other cultures, ethnic groups, races, genders or socioeconomic backgrounds. Using narrative identify and describe the experiences of the individual helps the reader gain a more complete idea of the understanding of the nature of the narration.

Ward, an anthropologist, uses the stories and narrations of poor women to promote her concepts of family planning (Ward, 1986). The reader then more acutely understands the meaning and need for birth control and family planning through the experiences Ward has gathered and portrayed in the narrative.

Giroux (1996) notes that to “understand the present is very much a matter of recognizing and understanding the extent to which and ways in which our everyday lives are invested in and impacted and punctuated by these counter narratives and against the “official” narratives by which they emerge as oppositional responses.” This describes an understanding of the culture and experiences that the teller of the story has emerged from in order to better perceive the experience as a whole.

Pilot Study

To determine a framework for the themes as well as formulate questions and develop ideas, an initial pilot study was conducted using four participants. Each participant was a GED recipient and enrolled in a two-year college or four year university. The reasons these students left high school varied from mental and physical abuse or lack of encouragement from their families to financially strained situations or other unplanned responsibilities. Instead of a format of questions and answers, the interviews were unstructured, allowing the participants to simply express their views and experiences about why they left school, the reasons for returning for the GED and what their future plans were.

The interviews varied from thirty-five minutes to an hour. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were studied and coded for similar inter-case themes, words and expressions that surfaced in the interview. The interviews were also cross case analyzed to determine what themes surfaced over and over again between the participants.

Through analysis of the similarities between the cases, possible questions were formulated that were used in the interviews with the participants of the actual study. These themes and questions were not solid and varied according to the interviewee.

It was expected that the participants would relate that they weren't interested in school or

that they had failed out of school and no other school would accept them. What surfaced instead was a myriad of reasons for their failure to succeed. From the variety of participant answers, a set of questions evolved that not only probed the participant's experiences with the GED, their ideas about the education and their hopes for success in finding good jobs, but also the reasons they felt they had been forced to abandon the traditional educational track. Through the use of pilot studies, important information can be sifted through and potential questions can be formulated to prevent redundant and unnecessary questions from being included in the interview process as well as ensure that relevant questions are included.

Grounding Narrative Research

Narrative research lends itself to an understanding of different cultures, experiences and backgrounds. We see that people do make choices in their own lives and it is through these choices that the experiences unfold. Without background knowledge of the choices made and the reasons they were made, the "perceiver" of the story has little potential for empathy toward the interviewee and thus decreased potential for an understanding of the experience the researcher is trying to portray, in this case, receiving the GED.

Narrative research offers the potential for something more, a promise of the future, a possibility that things may change, may grow, and may become something different, something better. Instead of the numbers and words of one perceiver, the story offers insight into the hopes and ideals and dreams of the interviewee, and is not flawed or changed or mixed by the meaning the researcher makes of it but instead goes directly to the perceiver of the information allowing for the reader to make his or her own determinations about the experience itself.

Riessman (1993) speaks of narrative style in her own interviews. Her subjects spoke at length about the difficulties they were having and she found herself not wanting to divide it into categories with themes and topics but instead to allow it to stand on its own as a unit. This is what narrative is all about. The desire is not to break the life story, the feelings and emotions and fears of the interviewee into themes but instead to let it speak for itself representing a sum of all fears and frustrations and finally of success in the life of the interviewee.

In addition, the use of the poetry is an interesting tool for fashioning the words of the interviewees (Glesne, 1997). The writer attempts to get to the heart of what is said and the emotions expressed. This forces the researcher to focus on the most important point of the interview and to express them with few words but lots of feeling. It is a third voice created by not just the researcher and not just the interviewee but instead a combination of them both. It also shatters the barriers of separation between the interviewee and the interviewer.

“Eisner (1997) discusses five reasons for choosing alternative forms of representation: 1. Creating a sense of empathy for research participants, 2. Providing a sense of particularity and authenticity, 3. Generating insight and attention to complexity, 4. Increasing the kinds of questions that researchers can ask as they think within new mediums and 5. Making better use of the variety in researcher’s representational use (Glesne, 1997).” However, Eisner also warns that we must be sure we are not substituting novelty for substance.

The stance for the methodology is of a narrative researcher doing a narrative analysis. This research takes on aspects of the paradigm called by Bruner (1990) and later Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’ (1997) of “narratives.” It is a style of writing that tells the stories of the individual participants. Bruner is the definitive researcher and proponent of the use of narrative as an artistic painting with words of the lifestyles, environments, backgrounds, cultures and

ethnicities of their participants. Narrative allows the participants to express their background and stories in their own words using their own ideas and their own perceptions of the importance of events as well as the significance order of the event.

Bruner's (1990) theory of narratives is used to describe the act of negotiating meaning through narrative interpretation. Bruner notes that we may not be able to grasp absolute meaning because we cannot "walk a mile in the participants shoes"; however, through the telling of the stories of the participants and the portrait of their lives compared to the lives of those who have shared similar experiences, we gain insight to what it means to be a "high school leaver."

Implications of the Stance

Implications for Lewin's theory allow the participants to see themselves as the "center" with outside forces that positively and negatively affect them without believing that they are the cause of their problems but that they are still in some way affected by them.

The implications of a narrative research stance permits the researcher to become more involved with the participants allowing for the research to become more concrete and personalized and thus understood by educators. The personable approach to research gives a name to the statistics and humanizes the numbers. It allows for a greater cross sharing of experiences that makes the research a richer piece of literature and the study itself far more useful.

Guiding Questions and Hypotheses for Examining the Phenomena

Phenomena

The phenomena of this study are the stories of the "high school leavers." The participants

differ in gender, ethnic backgrounds, socio- economic status, age and/or geography. These “high school leavers” share similar emotions, regrets, ideas and feelings about leaving high school. “High school leavers” cannot be stereotyped as a group of individuals consistently having the exact same problems or coming from a particular culture. For the evidence indicates that the problems of retention in adult education exist for a multitude of individuals from different cultures and experiences.

Although the GED claims its roots in the United States’ military, Canada too has taken up the movement and begun to incorporate adult basic education and the GED as standard curricula for those who have “slipped through the cracks.” Additionally, Canada has conducted research similar to Lewin’s theory of “forces” which helps to define the forces that act against the learner or alternately support the learner. It is interesting to examine Canada’s style of education as Canada bears the mark of European influence from its French dominated ancestry and yet still follows the pattern set up by the United States for receiving alternate adult education implemented by the government and the military in the form of the GED.

Guiding Questions and Hypothesis

The questions that are central to this study are ones that prompt the informants to tell the stories of their lives prior to, during, and after high school. Additionally, their stories of leaving high school and returning later for further education, job opportunities, and financial stability inadvertently direct the questions. Many of the students felt that the decision to leave school was not one that they actively chose to make but instead one that was forced upon them. Therefore, they had little control over where they landed after being dropped or after dropping as they case may be. Why do “high school leavers” leave school in the first place? How do they view the school, teachers, families, their lives and the world around and which of these specifically do

they consider to be causes for leaving high school? What are their experiences after dropping out as far as jobs and finances and their futures are concerned? And what changes prompt them to reenter the educational system? In reflecting back on their education or the lack thereof do they comprehend that receiving a GED is a necessary step to their future success or is it an individual need to finish something once started? These questions became the working rationale behind why the research should be done. It is the answers to these questions and the analysis of these stories that guides the research to its conclusion.

Plans for Access

As an instructor employed by a local community college, I sought and received permission from the college and the local university to select my target group from the students enrolled in these educational systems. All students who participated in the project were given a consent form and the procedures for the research were discussed with them. Additionally, any student who did not feel comfortable with the research while it was in progress or did not feel comfortable with the results of the research after the interviews, was allowed to withdraw from participation in the project. In reviewing the overall population of the community college, the population of the research group proved to be as diverse as the population of the college itself. All students who participated in the research participated on a volunteer basis and were polled for the research through the English Developmental, Reading Developmental and Freshman English Composition classes available at the college.

Description of Types of Informants Sought

Students from a local two-year college as well as a four-year university in New Orleans were contacted to participate in the project. A balance in gender, race and socio-economic status was desirable for the research. Fifteen adult basic learners who left high school and received the

GED were selected and after initial investigation, nine students were contacted to participate in the program. Of those chosen there were five women and four men. Of the five women, three are Caucasians and two are African Americans. Of the three Caucasian women, two came from suburban backgrounds: one lived with her grandmother, and the other with her divorced mother. The third Caucasian female lived in families with low income. The two African American females both lived only with their mothers, one was physically abused, the other was not. Of the four men, three are white and one is African American. Two of the Caucasians males lived with both parents who considered education important. The third Caucasian male lived with both parents neither of which considered education to be important and neither of which graduated from the eighth grade. The African American male lived with both parents and was the only participant who left school because of fighting.

These participants were invited to become involved in the study through reading instructors at the community college. After a brief description and explanation of the study, students were invited to participate without concern of public knowledge. The initial orientation or announcement explained what the study was about, why it was important and what was expected of those participating.

Selection Criteria

The group studied resides in a suburban population in a southern mid-sized American city. The socio-economic background of the city on a financial scale is upper-lower class to upper – middle class. The economy of the college and the students to be interviewed fall into this socio-economic grouping with greater than seventy-five percent of the students in the lower range.

Males and females from a variety of ethnic backgrounds participated in the study,

although the students had to meet a few conditions in order to participate in the study. The first condition mandated that the participants fall between 20 and 30 years of age. Students over the age of thirty would fall into a “gray area” prior to what we consider the standard education of today. At that time the GED test was not only different but so were the standards for high school education. These students may have taken the GED in a previous version of the test as the battery of tests have changed since its military beginnings in the 1930s and 1940s to reflect the changes in the economy of the United States. Students younger than twenty would still be influenced by parental guidance and perhaps might be taking the GED as an end result to home schooling. Both would skew the findings of this study. Also, this age group reflects the students who fall in the average age of students, 25 (Boessel, 1998), who return to school to receive the GED.

Secondly all participants left school prior to receiving the high school diploma and thus qualified as “high school leavers.” Although most of the students received some form of high school education, one student reported leaving school prior to the eighth grade. However, because many of the students came from a pool of reading classes at the college level, it is important to note that the students were considered “developmental” and have some sort of educational deficiency that placed them in one or more developmental programs, however, this in no way defers mental or emotional deficiency.

A third condition required that the students be involved in some kind of post high school education whether this education was in a four-year university, a two-year community college or some other form of education, for example, the merchant marines. This assisted the researcher to better understand in clarifying reasons the participants choose one form of education over another after leaving high school and pursuing the GED. A majority of the students who were polled to participate were from daytime classes. The demographics of the students who chose to

become involved in the project were students who had recently finished the GED program or some other form of adult basic education assessment and evaluation. A few students were from evening classes where the demographics of the class usually consisted of students who worked during the day and could only attend class at night. These students tended to be older and were generally in school to change their job status and increase their financial stability. Two of the classes polled were Saturday morning classes that consisted of students who worked one or more jobs during the week or had to travel a long distance in order to get to the college or university.

Each student evaluated received a consent form explaining all potential positive and negative outcomes of the study. There were no risks to the student, and to ensure total anonymity, names were changed during the course of the interview, in the findings, and in the research paper submitted at the conclusion of the study.

Lastly, each student who participated had to consider three objectives: first, what their goals were and to define what “being educated”; next, the student had to consider the forces that hindered or supported him or her in achieving the goal of education and determine whether these goals were strong or weak forces; finally, the students needed to understand the focus of the study and be able to see themselves as impacted by outside forces and how they could accentuate the positive forces and de-accentuate the negative forces. This was communicated to the student during the interview when the student was asked to reflect on the circumstances involved in becoming a “high school leaver.”

Procedures

Interviewing the participants took place over a five-month interval. The research is based on interviews conducted with students who have received a GED after leaving high school. It incorporates their feelings and experiences upon returning to school to receive a GED as well as

why they received the GED and what affect they felt it had on their future skills, career goals and earnings potential. My introduction to the participants, my interaction with the participants and the location of the physical interviews each occurred in a different manner that is recounted in the following chapter and in the appendices. The interviews were about thirty to forty-five minutes and looked at the history of the student and the experiences that impacted why they left high school when they did. The research looked at the career of the participants the choices the informant made about their course of education after leaving high school. Each participant was asked to consider what elements were missing from their education and how leaving would hinder further career goals.

Instrumentation and Observational Techniques:

The instrumentation of the research consists of a series of questions divided into groups for initial and follow up interviews. Each participant was interviewed at least one time. Although a series of questions were prepared for each interview, these questions were only used for backup or follow up information. A majority of the research was dependent on the narratives of the participants, the order in which they perceived the most important experiences to have occurred as well as what they believed to be the negative and positive influences that forced them to make the decision to become a “high school leaver.” These stories of their lives, experiences, emotions and feelings were then used as the narration that helped to tell the full story of the phenomena of “high school leavers.” Additionally, some of the students were asked to participate in a second interview to clarify answers or to probe for additional information. This set of questions was based on the findings of the original interview. In addition, questions about certain themes that surfaced after initial interviews were transcribed were asked to further clarify unclear information. These interviews were shorter than the first interviews running between 15

and 25 minutes long. Each participant as well as the names of school and family members were given a pseudonym.

There was one interviewer due to the scope of the study. The interviewer is a white married woman in her early thirties with a master's degree in education and eight years community college experience in Developmental Reading and English.

Each interview took an average of twenty to thirty minutes to complete and the students interviewed were allowed to choose the most convenient time and location for them to meet. Audiotape was used in all interviews as well as individualized notes by the interviewer. These individualized notes, or field notes, included, diaries, journals, and letters produced by the participants, as well as additional artifacts including scrapbooks and other memorabilia. All of these links to the memories of the participants provided the researcher and hopefully provides the reader with a clearer and more complete understanding of the thought process of the individual participant. One coder was responsible for all data including collection and analysis.

Additionally, interviews were coded by color and divided into overall themes. From there, all interviews were analyzed and cross-analyzed to determine similar characteristics and learning experiences of the interviewees.

The interviewer was responsible for taking notes on atmosphere, apparent comfort and interest levels of the interviewee as well as body language and expressions and methodological notes and interpretative notes to help further understand the meaning behind the narration of the interviewee.

Tape recorders were used in all interviews and the tapes were then transcribed and analyzed along with the interviewers reactions to the narrations of the interviewee. The audio tapes used in all interviews were then transcribed and analyzed along with the interviewers

reactions to the narrations of the interviewee.

The focus of these interviews was to hear the stories of the people who lived through the stigma often associated with leaving school and pursuing a GED and the expressions of lives no one else could live, of shoes no one else was meant to walk in. The focus was to obtain, in the “narration”, the words of the informant and hear how leaving school changed their lives and the different paths their lives have followed in having received the GED.

Log of Planned Activities:

All volunteers were informed of their rights to discontinue participation in the study if at any time their participation in the study made them feel uncomfortable or disquieted. A second interview served as a follow up of the first interview. Anything that was missed after initial analysis of the first interview as well as anything that the interviewee felt they should have said but did not, was brought up during the second interview. At this time, background information was already known and the student felt more comfortable discussing experiences directly related to the GED. Additionally, member checking was employed so that the informants were able to read what they said and make comments on the narratives allowing for further perspectives and understandings.

Observational Notes

All observational notes were taken during the interview and then included in the transcription of the taped interview. Different concepts and details to be examined included relative comfort levels of the interviewee, emotional levels of the interviewee and pauses before, during and after completion of sentences.

Details of Planned Activities

Each individual was allowed to choose a location that was most comfortable for him or her in order to achieve the maximum level of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer. Additionally, each individual interviewee received a copy of the narrative after it was transcribed and was asked to make comments on the narrative. This way the interviewee was allowed to further participate in the portrait and narrative of their life as seen through the eyes of the researcher.

Sequence of Planned Activities

For a standard qualitative research project, it may appear that ten questions are too many for one interview. However, over the course of two interviews all of the questions were discussed. Follow up questions were considered to enhance significant ideas that were brought to the table during the interview itself. The following were the questions considered:

Questions Used During the Interview:

1. Tell me first something about your life. Tell me about your education.
2. What was the reaction of your family when you left high school?
Where they actively involved in your decision?
3. How do you see yourself as a learner? Did this change in high school?
4. Why do you feel you left high school?
5. What factors do you attribute your problems in high school to?
6. Did financial stability influence your reason for leaving high school?
7. When did you decide to return to school?
8. How did you find out about the GED?
9. What did you do after receiving your GED?
What are your goals now and for five and ten years from now?
Where is your career headed?

10. How did you feel about going back and getting your GED?

Technology Used

In the analysis and coding of the interviews, a standard matrix structure was followed. Considering available software, the best and the easiest use of technology was a tape recorder and computer to transcribe all literature and interviews. Database software such as Microsoft Excel was employed in order to keep the “chunks” of information separate and manageable. CD burners as well as a Compaq Desktop were used throughout the research to keep everything organized.

Data Reduction and Analyzing Emergent Themes:

All of the interviews were analyzed through inter-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This was done to look for words, ideas and feelings that continued to emerge throughout the interview itself. Any similar thoughts, expressions or narratives were reworked and discussed further in the second interview. The analysis of these interviews was cross-referenced with the body of literature that was available on “high school leavers” and recipients of the GED. The source of data did not change and therefore became the constant variable on which to base all of the analysis of the interviews and narratives.

Additionally, the interviews were cross-case analyzed (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to determine what themes and concepts appeared among the variety of interviewees to determine a pattern of why students leave school and why and when they return to school.

The emergent themes follow MClosky’s (1970) theory of Margin and components of Schlossberg’s (1984, 1987) model for counseling adults by accessing relative strengths of four factors: situation, self (internal strengths), external support, and strategies one has developed to

handle stress. Additional themes may emerge.

Analysis

Preliminary analysis of the data depended on decoding the transcriptions of the taped interviews and then separating the data into matrices designed to clarify certain points of the data including the narrative point of view, the thematic concept point of view, and a time ordered sequence point of view. A table of contents of each interview and a general decoding glossary to relate why certain sections were decoded in the manner that they were, helped interpret the interviews.

Coding is analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In order to decode the transcripts, the research has to focus on identifying emergent themes and assigning codes to chunks of material of various sizes – words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs, connected to various themes. It is not just the words, but the meaning of the words that matters. Simple words on a paper mean nothing. It is the choice that is made in using the words that are used and in assigning them significance, by the narrator that gives meaning to the word (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Codes are used to help identify meaning. “Codes are used to retrieve and organize the chunks ... The organizing part entails a system for categorizing the various chunks, so the researcher can quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct or theme. Clustering and ... display of condensed chunks, then sets the stage for drawing conclusions” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.57).

Miles and Huberman (1994, p.57) also note that the process of analysis can be as straightforward as reading through transcripts and field notes, marking off units that deal with the same topic, and the “dividing them into different topics and subtopics at different levels of

analysis.” These topics would occur with some regularity and would be given a name marked with a shorthand label or “code”. These topics would then be differentiated, clustered and relabeled (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Types of coding could be illustrative, descriptive or patterned codes. Coding for this research was based on a combination of these three.

Further analysis of the data depended on cross-referencing secondary material including field notes, diaries, journals and letters. The findings in analyzing the data should be common threads that tie the interviews together, similar reasons why each of the informants interviewed felt it necessary to leave school and why or how they found themselves returning to school at some time later in their adult lives. Both positive and negative themes and forces that affected the life of the individual emerged during the interviews. The final analysis to be discussed in chapter five ultimately depends on the way the narrative process of the interviewees was conducted.

The Narrative Process

The narratives were the actual stories of the lives of the individuals as told by the individual and in the words of the individual. It was translated in the same manner the individuals intended starting at the points in their lives that they thought were the most significant and going either forward or backward from there. The most important parts of the story were therefore told in relation to the perspective of the individual and not in relation to the perspective of the researcher. Not only do the interviews elicit the narratives, they are the narratives. In order to catch the true feelings of the participants, the narratives were taken directly from the interviews including all the terminology that characterizes everyday speech.

Trustworthiness

Biases:

Understanding the researcher's own biases is helpful in determining the trustworthiness of a study. The subjectivity of the researcher affects the observational investigation as well as the results of the final research. "It is an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, status and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation" (Peshkin, 1988, p.17).

Subjectivity is invariably present in research, however, many researchers are not aware of it. Without examining one's own subjectivity, the researcher leaves the work open to misunderstandings and mis-conclusions. Through examining one's subjectivity, one learns about the particular set of personal qualities, obtained through upbringing and class, which may unconsciously conflict with the research.

In examining my own subjectivity, I characterized my subjectivity following Peshkin's model of "subjective *I*s". The first, borrowed from Peshkin, would be the Ethnic *I*. My pilot study of this research brought to me a variety of people, male and female, black and white. As a Caucasian woman, I wondered how African American males would relate to me questioning their lives, family history and education. On the same note, I also wondered how I would associate with them and what of my own knowledge and experiences I would have to call upon in order to begin to understand the mindset of someone totally unlike myself, racially, gender-wise and academically.

My second subjective *I* was a "family motivated *I*". As the stories of the participants began to emerge, one thing became painfully clear: they all shared, to one extent or another, the lack of strong family support. Though the presence of family support existed for most students, the quality of support was minimal. One participant even described the desire to stay at school at the end of the day instead of going home because she liked being with her teacher more than her

mother. In other cases, there was family support to an extent, however, it was not strong enough to keep the participant in school in order to finish their high school education.

In my own family, parental expectations were high and there was never a consideration that my siblings or I would not finish high school. As children we were constantly prepared for a college education. This subjective *I* emerged during the interviews. As I listened to the stories of the participant unfold, I was privately awestruck by the concept of not finishing school, the apparent lack of motivation on the part of the participant and the lack of family encouragement for the participant to succeed. As my own family had never been abusive, drunk, intolerant, unconcerned or uncaring, I became painfully aware of my lack of understanding of how other families could be.

My final subjective *I* could be considered an “andragogy *I*”. Because of my training in education and adult learning, I believe that all students should work towards their full potential abilities. From research available, I am aware that not all students learn in the same manner and at the same pace and students need to follow different courses of study depending on their own interests and future plans – college is not for everyone. Listening to the stories of the participants, I could not help but think that many might have dropped out of high school because of their lack of interest in the subject or their feelings that they weren’t learning the things they needed to know. Either the necessity for a well-rounded education a high school would offer was not integrated into the basic concept of education or the teachers and families of the students did not see that lack of caring for what it really was – the desire to pursue other courses of learning.

Threats

A real threat to the project would be losing contact with the informants over the course of the interview process. Conducting the interviews in as short a time period as possible minimizes

the loss. Additionally, a database of facts about the informants was necessary to maintain accessibility to the informant, this included phone numbers and email addresses. Continued open lines of communication with the informants helped to alleviate fears of being “forgotten” or “ignored” after the initial information was transcribed and analyzed.

Another threat to validity is description in recounting what was seen and heard. Maxwell (1992) notes that the problem of description in research is easily handled through the use of audio recorders for observations and interviews and verbatim transcriptions of these recordings. Without this there is a serious threat to validity in any study.

A further threat to this type of study is the concept of “truth”. This is a threat of the unreliability of the informant. Often the informant says or does what he or she thinks the researcher is asking for instead of relating or portraying the “truth”. This is known as the “halo effect.” It may be that the informant’s concept of the “truth” is based on their perception of what the truth really is whereas others involved in the narrative may see the “truth” as something entirely different. Even the researcher and the reader perceive the “truth” differently. What is “truth”? Truth is only a reality based on the concept of the perceiver. The idea that there are two sides to every story suddenly expands to more than that. There is the side of the story of the subjective personality, the giver of the action, the side of the story of the objective personality, the receiver of the action, and then the side of the story that is the truth that neither participant can see or understand. In a “narrative” study, this translates to the side of the story the participant tells, the story the researcher hears and then what falls between as the absolute “truth.” This concept of truth can be further expanded depending on the number of participants in the action or the number of participants who perceive the research. Each time an observer reads the narrative,

that person may be questioned on what he or she perceives as the truth. The truth may then be determined differently by anyone who sees it, hears it or reads it. It is therefore left up to the researcher to make the decision to ascertain the “truth” (Lawrence Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).

Narratives are open to interpretation and analysis instead of a “true” concept of reality (Denzin, 1989, p. 128). Thus each person who reads the narrative bases the “truth” of the narrative on a different concept of reality. Every time the narrative is read, or reread or reanalyzed, a new “truth” becomes evident. The story is constructed into one that is meaningful to the perceiver. The interpretation is accepted as valid because it is not the event that is important but the interpretation of the event that is important (Middleton, 1993). Middleton states, “I assumed that women were telling the truth about their lives insofar as they understood and remembered the events. There was no reason for them to lie. The techniques of revising and reinterpreting the material in subsequent interviews ...ensured that the stories were consistent” (Middleton, 1993, p.68).

This threat of truth is similar to Maxwell’s (1992) threat of interpretation. It is easy for the interviewer to impose his or her own framework on the narration of the interviewee rather than understanding the perspective and meaning of the participants. This can happen by not listening to the participants’ meaning, not understanding individual biases and bracketing those biases and comments into a framework separate from that of the interviewee, and finally, by asking leading, closed or short answer questions that deny the interviewee the opportunity to project his or her own feelings and ideas. This threat to validity was solved through member checking. This allowed participants to respond to the document of their transcription of their interview. Maxwell (1992, p.92) calls this “the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they say and the perspective they have on

what is going on.” However, Bloor (1983) argues, “such validation strategies are more problematic than most researchers seem to believe.” That being said, the participants responded either verbally to the transcription and the analysis of the transcription and then gave comments and feedback about their perceptions of what the researcher had written. Member checking was involved so that each “narrative” was reviewed by the individual thus allowing for the perspective of the individual on the original interview. This allowed the informant to participate further in the narrative and gave the researcher additional information on the background, ideas, memories and feelings of the interviewee.

Additionally, peer debriefing was used to guard against reviewer bias. The narratives as well as the analysis of the narratives were read by a third party to check that researcher bias had not become a part of the narrative and to determine whether or not the analysis of the transcripts was based on researcher subjectivity.

Another way of determining validity is through triangulation. Triangulation involves collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings and using a variety of methods to determine the “truth”. “This strategy reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that is developed (Maxwell, 1992, p.93).”

One threat to most research is that the participant’s behavior is often understood and analyzed only in a specific context. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.8) note that “focusing solely on individual behavior without attending to contexts runs a serious risk of misunderstanding the meaning of events.” Understanding contexts is critical; they drive the understanding of the meaning of events. To satisfy the problem of misunderstanding contexts and meaning of events,

context charts can be used to create “within-case analysis” an easier and more productive task in interpretation of narratives (Miles and Huberman, 1994). A context chart is a network mapping in graphic form of relationships and interrelationships among the roles and groups that identify individual behavior. To solve the threat of misunderstanding the overall context of the narrative, therefore, contexts charts were used to analyze individual responses and narratives.

An additional threat is the misunderstanding of ideas, themes and contexts across cases. The aim of many researchers is to see process and outcomes of many cases and to understand how they are developed and defined by local conditions. Multiple cases adequately sampled and diversified and then carefully analyzed can help the researcher to answer reasonable questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). “Cross-case analysis” also deepens the meaning of the individual narratives. Multiple cases pin down specific conditions and determine how these conditions can be related. A basic construct for “cross-case analysis” is the matrix that traces flow and configuration of events and allows us to see recurrent patterns and themes. The theoretical framework for this is to study one case in depth and then to analyze other similar cases to see whether the patterns found match that in the original case (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The narratives are the exact words of the participants. The researcher’s perception of the stories of the participants may be biased or skewed based on the researcher’s own experiences. This is what Peshkin refers to as the subjective “I” (1988). Being able to determine what the researcher’s subjectivities are is crucial when doing research however, it is not always possible to determine all subjectivities. In understanding this, I, as the researcher, ask the reader to formulate his or her own decisions and concepts about the narrations of the participants prior to the analysis of the narrations in Chapter 5. This allows the reader to make his own decisions thus entering the analysis with different perceptions of the narrations and possibly alternative views

about the necessity or lack thereof for the GED. Therefore I have elected not to interrupt the stories but allow the stories to stand on their own. Additionally, without the researcher's comments to guide and shape chapter four, the perceiver of the narratives is allowed the same advantage as the researcher – to hear the stories as they were originally told in the language of the storyteller.

Maxwell's (1992, p.90) final threat to qualitative data is to the theoretical validity of an account "by not collecting or paying attention to discrepant data, or not considering alternative explanations or understandings of the phenomena you are studying."

Additional Threats

There are a few additional threats that must be acknowledged. The number of informants is minimal and this may affect the variety that could be studied in a larger scale study of participants. However, in order to be immersed in the details of the individual's experiences of the individuals, the number of participants had to be limited. This produced a richer narration from each of the informants. Similar studies performed with fewer participants merited narratives more in-depth and personable than a large group of participants would have generated.

Furthermore, if the target group was larger, the percentage of students from one gender or race drastically outweighs that of another. This does not invalidate those interviewees, however, it does force the researcher to ask the question "why?"

Additionally, students who have received the GED and started in post-secondary education may have been forced to withdraw from school due to financial obligations, lack of childcare or lack of further encouragement when needed. These examples may all provide threats to the interviewees.

Conclusions

Because all research is open to suggestions of validity and bias, I have kept notes made by both myself as well as other readers of the preliminary report including reflections, time lines, ideas, thoughts, advice and any other relevant information that readers of the research had thought necessary. This information has thus become part of the overall value of the research and a source for further ideas and inspirations that I as the researcher may need.

One limitation of the study is that I could not include each interview of each person I spoke to. All of the interviews that were conducted helped to create an astounding picture of the pressure faced by “high school leavers” however, for the sake of brevity, not all of the narrations could be included, therefore three of the interviews are included in the text and the remaining six were included as appendices.

The purpose of narrative in relating the life histories of these participants is to explore the experiences of the GED recipient and how the GED has contoured and influenced job opportunities, financial stability and family relationships. The strength of this type of study is that it allows the voice of the participant to be heard and for their lives to be told in their own words. Because of the essence and the very definition of the narrative study, the voices of the participants focus on everything about their lives which influences their education and their goals and not just where they attended school and how long they were there. These participants become the “narrative” and the “narrative” becomes the research. Each of these participants is introduced in the following chapters in the stories they chose to share.

Chapter 4

The Stories

Literature and statistics tell the story of receiving the GED, but they don't impart the feelings, emotions, memories, pains and successes that can come from leaving high school to return later and receive the GED. This "portraiture" style of writing based on Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) concept in essence paints a picture of the subject using words, memories and narratives. It is easier to understand the feelings and emotions of these students when considering the decisions they made when the students are allowed to express their ideas, pains, hurdles and obstacles in their own thoughts rather than in the translations of a researcher. Portraits inform and inspire. They allow better understanding. They open the reader to the grief, happiness and feelings of the storyteller. Featherstone calls this "a people's scholarship" in which "scientific fact gathered in the field gives voice to a people's experience."

There is much more to this business of creating portraits and telling stories. It is a quest for something missing from a good deal of popular scholarship in education and other realms... we hear the sound of a human voice making sense of other voices, especially those not often heard, voices of women and of people of color. We trace the line of a story set in a historical context, placing the actors in a long running moral and political drama. The text itself enacts the writer's deepest moral and political values, the eclecticism of method and material. What if this kind of work were to become more prevalent? What are the implications of a kind of scholarship in education that combines the distancing power of analysis with another kind of power, the deep gesture of solidarity... Surely analysis and solidarity could stand as two poles of scholarship. Much research has neglected the second, studying teachers, for example, as though they were fruit flies... It is the quest of the power that comes from looking beyond the isolation at the little difference there is between humans, and the supreme importance of that difference. It searches for the energizing shock of sympathy and of human

community (Featherstone, 1989, p.367-368).

In the process of portraiture we enter someone's life, engage in conversation, and complete a relationship (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). We become a part of the story and it is this part that allows us to view structure, personality and context. We become committed to the person behind the narrative and receive a better understanding of them through their own words, actions, feelings and perspectives. Through this insight, we sense their choices and their differences thus reinforcing the analysis that can be made when trying to comprehend the overall picture. Narratives allow the reader to see the whole story by giving insight to the description of the past thus allowing us to search for themes, ideas, concepts and thought processes which are studied in a variety of different backgrounds and then analyzed for similar storylines.

Ultimately, this is where we encounter the very lives of the individuals as the participant tells the story. Through each story, there is a connection to each participant allowing for their stories to be seen not only as narratives but also as the portraiture that describes the big picture. There are no comparisons between the narrations in this chapter. Although the similarities among the participants seem obvious to the reader, the analysis of the similarities will be suspended until after the reader has met all of the participants.

The Participants

Students who participated in the project provide a balance of male and female students both white and black with a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and emotional histories. Nine participants expressed interest in the project, five women- Lori Anderson, Rachael Perez, Melissa Dunn, Valerie Johnson and Marcie Rogers; and four men – Billy Lewis, Kyle Roberts, Mark Jones and Bryan Lawson.

Of the five women, three are Caucasians – Lori Anderson, Rachael Perez and Marcie Rogers, and two are African Americans – Melissa Dunn and Valerie Johnson. Lori Anderson and Marcie Rogers come from suburban backgrounds. Lori Anderson lived with her grandmother when she decided to leave high school prior to graduation and Marcie Rogers lived with her divorced mother when she decided to leave high school before receiving a high school diploma. Both guardians considered education to be very important and tried to encourage both Lori and Marcie to stay in high school. Rachael Perez lived with both parents but the combined family's income was very low. Neither of her parents valued education very highly and made an effort to keep their daughter home from school. Melissa Dunn and Valerie Johnson both lived with only their mothers. Melissa Dunn was physically abused. Her mother valued education, but was impatient and violent when Melissa could not understand basic math and English. Valerie Johnson was not abused by her family but rather by the school system and feels that it is the school system itself that let her down.

Of the four men, three are Caucasian: Billy Lewis, Kyle Robertson and Bryan Lawson. Mark Jones is African American. Kyle Robertson and Bryan Lawson - lived with both parents, and had families who considered education important. Billy Lewis lived with both parents neither of which considered education to be important and neither graduated from eighth grade. Mark Jones lived with both parents and was the only participant who left school because of fighting.

Only three of the nine narratives are used here. These three narratives cover the scope of the negative experiences and influences that may affect the student and his or her ability to learn. This is not to say that the problems affecting the six remaining students were insignificant. They

simply continued to reflect the same themes as were evident in the three that appear in the text. The remaining six narratives appear in the form of appendices. Each negative force acting on the student, is, in itself, enough to cause a student to become a “high school leaver.” The act of leaving high school does not require a series of negative forces as each of these alone is capable of causing a student to leave school.

The use of the poetry at the beginning of each narration is called poetic transcription. Here the researcher fashions poetry from the words of the interviewees (Glesne, 1997). The writer attempts to get to the heart of what is said and the emotions expressed. This forces the researcher to focus on the most important point of the interview and to express them with few words but lots of feeling. It is a third voice created by not just the researcher and not just the interviewee but a combination of them both.

Kyle

I met Kyle in the middle of the summer. He almost fell into my lap while he was working as a waiter in a steak house. He was thin and wiry and smiled a lot. His blondish brown hair was slicked back and he spoke animatedly and used his hands to express his feelings as I had seen my Italian grandmother do so often.

He told me he was working his way through college and I joked about me being in college for thirteen years. He could not believe it and asked what I was studying. When I told him about my research, he jumped in and told me he would like to talk about his experiences. He had received a GED as well and would like the opportunity to talk about it. Right then and there in the middle of the steak house, I set up the interview to talk to him when the regular semester began in the fall. After the beginning of the fall semester, I met him in the lab and he sat down at the chair across from me like he was falling into a pool. It was hot, both outside and inside and

he was dressed for the weather. He began to speak and the animation I had seen in him earlier was no game, he used his hands constantly express his feelings, his ideas and his emotions.

Unlike the others, the descriptive poem for Kyle's story comes not from the words of his own interview but is a culmination of the words, thoughts and feelings expressed by each of the interviews, a theme which seems to underlie all of the narratives, the theme of being less than perfect, of being stupid and unworthy of proper education, a theme that the lack of a high school diploma or GED seems to instill on those who must travel that road.

Kyle's Story - It Seemed Like the Right Thing to Do

1. *I failed in the eighth grade. For some reason I thought being the class clown would get me through. So I failed in the eighth grade. I finally got through the eighth grade though after my parents switched me out of that school and into another. I went to high school and got kicked out of that after half a semester. I was pretty bad in high school so ... I went to another high school and got kicked out of there and then I went to a third high school, one that all the rejects go to and I just dropped out of there. That was in 1994 and I was a junior.*
2. *Things were getting bad at home. My mom and dad couldn't pay bills and my dad decided he was going to retire at the wrong time. So he retired and my mom had trouble paying bills so I decided that I would like cut out of school 'cause I was having a bad experience in school anyway and like help them pay bills for a while.*
3. Kyle didn't like school very much. His thoughts were not on studying so much as they were on playing. As a result, he failed eighth grade and his parents were forced to switch him into another school. Kyle did not consider himself a learner. To him, school simply was not for that. This did not change when he went to high school. However, even with

this lesson that hard work and study are necessary to get through school, he again failed and was asked to leave his high school. Finally, two schools later, he went to a school that he considered the reject school, but even here he could not finish. Financial instability in his family caused a great deal of tension between his mother, his father and himself and he thought it best if he to drop out of high school and got a job helping to support the household. Kyle felt that the reason he finally left school were two fold: his inability to treat it seriously and the financial problems his parents were facing.

4. *A couple of years later I finally decided to get a GED and go to school at the university here. Then when I got to the university, I started goofing off again. So I basically gave them \$1500.00 for a semester of nothing, dropped out and then I went to work some more after that.*
5. *My family life kinda sucked. It was mainly like the parent situation or whatever. I mean I really did like school but when I was at school, I enjoyed hanging out with people instead of going to class and studying and everything. Usually after school I would hang out with friends instead of going home and doing homework and study or something like that. So I don't know, just dumb things like that.*
6. *I remember when I told my parents I was dropping out. They basically knew it was coming because I was getting kicked out of everywhere and everything and they were trying to get me to do good. But, I mean, I had to do what I had to do and they knew that so I did it.*
7. *I mean, I was a good student. I was good, but they were parts in the year that I would goof up but then I would always come back in the end and catch up and make like A's or B's or C's in whatever classes. But there was always like a lag during the year. My*

parents weren't happy with me. They kind of understood but they weren't happy. And, like my parents and my grandparents were trying to get me to go back to school and at that point I was just like working and doing whatever I wanted and helping them pay the bills. I didn't have to help that much but, I was pulling in a lot of money. At times I was working two jobs for no reason other than just to do it. And just buying whatever I wanted, so I mean... I think my parents were happier when I was working then when I was in school. I remember my mom saying that she wished there was another way around it all, everything that was happening. She was sorry it had to be like that.

8. *Everybody else in my family graduated except for me.*
9. *When I was at the third high school, you would go there and there was like maybe two hundred students at the most and they supposedly had a school that was Kindergarten all the way through twelfth grade so, you would go in one classroom and you would have different grade levels being taught by one teacher but you were supposed to be at a higher level of math or something than somebody else and I mean, I skipped out a lot from there, because I mean it really wasn't that great of a school and I was considering starting to actually study and graduate. But when I started doing all that I decided that I wasn't learning anything else than I would have been learning in like grammar school. They don't, I mean, you go to English class and all they want you to do is like instead of writing essays, the teacher would tell you to read a story and then to answer questions. So it was basically a reading class instead of an English class. So I just decided that I would drop out and help out with the bills and then I decided to get a GED after that and then take a placement test and study on my own. Just like place higher than I would have at that stupid high school. I guess what really caused me to drop out was a lack of*

finances and the fact that I just hated the school.

10. Although his parents were not happy about Kyle dropping out from school, they understood. The repetitious failing and leaving school were hard to ignore. Kyle believed that they were happy, in a way, when he did drop out, because he began to contribute to the family's income. He felt that his problems which lead to him eventually leaving school were in part due to financial problems but also associated with his lack of desire and motivation toward school.
11. *I stayed out for two years and then I actually went back and took the GED test. I guess I was just tired of working in restaurants. I worked at that steak house for 6 years and finally I said, "I can't do this anymore." I was also working somewhere in the morning because I would work at the restaurant at night. Then I would have to get up early in the morning and go back to work.*
12. Kyle reasoned that he had to return to school because he understood that he would not be able to work in restaurants for the rest of his life. He was simply not making enough money and the job was not the one he expected as his career. Motivated by job and financial stability, he decided to return to school and receive his GED.
13. *I went to UNO for a semester. To me that was a really hard school to start off in from my situation. So I kind of went with a bad influence. My friend Kevin, all he wanted to do - his parents were paying for school but I was paying for my own school, so we would go to some classes and maybe there were some days where we would - he was my ride to school all the time and he would be like, lets' go to a music store or lets go do this and I mean I would be like, I really would have no say so in the matter because I didn't have any other way to get to school and you know. That was it. I had to pay 1500.00 of a loan*

back so I started working two jobs again. And then about a year later I decided to start again and that was it. Now I go to school at a community college. Hopefully I am going to pass the Biology class that I am so worried about this summer, then I am going to have to go next semester. In August I am taking the Pax RN test for nursing and then hopefully in the fall, not the fall, the spring, I am going to start at Charity and take it from there.

14. *I felt pretty good, I mean, about getting my GED. I was really confident about it. I went in there and basically took everything and everything seemed really easy for some reason. I bought a math book, I used to be really good at math and I bought an Algebra book from a bookstore and then I bought a basic science book. I went through both of those and I scored the second highest score in the class. I felt really good. I got it in the mail, well actually I didn't get it in the mail, I had to go and pick it up and I was really close to my grandfather and he took me to go pick it up and I felt so good but I didn't want anyone to know that I felt so good. I wanted them to think that I thought it wasn't a big deal. But I got home and they threw me a little surprise party.*

15. *I felt like I had completed something. Definitely. Before we took the GED test, there was a guy in there. He seemed like he was a motivational speaker because he was like, I mean, not everything he said was necessarily true but he said if he had the option of hiring somebody that had a high school diploma or that had a GED he would hire the person that had the GED because they actually dropped out and then they took it upon themselves to go back to school and get their diploma.*

16. Kyle believes that receiving his GED was a great accomplishment. He studied for it, took the test and scored well. Receiving the GED gave him a feeling of completion and

accomplishment. It renewed his sense of need for an education and reactivated his interest in learning.

17. *Now, I don't want to think about where my life would be, where I would be, if I hadn't graduated. I don't want to think about that. Probably still be working in fast food or at the steakhouse or something like that, I don't know. With a really bad attitude. I definitely think that education helps you get a good job or something. It depends on what field you go in. People who get a GED in college, general studies, I mean I don't think that would really help but I mean you get like engineering or nursing and something like that, that can definitely help you, but I mean if you are going to go to college and you don't know what you are going to be, well I don't see a point in that because that's what I did at the university and that's what ... I just didn't do good there.*
18. *I really don't blame my friend for me leaving school. It wasn't him necessarily, it's definitely me that made the decision to go with him. I could have called somebody else and done something to get to school. I still hang with him to this day and I definitely don't think I failed because of him or something like that. It was me. There's times when you are ready to do something and times when you are not and I don't think I was ready. I was just really excited. I got the GED it's time to go to school but then I go to the university and I was completely overwhelmed and everything. All my teachers giving me all this homework. Going from nothing a semester before that. It was two years between the time I left the university and the time I decided to go back to school here at the college.*
19. *Getting the GED changed me. It changed it a little bit, but I am the kind of person that once I set myself in motion to do something like a GED, I am not going to be happy with*

myself until I do it. Right now, I am in college so I am not going to be happy with myself until I am out of college and having a better job. It's definitely changed me I am just not satisfied until I get my diploma from college.

Reflections on Kyle

How Many Times Have I Told You? You are So Stupid!

You're stupid.
 I thought I was stupid.
 I just thought ...
 I get it or
 I am just dumb.
 But
 I am not stupid
 I learned that I wasn't stupid
 I am not dumb.
 Mother was wrong.

Kyle now believes that without the GED he would still be working at mediocre jobs making little money and having little chance at a good future. His failure he blames only on himself and no one else. He believes that now he has the potential to succeed, to achieve and that his future is better because of his experience with the GED.

Fortunately for Kyle, the financial need for working which led to his inability to stay in school has changed. His father began to help him more and finances in his family began to stabilize. The change in his concept about his education may not be entirely a result of the change in the financial stability of the family but may also stem from his own realization that a change had to occur in order for him to make a difference in himself, that his education was crucial in his career goals and career opportunities.

Mark

Mark was another volunteer who had come to me through my work at the lab in the community college. He was a young black man and he was dressed very well. I did not expect to hear the story he had to tell. He was very interested in speaking to me about his life and receiving the GED and he spoke clearly and distinctly as if he had received a great deal of education since the time he left high school to pursue a GED.

Like the poem used in Kyle's narrative, Mark's poetry is a reflection of the words, ideas and feelings of the various participants. It reflects an overall pattern of outside forces that react on the adult learner and play a part in his ability to stay in school or leave in search of other venues.

Mark's Story

1. *I left high school in my senior year. I went to my senior year. That's when I got into trouble, I kept fighting a lot, that's when... at that time I got kicked out of all public schools so instead of me just sitting out and going again next year, I decided to just go get my GED. It took me approximately, I want to say, about a month just to study for it and pass it. No, it was a matter of...I got kicked out of school one week and the next week I was in the GED school getting my GED.*
2. Although Mark liked school and was interested in education, he was also interested in fighting and found it difficult to stay in schools because of his like of fighting. However, he knew he needed to get a degree and unlike the rest of the participants received his high

school diploma, in the form of the GED, less than one month after “dropping out” of high school.

3. *I just liked hanging out with my friends too much. Clowning with everybody.*
4. *That was the only reason I stayed in school. I was a good student I guess. In high school I was a “B” well between a “B” and “C” student. In grade school I was a GOOD student.*
5. *But my grades dropped when I got into high school, maybe because of the high school I went to. It wasn't hard at all, I would say it was, I was just there at the wrong time. I was about to graduate and I was getting into trouble. Getting into trouble. Getting into trouble. I was fighting. First two times I got suspended and the third time, I hit somebody with a baseball bat and I got suspended from all public schools. I don't even remember why I hit them. I think it was because I was at a dance a week before that they jumped me and I retaliated and caught them at school.*
6. *I just wasn't thinking at the time. That was ten years ago.*
7. Mark attributes his need to “drop out” of high school to his inability to stay out of trouble and his carefree attitude of playing around. He loved to get into trouble and fight and this resulted in him being suspended from one school after another until he was finally forced to leave altogether.
8. *I remember my mom was really mad! Well at the time I lived with my momma, she was mad, pissed off and I had to get back in school so she wouldn't get more madder. I had to get my GED. After I got my GED, as a matter of fact, the day I got it, two days after that I went into the army. I did six years active and four years in the reserve. My mom wasn't that happy even when I told her I was going to get my GED. She wasn't...she knew I was*

going to eventually finish. She wanted me to finish then so to please her, I went and got it and I had already told them that once I went into the service I was going to come back to school. I have three sisters that graduated from college and that just left me.

9. *My mom really cared about my education. She had graduated from high school and from college just as my three sisters had. We all had to come home and read every day for at least an hour and a half. Before we do anything else, we had to read. Checking homework, she would constantly quiz us. We were getting ready to go to sleep, wake up, I need to ask you this, I need to ask you. So we were always being tested.*
10. *My dad was as pissed off as my momma was. Oh, he was pissed off! He was ticked off. After I got kicked out of school, he wanted me to come stay with him. I didn't want to do that. My dad was mean! So either I had to get back in school and do right or I had to go live with him.*
11. *Once I got in, everything I knew already, I just had to take the test. Well I graduated with my senior class, joined the army, almost got married and now I am in college. Right now I am in computer repair. After I finish it here, I am going to school at the university, get my bachelor's in that. After I get my bachelor's, I am going to open my own business repairing computers.*
12. *Mark's parents were not happy at all about his desire to leave school, and the angrier they got about Mark, the harder he looked for a way to get back into school. He believes that his parents were very supportive. His mom really cared about his education and believed that Mark should finish high school and attend college just as his sisters had done. Instead Mark graduated at the same time as his class by receiving the GED and joined the army.*

13. *I was just hanging with the wrong people, I guess, and that's what caused me to drop out even with my momma trying so hard to keep me in. There was too much partying going on. I know it wasn't because of alcohol or anything. I don't drink. Just too much partying. They never told me not to go to class, not to go to school. I went to class, it's just that, you know like, once we get out of class, the things we do. I just lost track of homework and not wanting to study, always wanting to hang out. Until I got suspended for fighting. As a matter of fact the first two times, when I came back from the first suspension, two days later I got suspended again. And then after that, I got back a week after that, I hit somebody with a baseball bat.*
14. Additionally, Mark attributes partying with his friends to be a part of his problem and lack of insight we he decided to “drop out”. He eventually lost track of homework and not doing homework lead to not caring either. Finally, Mark's attitude of not caring and not doing culminated when he hit someone in the head with a baseball bat and was expelled from school.
15. *Even though I screwed up, I was happy. I was happy when I finally graduated. When I finally got my GED. I was happy. I was happy. It took a big burden off my back. I put my life in phases and to me I finished that phase of my life and now it is time for me to move on, time to prove that I am a man, time to grow up. My dad was in the service so it was pleasing them both at one time. My mom wanted me to get out of trouble, my dad wanted me to join the service. I went into the service but I always told my mom, I am going to go back to school.*

16. *Now I look at all the people I used to hang with. Three of them are dead and some of them are in jail. I never went to jail, I never did drugs, don't drink and I have got four little girls.*
17. *Getting my GED, it made me feel that I had accomplished something. I always knew that I was better than them, it just that hanging with the wrong people, I was being a follower rather than a leader. Right now, I am a happy father, you know, striving to make my life better, my children's life better, and I hope to one day be married. I am somebody whose whole mind is at ease right now.*
18. *The only thing I can say is that for people who do drop out of school because going to school isn't for them, the only thing that you can do is just try it you know. If getting out of high school, you know, it would make you feel better, knowing that you get what you needed.*
19. *If I hadn't gotten the GED, I would probably be dead somewhere or in somebody's jail. I think if I wouldn't have gotten it ... I don't know. I would rather not think about it.*

Reflections on Mark

That Ain't No Reason to be a Drop Out

Pregnant.
The LEAP.
Alcohol.
Peer pressure.
Money.
Jobs.
Fighting – I hit somebody with a baseball bat.
I already knew everything I needed to know.
I was stupid.
I am glad
I went back.

Mark feels that he is better off for receiving his GED, joining the army and finally attending college. He reflects on where he would be had he not returned to school and made a career with the military. By looking at the people he used to hang around with, he knows the answer, dead or in jail. He knows his life would have been far different had it not been for the GED and his parents motivation for him to return to school.

By the end of Mark's story, I was glad to see that he had made certain changes I felt would make his life better. I knew it wasn't up to me to make that kind of determination but I was happy for him nonetheless. I hope to be able to follow him closely and that he allows me more of a vantage into his life and the choices he has made and the decisions and experiences he will have in order to overcome the obstacles I am sure he will face.

Marcie

She wandered into the lab one day looking for another teacher who had gone home early for the day. Before I knew it, she was telling me about her life, her family, her job and her educational experiences. She was no taller than me with blond hair and blue eyes and a very wide smile. She seemed genuinely happy to meet me and when she told me she was having a great day even though it was raining outside, I believed her.

She wanted to tell me about her GED mainly because no one had ever asked her before now what it felt like to have one. She told me she could not believe I was really interested in her and her GED at all.

She sat down and told me a story, one that saddened me incredibly but appeared to make her feel much better although with the attitude she had come in to my lab with I really could not see how that was possible.

“How Many Years”, the poem written about Marcie, was also written as a culmination of ideas and feelings and concepts about why it takes so long to get the GED, reasons for leaving school and reasons for returning to school. Although each participant had a distinct reason for “dropping out” and then returning to get a GED, they are each irrevocably tied together as well by a feeling of loss at leaving high school and of satisfaction at achieving the GED.

Marcie’s Story

1. *I failed the 11th grade. And then I went to 11th grade again at another high school and there was a program going on that had just started like at the first high school I had been to. Instead of getting six credits a year you get eight, so if I had gotten eight credits, I would have graduated with my class in 96. So I switched over to do that and I didn’t like it. It was a big mistake. So I just stopped going. There were other things involved. I had a boyfriend and then I got kicked out the house.*
2. *It was just that...well my second high school was completely different from the first and I just went in there, half the year and I was just thrown into it. I mean I knew what was going on. Really, I didn’t know what was going on. They were in different spots and different books and classes were going faster because they were now combining you know two more classes a year and I wasn’t able...I felt like I was lost. It was just so far...everybody was so far ahead you know, they knew what they were doing it was too late. I just slept in class. It was too late for me to talk to the teacher and I was like, you know, ok, well this is where we were and I tried that once. This is where we were at my other high school before I came here and she was like you know, oh, this is chapter two, we are already in 17. So it was like well you better read and catch up, it wasn’t like... I*

don't know.

3. Marcie did not enjoy her high school years at all. She always felt as if she was being left behind and her inability to catch up frustrated her. At the height of her frustration when she felt there were no other decisions to make, she simply left school and decided not to finish. However, she went to a second school that, in her opinion, turned out to be a far worse experience than her first. Marcie believed that everyone was so far ahead of her that she would never be able to catch up and that her endeavors were fruitless. In addition, she attributes her lack of interest in school to outside factors, both of which would be negative factors, including a boyfriend and being kicked out of her house.
4. *I didn't tell my parents. I was kicked out at the time. I was, I think I was 17, almost 18. Yeah, I was 17, maybe two months away from 18. My mom had kicked me out and I wasn't talking to my dad. They divorced when I was young. I was kicked out of my house. So I was living with my boyfriend and his parents and they...well they were living in Lakeview and my high school was off of Jefferson Highway so there was a problem getting there and well, it wasn't a priority any more. So I dropped out.*
5. *A couple of months later my mom and I started talking again and she was just like well what are you planning on doing? What are you going to do? You know. By that time I was two months pregnant. That sounds horrible. I didn't even tell her I was pregnant. I just told her I was going to go and get my GED. I didn't do that, I was just kind of floating around with my boyfriend and doing all the important things. I had made 18. I got pregnant a month after I made 18. That was six years ago. My mom was really concerned that I had left school. I wasn't talking to my father. I hadn't talked to him for about five years. My mom was concerned but there was nothing she could do you know,*

as far as making me go. She would go to work and do her thing and keep supporting us.

6. *I think my mom was concerned about me being in school, but that was it. It wasn't that she didn't have time, she was trying to work and support our household. She couldn't make me go. That was it, she would talk to me and it would be like "Well you need to go back to school and you need to do something with yourself, you know, you need to do something." But she couldn't make me go back to school, you know, she couldn't make me go. I was young and rebelling, you know, all that.*
7. *Marcie's mom was concerned about her leaving school although they did not find out about her dropping out until a few months afterwards. She had been living with her boyfriend at the time and had little occasion to talk to them. As concerned as she was, there was little she felt she could do for Marcie, as they damage had already been done. Marcie's father did not live with the family and Marcie did not even consider informing him of her decision until some time later.*
8. *I was really good in school. I like it. I guess the reason I dropped out was because of people, friends, drugs. It didn't make me want to leave school but it didn't fit in with the whole school scene. I was out of school you know, and I would go drinking, drinking and drugging all night and then you know, my mom would wake me up and make me go to school and I would go to school and I would sleep all day. Finally, I talked my mom into taking me to school and letting me drop out so I could go register to get my GED. She talked to me about it and made sure that it was what I wanted to do so she brought me and I dropped from all my classes and then ... it was pretty... at the time it was a relief for me. It wasn't, it wasn't one of my priorities, school wasn't one of my priorities at all.*

By this point I was pregnant. My mom didn't know. I mean I wasn't partying or anything anymore you know, but, it was just like I was trying to work and trying to keep a hold of my boyfriend. School wasn't...it just wasn't a priority. Unfortunately.

9. *I just skipped classes. It was like, wake up, if I did wake up in the morning, you know. Well I don't have a ride. Excuse after excuse and then finally I just didn't go. And then eventually my mom was just like, you know you are going to have to take care of this. Either you are going to go back to school or you are going to drop and go get your GED. So that's what I did.*
10. *It wasn't the fault of my family that I finally quit. Not so much family. I would say friends. Well what I thought were friends at the time. Um... No they weren't in school. A couple of them were but not all of them. I guess I would say, I wouldn't really say it was the friends, well maybe it was the influence of the friends and the partying and the drinking and drugging. I guess so. I guess friends. Not family though.*
11. *Marcie considers herself to have been a good student and expresses that she liked school. She attributes her leaving school to drugs and alcohol and the people she was friends with. School became less and less of a priority and when she became pregnant, she rationalized that there were few other choices than to leave school and work on trying to get a GED.*
12. *I do know that my family life wasn't all that great. Maybe that's it. I don't know. My mom and dad divorced when I was two. And split up. My dad remarried when I was five or six and they have been married ever since. They built a house in Covington across the lake and they were just over there. And when I was 13, I used to have to go over there ever summer, you know, for two months out of the summer. Well, I lived with my mom*

during the whole school year I had friends and everything else, I didn't want to go over there. There was nothing, nothing around. This was almost 12 years ago. There was nothing there. Nothing anywhere near when I used to go over there. It was just like woods. It was boring and I didn't want to go so ... When I was 13 my dad looked through all my stuff and he found a notebook that my friend ...it was my notebook and a friend's notebook and it was like a little diary and we used to write notes back and forth. Like what we did, you know. I smoked a joint yesterday. And my dad is a New Orleans policeman so he was quite upset and that was the beginning of the summer so he made my summer a miserable hell. I couldn't call my mom, I couldn't write to my mom, I couldn't talk to any of my friends. I couldn't write to anybody. He took the radio away. I had to go to summer school and I would leave summer school and had to come home and do whatever my step mom wanted me to do like dust the furniture or clean the bathrooms or you know what I mean. Something on that level. So after the summer was over, I was so miserable and he was like you know, "Look if you don't want to come back, you don't have to come back." I think he was trying to use you know, reverse psychology. Well I do want to come back, you know, but instead I said "Fine" and I was gone and I didn't go back. When I was probably seven months pregnant, I wrote him a letter and I said that I was pregnant and you are going to have a grandson and I just wanted you to know and that's fine if you don't want to call or come by or whatever but I am just writing this to let you know. About two weeks later, he shows up on my doorstep, my boyfriend's, you know, our door, and he came in and talked to us and everything and he started our relationship. It's really kind of rocky because he's one way. You know, he's this cop, follow the rules, you know do everything my way. You know, be in control. And I want to be my own

person over here you know. I can't do that. I go to my house now and I take my six year old little boy and I go over to his house and I become twelve years old again. But, he's a good guy. He had a son with my stepmother who is now 17. He is a good boy. He's in Boy Scouts, doesn't do drugs, never drank beer. You know. He's also really naïve about a lot of things.

13. *The baby was born two months before I turned 18. Then I didn't go back to school until ...about two years later. It took about 6 months to get my GED. I was talking to a friend. We were talking and she was like they have GED classes at night at EJ and she lived right across the street and she was like well I think I am going to start and I was like well, I will start with you. It's like a co dependent thing. So we went and we both finished six months later. After that, I started just working. That was all I did, just waiting tables. My little boy, my son, was small, you know six months old. He was fine in daycare until he could crawl. You know? He started crawling. They didn't watch the kids. It went downhill from there.*

14. *I thought I would just get the GED so I would just have it, you know, I would be finished school. I would just have my little certificate saying I had finished school, you know, that I had made it. Well I didn't go to college. My little boy was about a year old and he is now going to be about six. I am just starting college. I just worked. I just worked and supported my son. I mean really I didn't have anywhere to put him, while I went to school. I had put him in daycare but that was anywhere from seventy to a hundred dollars a week. Going to school, I couldn't pay that so I had to work. I mean really I had to start bartending because what's the sense in going to work if you have to pay one hundred dollars in daycare a week. It cancels out. Now I am back in school and I*

am going to be a nurse anesthetist and put myself through school and buy a house and a boat and a car.

15. Marcie found out about the GED program from a friend who lived across the street from an adult education facility. She finished the GED soon after her baby was born but her thoughts about the GED being the answer to her problems were soon ended when she realized that it hadn't help change her financial stability or job stability. "I thought I would just get the GED so I would just have it, you know, I would be finished school. I would just have my little certificate saying I had finished school, you know, that I had made it." It took six years after receiving the GED to decide to attempt college. Now, being in school, she feels that her goals are in sight and that her future is far more assured. She feels more confident about getting a good job and working for the future as the GED has given her accessibility to a college and a degree.

16. *I think I am more mature now. I'll have more self esteem, my son will have more direction. His father was sentenced to prison, sentenced to eight years in prison not even a month ago. He was a drug addict. That's all my son had seen. I mean that's not all my son had seen. I don't do drugs. He's got a good example in me because I am not doing anything. I am working. So I am hoping that in the next 5 to 7 years I should be finished with school I should have a nurse position and keeping my son on the right track.*

17. *It's funny how my life has changed. Everything seems to be on track now. When I went to school to get my GED I was so nervous. I was nervous. I was very nervous. It was more of a problem of who was going to keep my son. I mean, I was really nervous. When I took the test, I walked out of there and I was like, I didn't pass. There was like three other friends there taking the test. You all go in one building. I was just like I failed! I*

failed! I failed! And about two weeks later, I got a big packet in the mail and it was my diploma. I really didn't feel like I got anything right. I really feel like I had guessed at everything. But I got the paper. It was wonderful. I couldn't believe it. I was so proud of myself. I was like, "I thought I failed!" I was shocked. I would have rather had the diploma but the GED was better than nothing at all. But I would have preferred to pass through high school and gone to the prom and all you know.

18. *I am glad it all happened the way it did. I am a really good person. I am trying to instill that in my child. I am a different person because I have grown up since then, but I have worked and I have seen things. I have matured but I haven't really grown up.*

Reflections on Marcie

How Many Years?

How long did it take?

One week.

Two years.

Six years ...they called me a super senior.

Nine years.

Ten years.

Ten years later I went back to get the GED.

I had put it off way too long.

When Marcie reflects back and thinks about her life and how it has changed since she received a GED and realized that education needed to be a priority instead of boyfriends, drugs and alcohol, she considers herself lucky for having made the right choice and return to school. Although she regrets not finishing high school because of all that she missed along the way, having the GED is better than having no education and it gave her the starting point she needed to get back into school and to make a better life for herself and her son.

Marcie's experience with education seems to reflect the experiences many have with education today when they find themselves constantly being transferred from one school to the next. She felt that no one ever really had a handle on her and that her education was catch as catch can. In high school, education was never introduced to her as being important and therefore never was.

It was not until she realized that she had to make a difference for herself and her son that the value of both of their educations actually became important. It was not until she saw the need that she realized that the experience and the desire for the education itself had to be fulfilled.

These three individuals represent a cross section of society that leaves school because of peer pressure, financial instability, and mental or physical abuse, and then return to school to receive a GED. The stories are not unusual – others experience not only these problems but many more in their search for education. By analyzing the stories and the themes embedded in the stories, it is possible to form conclusions about how these students would be better served in the educational system.

Chapter 5

The Analysis

This chapter examines the similarities and differences among the nine participants in the study. Each of these nine participants is at the center of positive and negative forces as a result of an educational system, a dysfunctional family or a dysfunctional environment that affects the participant's economic stability, social background or cultural and ethnic backgrounds. But instead of allowing themselves to continue to be affected by the negative influences, they have found ways to decrease the negative and increase the positive influences – McClosky's theory of margin. Each one has become a "hero" if not to others, at least to themselves by changing their perspectives on careers, finances and education thus making a difference in their lives and the lives of their families.

Five themes emerged in the transcripts of the participants [which I labeled]: Reflection, Outside Forces, Focus, Collaboration, and Emotion. These themes translated into an understanding of how the participants became "high school leavers" - from unplanned pregnancies to feelings of low self esteem and "not being good enough." The first theme is reflection. In order to change, the individuals must reflect on what has happened in their lives – the choices made and the outcomes achieved. This self-reflection about wrong or inappropriate choices and the resulting consequences is essential to understanding what choices need to be made is change is to happen and if that change is to be positive. From there, the second theme of outside forces is evident. The "high school leaver" must recognize what outside forces

influenced the student's decision to leave high school. These outside forces could be the negative impact of family and friends in the form of mental and physical abuse, the controlling influences of alcohol and drugs, or the instability of the family's financial situation. The third theme is focus. The student understands that focus must be achieved in order to improve job marketability and financial potential. This change ultimately affects the future of the individual and the futures of those who depend on them. Correct focus precipitates the learner's decision to reenter school, receive further education in a field or vocation thus effect the desired changes in their lives. The fourth theme, Collaboration, involves the decisions to seek the support of positive influences through new associations in family, friends, teachers, and bosses. This collaboration is what McClusky (1963) calls the theory of margin. This theory focuses on the increase of positive energy while decreasing the negative energy. The final theme is emotion. Here the feelings of self-confidences and the increase in self-esteem due to a series of successes gives the students a new and brighter outlook about themselves, their families and the futures.

Each narrative itself is important to the analysis. These stories are the true stories of real students – students who felt they had no place in school, were misjudged and misunderstood by family and friends and the educational system or inappropriately acted and made wrong choices. It is their words that bring a reality to the phenomena of “high school leavers” who receive GEDs. In analyzing the narratives, my “subjective I’s” became even clearer. We are not all the same, we evolve from different walks of life, different ethnicities, different cultures, religious affiliations and biases. It is in the analysis that this clarity is achieved.

The appendix number and paragraph number following the individual quotes represent the pages where that quote may be found in each individual narrative.

Presentation of the Findings

The emergent themes in the interviews of the participants are explained here in a linear fashion. However, these themes are seldom experienced in this manner. As is characteristic with all narratives, not all participants start with a beginning, proceed to the middle and end at the end. Stories begin and end at various points in the life of the storyteller. One begins with an experience in high school and relates it to an incident that happened years and years ago at the family kitchen table. Another presents the political elements of the time as he grew up and then relates it to his high school education and his future plans. As he speaks, he breaks off into tangents, remembering and relating other similar incidents from his childhood that suddenly seem very important. It is not until after some adjusting of the lens does the picture fall into focus. For many of the participants a time of self - examination and self - understanding had to be negotiated before that focus became clear.

As varied as each theme is and as varied as each participant is, the perspective's of each participant help to tell an overall story that is overwhelming and often unbelievable. Yet, their common goal of education is the tie that links them together making them susceptible to the forces that rend and bind us to our past and make our present and future possible.

Reflection

In order for the participants to understand the present, they had to remember the path they took. For many, the process was a difficult one, reliving old memories, bringing up old feelings, reliving old battles. To put their presents and futures into perspective, these participants had to relive the past, acknowledge it, and learn from it. They had to apply what they had learned in order to make the decisions that would make their futures a little brighter and a little more successful. However, since no narration is ever told from a definite beginning, this may or may

not represent the beginnings for the participants. Reflection is the ability of the participant to look at his or her life objectively and to examine the choices that were made and how they positively or negatively affected a particular goal. This would include their ability to see themselves as a learner and objectively discuss why they left high school.

Not good enough

From Billy's perspective, his family always felt and tried to reinforce that he was not good enough. His mother would tell him he was stupid and his father would call him a bum. Years of negative influence forced him to finally believe that they were right. Years of negative habits and skipping grades reinforced his concept of uselessness and ignorance. By the time he was 17 and in the ninth grade, his parents were trying to talk him into dropping out. (Appendix 2, p.3)

Rachael experienced similar negative factors from her family but additionally the lack of close friends lowered her self-esteem. "I didn't have a lot of friends and I think that that was part of the reason I finally quit. I couldn't take the pressure of being the outcast, of always feeling like I didn't belong." (Appendix 4, p.6) Melissa also hated school. High school simply was not a good experience for her. Additionally, Melissa cites her mother as part of the reason for hating school. "I hated high school because of my mom and I associate high school with her." (Appendix5, p.2)

Valerie remembers leaving school not because of her parents or her friends but because she felt the school had let her down. "when it came to my 11th grade year in high school, I didn't make it on the LEAP. I failed the math by one point. At that point I was ready to give up. I was like well, you know, why finish? You know, I know I am smart." Valerie felt she did not have to prove her intelligence to anyone, especially not teachers. In the end, she told her mom she hadn't

done well on the LEAP. When her mother asked what she would do, the only thing Valerie knew was that she was not going back to school. (Appendix 1, p.2)

Pregnancy

Marcie was pregnant and knew that she would not be allowed to continue school. Instead of telling her mom about her pregnancy, she simply told her that she hated school and had decided to drop out. School had become less and less of a priority and her boyfriend, her baby and being with her friends had taken its place in importance. (Chap.4, Marcie, p.9)

Lori's experience is similar to that of Marcie's experience. "I got pregnant. At that time, you know, seventeen years ago you didn't really stay in school. Pregnant. It was not as common as it is right now. So I just decided to leave, I thought it was best. My head was not on at that point." (Appendix 3, p.1) Lori thought she was too interested in having fun so she decided to drop out when she found out she was pregnant. "It was the worst mistake I ever made in my life." (Appendix 3, p.1)

Other Problems

Other problems were just as noticeable. Kyle's dad decided to retire leaving his mom to bear the brunt of the bills. Feeling the need to help his mom with the bills and already having a distaste for high school, "dropping out" was easily done. (Chap.4, Kyle, p.4) Mark had been kicked out of all public schools in the city and for fighting. He had been suspended the third time for hitting someone with a baseball bat over an incident at a dance the week before. (Chap.4, Mark, p.13) .

Bryan simply decided he didn't like school anymore so he just stopped going. "I would show up, take a test, show up for a week or two straight, skip a week or two and so I had to go to summer school to pass the seventh, eighth and ninth grades." (Appendix 6, p.1)

Bryan's frustration stemmed from his lack of interest in school. Due to this lack of interest, he understood less and less of what was going on in class. As a result, his grades suffered and his frustration increased. "I was really frustrated. I was just frustrated. At the time I didn't think that they had anything more to teach me. I felt that if I had stayed in school until my senior year...in my mind it would have been nothing more than repetition of classes and subjects that I already knew and social preparation." (Appendix 6, p.4) Bryan reflects on what it would have been like had he stayed in school and gone to graduation with all of his friends. "Not knowing anyone else in the room, there was not that feeling of being in a class, graduating with a class." (Appendix 6, p.16).

Reflection on Reflections

In order for each of us to better understand the present and the future, where we are going, our goals, and the reasons for our successes, we have to look at where we have been. We may not understand what happened but we should use what happened, learn and go on from there.

Although each participant had to overcome different obstacles, different fears, different problems, they all had one thing in common - through adversity and hardships culminating in "dropping out" or being "pushed out" from high school, each had to make the decision to return to school to better his or her life.

The following charts break down the individual problems the participants associated with them becoming "high school leavers."

	Billy	Rachael	Melissa	Valerie
Frustration	Years of Being called a bum, negative habits, skipping grades	I couldn't take the pressure of being an outcast, of always feeling like I didn't belong	I hates high school because of my mom and I associated high school with her	I felt like the school let me down

	Marcie	Lori
Pregnant	School was less of a priority, boyfriend, baby and friends became more important	I got pregnant in high school. I decided to leave. I thought it was for the best.

	Kyle
Financial	My dad decided to retire early, my mom couldn't meet the bills, I had to help out.

	Mark
Fighting	I was kicked out of every public school for fighting.

	Bryan
Frustration	I was so frustrated, I had no interest in school

Outside Forces

Negative and Positive Influences

According to Lewin there are negative and positive influence that affect how the adult learner learns and why he or she makes the decisions that are made. These negative and positive influences continuously bombard us all. As we grow older, the number of problems we have to

deal with changes as well. It is these negative and positive influences that control decision making. Although all of the participants have started on the road to fulfillment of their dreams, each had problems to overcome along the way. All nine dealt with lack of self-esteem, lack of encouragement, lack of motivation. Many were neglected, some physically abused. Some turned to alcohol or drugs or sex as an answer to the problems they could not solve. Outside forces are those negative and positive forces that Lewin (1999) says constantly bombard adults making decisions both harder and easier at the same time. These forces would include the reaction of the participant's family when they were told of the student's choice to leave school, the factors attributing to the student's problems in high school and whether or not financial stability influenced their reason to leave high school.

Alcohol and drug abuse

Billy resorted to alcohol in high school as a way to hide from his problems and pain. After repeating almost every other grade and struggling through a series of different school and a lack of friends, alcohol seemed to be one of the best solutions to the problem. "I didn't know that the way I was drinking was leading to my problems. I was drinking you know. I would go to school, we would drink Boonesfarm and Mad Dog. It was real popular then." It was this constant desire to hide from his problem with education that made his life after classes seem easier if he could not remember it. Eventually, even after-school drinking was not enough and Billy started skipping the classes he did not do well in to escape alcohol. "We would drink so much Boonesfarm at night all you had to do was go to school the next day and start drinking water and you would get a buzz all over again. Just that rot gut, just that wine hang over. It was part of it, it was part of it. [Years later] I knew I had to go back and get a high school diploma. (Appendix 2,

p.15)” Billy’s home was “chaotic.” Both of his parents drank and continue to do so. Billy describes his life as being abnormal and unstable (Appendix 2, p. 5).

The drug and alcohol abuse was not always self-inflicted. Often it was not even the participant doing the abusing. Rachael remembers waking up in the morning and preparing for school, but her mom, who was abusing drugs and alcohol, had other ideas, “When I was home my mom would come up with some kind of reason why I had to stay home from school. I couldn’t go to school. She would be on her drugs and she couldn’t stand up half the time to do what she was supposed to do. I remember one morning when I got up, she goes ‘You can’t go’ and I said ‘Well why can’t I go?’ and she said because ‘you have to take care of us. You have to cook for your little brother. You have to get him to off to school or keep him home.’ She didn’t care...that’s what made me leave. (Appendix 4, p.3)” For Rachael, overcoming someone else’s drug and alcohol addiction became the problem. It was the alcohol and her mother’s lack of responsibility that kept her back, that failed to build the self esteem she needed in order to succeed. It was this failure on her mother’s part, Rachael believes, that caused her to leave home before she was fifteen. “My mom and dad, my whole family was on drugs at the time and I was pretty angry about that.” Rachael felt they were not interested enough in her to encourage her to continue her education. (Appendix 4, p. 4)

Physical and Mental Abuse

There is little difference between the effects of drug and alcohol abuse and verbal or physical abuse on the self-esteem and emotional stability of a child. Both degrade, humiliate and hurt the child far more than anyone can tell until years later when the pain of childhood starts to surface and the effects of the abuse are clarified. While some parents of the participants resorted

to drugs or alcohol to ease their pain, others resorted to physical or verbal abuse, tactics they learned from their own parents, thus continuing the cycle of abuse and neglect.

Melissa remembers never getting help at home as a child. “You know like homework and stuff like that. You know all kids are interested in things but if there is no one to help them they become disinterested. So that is what happened to me. When my mother had to help me with things she would get mad because I didn’t catch on you know, right away, so she would abuse me. She didn’t want to help me...because she just didn’t want to help me. She would hit me.”(Appendix 5, p.1) Eventually, Melissa quit asking her mother for help and when her grades began to suffer, she did what she thought was best – she dropped out. As much as she liked school, she believed that it was not for her, that anything was better than abuse, even getting a low paying job was better than being hit. The seeds of education, however, persistently germinated in her mind.

Billy also remembers physical and verbal abuse at the hands of his disinterested parents. “I was beat down from an early, early age, physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally.” Finally Billy sought help for his alcohol abuse and by doing so, received the help he needed to build his self-esteem and to face his past. His mother resorted to terms like “good for nothing bum” and his dad’s negative statements “you’re making enough money, why do you need to stay in school?” chiseled away at the thin shell of self-esteem that Billy had, finally forcing to seek a solution in alcohol.

Other Obstacles

For Kyle, things were getting bad at home but not because of drug or alcohol abuse of verbal or physical abuse. Kyle’s mother and father could not pay their bills and his dad decided he was going to retire at the wrong time. With his mother as the only source of income, the

financial burden became difficult to handle, and Kyle felt obligated to drop out of school to help his mom pay the bills. He was not enjoying high school and felt that it was up to him to help with the bills. Dropping out seemed like the obvious choice. (Chapter 4, Kyle, p1) Fortunately for Kyle, the pressure of working two full time jobs with little in return began to break down his energy and desire. Before long, he knew that the answer to both his and his mother's problems would be to return to school and earn a degree that would promise a better job and a better salary.

For Mark, an excuse for leaving school grew from his relationships with his friends. "I was just hanging with the wrong people, I guess, and that's what caused me to drop out even with my momma trying so hard to keep me in. There was too much partying going on. I know it wasn't because of alcohol or anything. I don't drink. Just too much partying." (Chap 4, Mark, p.13) Mark started getting into trouble and eventually hit someone with a baseball bat. By his senior year, Mark had dropped out of high school. He was getting into trouble and eventually hit someone with a baseball bat. (Chap. 4, Mark, P.13) He knew, though that education had to be his top priority and went back to adult night classes to get his GED.

Bryan's experiences were similar. He knew he was hanging out with the wrong crowd, but felt it was impossible to leave them as he considered them his friends. The difference, however, between Bryan and Mark, is Bryan's decision to drink and do drugs as well which he admits his friends were a part of. "I was off drinking and running around with my friends and staying out all night and got in with a bad crowd and I was doing drugs at an early age and just your basic rebellious teenager." (Appendix 6, p.6)

Besides the drug and alcohol abuse that Rachael had to tolerate, there were more dangerous manifestations of her mother's "love" that she had to contend with. No one in

Rachael's family had ever graduated from high school and therefore there was no point of reference for high expectations. Most of Rachael's family was addicted to one type of drug or another and many were working as prostitutes to support their habits. "My mom used to tell me that that was my goal. 'lay down and make your money.' I hate her for that. She couldn't be a mom to me though. She didn't know how. She didn't care." (Appendix 4, p.12)

Reflection on Outside Forces

The positive influences that Lewin speaks of provide the adult learner the means by which he or she is able to fulfill their goals and attain success. These positive influences mean having someone to baby sit for free while the adult attends school, finding a support group that is willing to lend a hand and provide the encouragement one needs to continue or a shoulder one needs to cry on, or a family - husband, wife, children – that love and support the person for who they are rather than hate them and degrade them for who they aren't or who they can not be. These positive influences are what fuels the fire for educational success, job stability, and financial growth. However, often these influences are tempered by the negative influences that also bombard the adult learner, making it difficult to attain the goals and achieve the success they desire. From alcohol and drug abuse to neglect and physical and verbal abuse, the adult learner faces obstacles for education, success and job advancement that may temporarily or even permanently hold him back from his goals. McClusky's (1963) theory of margin situates the adult in a time of growth, change and integration where the adult seeks balance between the amount of energy needed and the amount available. The amount needed is the positive energy, the positive influences, which make it possible for the adult to achieve his goals to succeed. The amount available is lessened by the negative energy the adult must also contend with in order to survive. For the adult to achieve and succeed, the positive influences that act upon his life need

to be increased and the negative influences need to be decreased.

The following charts break down the individual problems the participants associated with becoming “high school leavers.”

	Billy	Rachael
Alcohol/Drugs	“I didn’t know that the way I was drinking was leading to my problems. I was drinking you know. I would go to school, we would drink Boonesfarm and Mad Dog. It was real popular then.”	When I was home my mom would come up with some kind of reason why I had to stay home from school. She would be on her drugs and she couldn’t stand up half the time to do what she was supposed to do. She goes “You can’t go” and I said “Well why can’t I go?” and she said because you have to take care of us.

	Melissa	Billy	Rachael
Mental/Physical	When my mother had to help me with things she would get mad because I didn’t catch on ...she just didn’t want to help me. She would hit me.” Eventually, Melissa quit asking her mother for help and when her grades began to suffer, she did what she thought was best – she dropped out.	Billy too remembers physical and verbal abuse at the hands and mouths of his disinterested parents. “I was beat down from an early, early age, physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally.”	Most of Rachael’s family were addicted to one type of drug or another and many were working as prostitutes to support their habits. “My mom used to tell me that that was my goal. ‘lay down and make your money.’ I hate her for that.

	Bryan	Mark	
Friends	“I was off drinking and running around with my friends and staying out all night and got in with a bad crowd and I was doing drugs at an early age and just your basic rebellious teenager.”	“I was just hanging with the wrong people, I guess, and that’s what caused me to drop out even with my momma trying so hard to keep me in. There was too much partying going on.	

Focus

For those who “drop out” or are “pushed out” a common question they ask themselves is “what’s next?” The tie that binds these participants together is that though it may be a few years down the road, the “what’s next” was continued education. Some of their experiences were tragic, even scaring, but all have faced adversity. The obstacles were related to physical and mental health and the student’s treatment by others including close family members. The important part is that through the adversities and because of the hardships they faced, each participant became stronger, more resilient, and learned not just to put their past behind them, but also to learn from the past and apply it to their futures.

Over time, and with encouragement they desperately needed, the feelings of each of the participant’s changed. Many gained a new outlook on life through marriage, children, or the realization that something, somewhere had to change. As Freire suggested (1970) in his theory of adult education, “focus” involves the ability to be aware of one situation and to fix on the means to achieve goals. Focus may include when the student decided to return to school and how the student found out about the GED. Additionally it also addresses what the students did after

receiving their GED and where they thought their future was headed.

Feelings of Encouragement

Billy remembers making the decision to go back to school and the reaction from his wife, children and friends. “[I was getting] Encouragement from my sponsor, encouragement from my friends, encouragement from that one sibling, my older sister who really kind of raised me, you know. There was a ten year difference. She was encouraging me and my ex-wife was encouraging me. My ex-wife had always encouraged me to do it. My daughter was young but she was still encouraging me ... so I had enough people kind of cheerleading for me. Vocational rehabilitation kind of came in and there was a counselor there and they were kind of encouraging me and really coming in like gangbusters to help out every way they possible could.” (Appendix 3, p. 20) “A couple of my friends were going back to school or going to college and I wanted to go. They were going and I wanted to go. I wanted to. One friend went back and he was doing good so another friend went back.” (Appendix 3, p.20)

This feeling, this desire to return to school is reflected in Rachael’s reasoning about education. “I have always thought about school. I have always wanted the education. I knew that I would go back because that’s where I wanted to be.” (Appendix 4, p.11) She originally thought about going back to receive a high school diploma, but because of her age, decided that there was another way. Her husband told her about the GED and both she and her husband believed it would change her outlook and raise her self esteem. “I am going to do it,” she remembers thinking. “It was the happiest day of my life, being able to get my GED and go to college.” (Appendix 4, p.1)

Melissa also remembers a feeling of elation when she made the decision to go back to school and finally finish. “I went back because I knew I had to teach my son something. I had to set the example for him.” (Appendix 5, p.33) The feelings of elation for Melissa were a slice of heaven. (Appendix 5, p.26) “Oh God, I was in heaven. I was in heaven. I was like, Oh my God I was just... I couldn’t believe it... it was like, somebody had just lifted a gorilla off my shoulders. I was like ... me. I had to like, look in the mirror, you know. It was phenomenal. It was the best. I was happy. It was fantastic. It was great. I am much stronger... a much stronger person. (Appendix 5, p. 26)

Outside Influences

Valerie and Melissa share similar sentiments, both realizing that children learn by example, both returning to school to set a good example for their children. Valerie remembers thinking about her son and noting that he helped to make the final decision for her to go back to school. “You know, my son kind of motivated me as well because I want him to have a choice.”(Appendix 1, p.18) “ Since I have gotten the GED I am able to do what I wanted to do which was to go to college and further my education. (Appendix 1, p.18) [I wouldn’t have gotten it] if I hadn’t wanted the education so bad. I would still be stuck in a dead end job. (Appendix 1, p.18)

Kyle realized that working dead end jobs was stopping him from doing what he really wanted and making the money he thought he deserved. “I guess I was just tired of working in restaurants. I worked at that steak house for six years and finally I said, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’ I was also working somewhere in the morning because I would work at the restaurant at night. Then I would have to get up early in the morning and go back to work.” (Chap.4,. Kyle, p.11)

When two full time, yet low paying jobs prevented him from following his dream, he knew that school was the only answer and decided to return.

Reflection on Focus

Though their ability to achieve and succeed was dampened by obstacles that they could not avoid or that were difficult to overcome, each participant understood the eventual goal.

For Billy, it was his friends going back to school and completing their GEDs and knowing and believing that this was something that he also wanted – to change his life, to change his future.

Melissa thought it would be a “slice of heaven” and anticipated the moment when she could walk up to the stage and receive her diploma. It was the aid of family and friends and support groups that brought the participants back and helped them to refocus on a desire that had so far eluded them. It was the knowledge that their futures depended on the decision they made and not just their futures, but also the futures of their children. For Melissa and Valerie it was knowing that setting an example of staying in school and achieving their high school diploma would reflect in the lives of their children. It was the telescope lens that was needed to bring the picture into sharp view.

The following charts break down the individual problems the participants associated with becoming “high school leavers.”

	Billy	Melissa	Rachael
Encouragement	“[I was getting] Encouragement from my sponsor, encouragement from my friends, encouragement from that one sibling ... so I had enough people kind of cheerleading for me.”	Everyone was there, standing back, pushing me forward.	Her husband told her about the GED and both she and her husband believed it would change her outlook and raise her self esteem.

	Valerie	Melissa	Kyle
Family/Friends/Family	Valerie remembers thinking about her son and noting that he helped to make the final decision for her to go back to school. “You know, my son kind of motivated me as well because I want him to have a choice.”	“I went back because I knew I had to teach my son something. I had to set the example for him.”	“I guess I was just tired of working in restaurants. I worked at that steak house for 6 years and finally I said, “I can’t do this anymore.” I was also working somewhere in the morning because I would work at the restaurant at night. Then I would have to get up early in the morning and go back to work.”

Collaboration

For many there is a support system, a circle of friends and family that enables the student or “drop-out” to return to school and finish an education. For others, however, the absence of this circle could be called a lack of support system. There is no one there to back the student up, to encourage them, to offer advise or to lend a hand. There is no point of reference to look rationally at the future, to understand what needs to be done and to start the steps necessary to start the journey toward a successful finish. No one is there to say “finish high school, go to college, get a job that pays well.” Instead, these students are left on there own to fend for themselves, make their own decisions and become influenced by unnecessary, unneeded and unwanted advise.

Collaboration is the support system that exists for the student and makes it possible for the student to return to school. This coincides with Lewin’s theory of positive and negative

forces. The positive forces are the ones that made it possible for the student to return to high school or adult education classes and complete the GED. Additionally, McClusky's theory is reflected here. The negative forces would be obstacles or people who made it difficult or impossible to return to school.

Encouragement or Lack Thereof

Billy represented himself as a child screaming out for help. "You know. Why didn't ya'll notice this child screaming out for help? I was just crying out for help and no one answered." Billy noted that he wanted someone to tell him to stay in school, he wanted someone to offer him advice and tell him what to do, but instead, even as a youngster, he found himself making his own decisions and fending for himself. No one told him to do his homework or offered him any sort of encouragement. (Appendix 2, p.3) "Oh, I mean the claw marks are on the wall when you fail every other grade. You know. But my parents had no education. They had third or maybe fifth grade education. They were country farming people. So, they didn't know any better when they told me to just drop out." (Appendix 2, p.3) Billy does remember two teachers who tried to make a difference in his life, two who may have tried to convince him to stay in school and to tell him that school could be different. Unfortunately, by then he believed himself to be too old for school. By high school, he was already six foot five and bigger than all the kids and most of the teachers. He thought of himself to an adult. He was in the ninth grade. (Appendix 2, p.3)

Billy's parents, having no education past the third grade could not understand or explain the need to stay in school and finish high school. In the ninth grade, his father told him "you know, you're making more money than me," because he was working as a chef at the time. "You're making more money than me why are you wasting your time with this school, why don't you give it up?" and that was the end of school for Billy. (Appendix 2, p. 3)

Things changed for Billy when he decided to go back and receive his GED. The support and encouragement he lacked from his parents surfaced in the coordinators and teachers at the night classes Billy decided to attend. “The people were absolutely wonderful. There was just no prejudice, they were just super supportive. At every turn they would tell me that I could do it.” (Appendix 2, p. 20)

Lori had missed a lot of school but believes she was simply not motivated to attend. Lori portrayed her mother as a spider, claiming that once her mother had given birth to her and her sister, that was the end of the responsibility. She and her sister were raised by their grandmother. Although her grandmother was educated, she never insisted on the girls going to school and felt that if they went it was from their own need and desire. Evidently, the girls were to self motivate themselves. “If I wanted to I went. If I didn’t want to, I didn’t go. If you wanted to stay home a day just because you didn’t feel like it... that was OK...she just allowed me to do what I wanted to do. I guess she was trying to compensate for the fact that my mother bailed on my sister and I. I think she just over-indulged us a lot in that respect.” Finally Lori left school when she found out she was pregnant. Her grandmother was upset. Her mother? She never knew. (Appendix 3, p.4)

Rachael’s home life was far different from the life Lori experienced but she shared one thing in common with Lori and Billy – lack of encouragement and motivation from their family. Rachael believed that school should be her only responsibility. She loved school and did not want to go home at the end of the day. (Appendix 4, p.3) Rachael felt as if she were growing up too fast and was being burdened with responsibilities that she should not have to carry at the young age of 12. “The feeling of growing up too fast, of anger and frustration. So I left home. I

didn't want to be there, I couldn't be there. I was 12. I remember there was no encouragement for me, no one even asked me to stay. No one cared." (Appendix 4, p.3)

The morning responsibilities Rachael's mother placed on her at such a young age – the care and nurturing of her younger siblings often kept her from going to school. Neither Rachael nor her little brother received any emotional support. Rachael believes this is what finally caused her to leave home. Her feelings of frustration and depression were overwhelming. She was isolated from her family and could not understand their hatred toward her. (Appendix 4, p.3-5)

In addition, no one in Rachael's family had ever graduated from high school. There was no sense of the benefits that an education would offer. Her mother's occupation as a prostitute and encouragement of Rachael to follow in her footsteps disgusted her. Rachael could never forgive her mother for this and this anger with her mother continues today even though her mother is deceased. (Appendix 4, p.12)

Melissa feels her lack of encouragement stemmed from a mother who hid abuse under the thin veil of discipline. Melissa felt she never received help from her mother and that her mother often became impatient with Melissa's inability to understand the subject matter. "You know all kids are interested in things but if there is no one to help them they become disinterested. So that is what happened to me." The impatience would turn into abuse. "She would abuse me, she didn't want to help me... she would hit me." (Appendix 5, p.1)

Melissa's mother never spoke about education as an achievement and never discussed it as a goal for Melissa to attain. Her mother also quit school and therefore had no point of reference when it came to encouraging Melissa to stay in school. To her, education had no meaning. There was never a reason to stay, to achieve, to succeed and because there was nothing

there for her, she couldn't help Melissa when she herself had no concept of the benefits of education. (Appendix 5)

Parents who Care

Marks' parents actually did care about his education and quizzed him constantly hoping for him to succeed in school. With so many high school and college graduates in the family life centered around educational activities. "We all had to come home and read every day for at least an hour and a half." (Chap.4, Mark, p.9) It was not for a lack of encouragement that forced Mark to quit school, but his inability to stay out of fights. Mark received little discipline from parents and teachers and after his third fight in his senior year of high school was asked to leave the public high school system altogether.

Similarly, Marcie's mother was concerned about her decision to leave school. Marcie was not on speaking terms with her father, and so he offered no encouragement in her educational endeavors. Marcie's interests strayed from high school to other interests. She was easily swayed to spend more time with her boyfriend and friends. School was no longer important. Despite her mother's best efforts to influence her daughter's decision, Marcie was ready to leave school. "My mom was concerned but there was nothing she could do you know, as far as making me go." (Chap.4, Marcie, p.5) After discovering that she was pregnant, she decided to drop out of school and get a job to start earning a living.

Bryan's parents also struggled to keep him in school going so far as to bribe him with scuba diving lessons if he were to remain in school. "When I told my parents, they fought it. They...um...my father actually offered...he told me that if I would stay in school and finish high school, he would pay for scuba lessons which was something I had always wanted to do." (Appendix 6, p.6)

Bryan knew his parents wanted him in school and that they cared about his involvement in school. However, school was not as important as other things in Bryan's life and he thought the class work redundant and boring. Instead he dropped out and begged his parents to sign the paperwork to allow him to join the Navy at 17.

Valerie's parents were similarly strict. At night, after school, she was required to go home and do extra work that her parents would arrange for her. They wanted her to be a productive adult. (Appendix 1, p.20) "My parents were pretty strict. My dad was like really strict... You know. That's how I got the motivation to do it, because your parents were like, this is what needs to be done. So that was like your kind of morals that was instilled in you." (Appendix 1, p. 20-21) Unfortunately, the strictness of her parent's discipline and overwhelming study habits was not enough to keep Valerie in school.

Reflection on Collaboration

Collaboration is not just the support that the participants received but the lack of support that they were denied. Billy remembers screaming out for help and no one answering. Lori does not remember her mother being around at all and her grandmother not motivating her enough to want to stay in school. Rachael wishes her mother had never been there to push her into drugs and prostitution and to downplay education as something Rachael would never need. Neglect touches many people in many different ways. But whether it was Melissa's lack of encouragement from her mother, Mark's inability to stay out of fights or Bryan's disinterest in education that he could not see working for him, each was crying out, "clawing on the walls", and no one was there to answer.

This problem that occurs with each of the participants could have been avoided had someone noticed that they were in desperate need or had someone taken a moment to show they

cared, because, for these participants, no one cared, not enough to keep them in school and not enough to make a difference in the lives of these individuals who were calling out for help. Maybe it was not that someone needed to care, but rather that the motivation had to come from within the individuals to change their lives and succeed at their dreams. But it was not until they recognized the potential within themselves that they made a conscious effort to change a downhill destiny. And yet, what motivation can a child have to stay in school when everything and everyone around him tells him otherwise.

The following charts break down the individual problems the participants associated with becoming “high school leavers.”

	Billy	Valerie	Rachael	Melissa	Marcie
Stay in School	Billy waited someone to tell him to stay in school, to offer him advise and tell him what to do, but he found himself making his own decisions and fending for himself. No one told him to do his homework or offered him any sort of encouragement	“My parents were pretty strict. My dad was like really strict... Unfortunately, the strictness of her parents discipline and overwhelming study habits was not enough to keep Valerie in school.	“The feeling of growing up to fast, of anger and frustration. So I left home. I didn’t want to be there, I couldn’t be there. I was 12. I remember there was no encouragement for me, no one even asked me to stay. No one cared.”	Melissa feels her lack of encouragement stemmed from a mother who hid abuse under the thin veil of discipline. Melissa never got help at home from her mother.	Marcie’s mom put forth an effort but by the time Marcie was ready to leave school, there seemed to be little else that her mother could do.

	Mark	Valerie	Bryan
Didn't care	It was not encouragement that forced Mark to quit school, but his inability to stay out of fights. Mark received little discipline from parents and teachers and after his third fight in his senior year of high school was asked to leave the public high school system altogether.	My parents were pretty strict. My dad was like really strict... Unfortunately, the strictness of her parents discipline and overwhelming study habits was not enough to keep Valerie in school.	school was not as important as other things in Bryan's life and he thought the class work redundant and boring. Instead he dropped out and begged his parents to sign the paperwork to allow him to join the Navy at 17.

Emotion

Self esteem plays and played an important role in the lives of the participants both before and after receiving the GED. This self esteem either grew or was suppressed by the encouragement that was given the participant. Coupled with negligence, physical and mental abuse and overall bad timing, self esteem and understanding are absent in many of the participants.

This theme of emotion is the role that self esteem plays in the lives of the participants and in their ability to return to school and their ability to function as active adults for the families, financially and emotionally.

For Billy, it was fear. (Appendix 2, p. 18) It was his biggest set back and the biggest obstacle he would have to overcome. It was not until after he decided to go back and get his GED, years later, that the self esteem that had been slowly chiseled away by the lack of understanding and abuse from his parents began to reform itself and enabled him to receive his GED. “[The people in the GED classroom] were absolutely wonderful. There was just no

prejudice, they were just super supportive. At every turn they would tell me that I could do it.” (Appendix 2, p.20)

After years of abuse by her mother for what Melissa considered only minor mistakes, Melissa’s self esteem was broken down so far she believed there to be little chance for the inner healing she needed to begin. “I just thought either I get it or I am just dumb. Either that I get it or, not that I am dumb, either I get it or I don’t. If I don’t know it, I will never know it because there is no one to help me.” (Appendix 5, p.2) Her decision to go back to school changed Melissa’s life. She no longer felt unimportant and useless. She began to feel as if she were in charge and could make good decisions concerning her own well being. “Before I got my GED, I was miserable. But when I got it! I was raised to a whole other level. I was so happy. I could do anything.” (Appendix 5, p. 26) “Getting my GED changed that. It raised my self esteem. It made me feel like nothing was impossible.” (Appendix 5, p. 26-27)

Reflection on Emotion

Emotion seems to tie all of the themes together. The telescope comes into focus and suddenly a picture that was hazy and unclear snaps into places as if all of the pieces of the puzzle have found the right pattern. Emotion covers all ranges and all themes and the one idea, the one concept that continues to emerge throughout the range of interviews and feelings and tears is the lack of self-esteem. It is this lack of self-esteem, that results from a lack of encouragement, a feeling of neglect, a feeling of being ignored, hated, unloved, unwanted, that continues to drive the downward spiral of self hate until the student either drowns or is rescued. It is never entirely someone else’s fault, but these participants may have seen the depreciation of their physical and

moral state difficult to overcome, if not impossible, and were therefore sucked into a chasm of continued failure.

The following charts break down the individual problems the participants associated with becoming “high school leavers.”

	Billy	Melissa
Fear and Uselessness	Fear was his set back. It wasn't until years later that he found the strength to go back to school. “[The people in the GED classroom] were absolutely wonderful. There was just no prejudice, they were just super supportive. At every turn they would tell me that I could do it.”	Her decision to go back to school changed Melissa's life from feeling unimportant and useless, Melissa began to feel as if she were in charge and could make good decisions concerning her own well being. “Before I got my GED, I was miserable. But when I got it! I was raised to a whole other level. I was so happy.

Conclusion

As different as their stories were and continue to be, each of these participants have several things in common. They each felt that school was not for them, primarily because of the outside negative forces that affected them. They were each compelled to leave school in some state of frustration or confusion. They each understood that in order to make a change in their lives, either for themselves or their family, that school would once again need to become a priority. Eventually they would have to return and get a GED. They each faced a psychological or emotional crisis about getting the GED but overcame the crisis and focused on future plans and goals. They each understood the concept of collaboration and had learned to accept the help of others and reject the negative attitudes of those who stood in their way. Finally, each had to

deal with problems of self esteem in order to accomplish their goals and succeed in their endeavors. For each the end result was an awakened sense of self importance. They proved to themselves and their families that the task was not impossible and that they were up to the challenge of fulfilling their goals.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

For many students, teachers, parents and administrators in today's educational system, there is a discrepancy between the way education should be practiced and the way it is practiced. A new vision of education is needed in order to continue the work currently being done and change the educational system for a growing number of those at risk of not achieving basic literacy. To understand what needs to be changed and what commitments to our future are necessary to make these changes, educators must reflect on their own educational experiences and the great variety of experiences of those they instruct. Only with this complete picture can they make curricular and instructional policy changes that would benefit the entire student body.

A Framework for the Findings

The purpose of this study was to bring to light a sampling of the experiences of students who were considered "high school leavers", their reasons for leaving school and the decisions they made for returning to school. The framework for this study was based on Lewin's theory of the participant at the center of the arena, McClusky's (1970) theory of Margin, Knox's (1980) theory of proficiency and Jarvis'(1987) theory of responses to educational experiences with the positive and negative influences of life acting upon the participant. These theories help us to understand how adults learn. Lewin's theory of the adult at the center of positive and negative forces is exemplified vividly in the narratives of the participants. The positive forces that acted

on the individuals included support of family members, the need for financial stability or escape from an abusive situation. These forces aided the student in achieving their goals. The opposing forces that acted negatively on the individuals included unplanned parenthood, financial strain on the family and abusive parents or spouses. According to McClusky's theory of margin, by increasing the positive and decreasing the negative, the individual gains the energy needed to succeed. Jarvis believes that all experiences are learning experiences regardless of the impact. The participant's belief in their own education and in the desire to learn brought each one of these people to the goal of the GED as an alternative to high school in preparation for future education, better opportunities, extended careers, improved pay and greater self esteem.

Themes of Analysis

Five themes emerged during the study: reflection, outside forces, focus, emotion, and collaboration. These themes are reflected in Scholssberg's model for counseling adults by accessing relative strengths of four factors: situation, self (internal strengths), external support, and strategies one has developed to handle stress. The themes which have emerged from these interviews were strikingly similar to Scholssberg's model but still bear certain differences.

In order to change, the individuals must revisit the choices they made and the outcomes they achieved. This is the reflection phase of moving forward. This self-reflection about wrong or inappropriate choices and the resulting consequences is essential to understanding what choices need to be made. From there, the "high school leaver" must acknowledge the outside forces that influenced the student's decision to leave high school. These outside forces could be the negative impact of mental and physical abuse, alcohol and drugs, or financial instability. Next. The student must focus on the steps necessary to achieve the goal and improve job marketability and financial potential. Correct focus precipitates the learner's decision to reenter

school, receive further education in a field or vocation thus effect the desired changes in their lives. From achieving focus, the student must surround himself or herself with a support system of associations in family, friends, teachers, and bosses that will provide a positive influence in the student's education. This collaboration is what McClusky (1963) calls the theory of margin. This theory focuses on the increase of positive energy while decreasing the negative energy. The final theme is emotion. Here the feelings of self-confidences and the increase in self-esteem due to a series of successes gives the students a new and brighter outlook about themselves, their families and the futures.

The theme of reflection, of how their lives changed due to the decision to leave school, had many common characteristics. Each saw themselves as having been a different person from the ones they are now - grown, matured, different from the misunderstood, children they were when they made the decision to leave school. "Reflection upon the content of one's environment and one's experiences is a common component of [adult education theories]. Reflective thought... may even be the thought structure to emerge in adulthood and 'a necessary prerequisite to asking questions and discovering problems,(Allman, 1983)' (Merriam and Cafarella, 1991)."

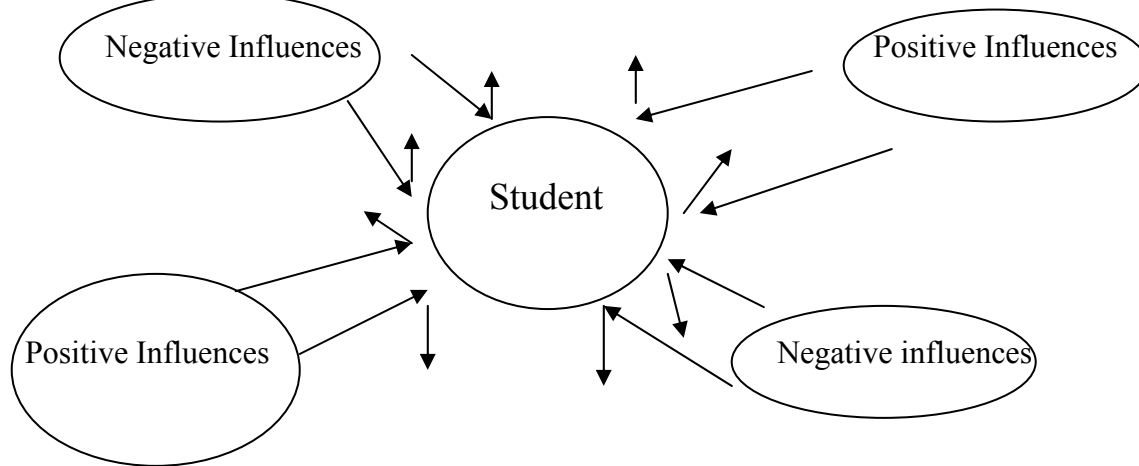
The students began their quest for success by reflecting on the problems they had to face. In order to move forward, the students tried to comprehend what had happened that contributed to the student becoming a "high school leaver." Lewin, McClusky, and Jarvis all have theories that relate to the reflection phase of the student. Lewin's force field theory places the learner at the center of both negative and positive forces. In reflection, the student must examine both forces to determine why he or she became a "high school leaver". Similarly, McClosky's theory of margin expects the learner to reflect on the positive and negative forces and then to accentuate the positive and de-accentuate the negative, thus providing themselves with more energy to

accomplish goals. Finally, Jarvis' theory relies on nine responses to an educational experience in a given social situation. The first three of these responses contribute to the reflection theme. They are the non-learning responses of presumption, consideration and rejection. The student reflects on the circumstances of becoming a "high school leaver", chooses to consider them as negative or positive outside forces and then may either accept or reject them.

The second theme to emerge was outside forces – those negative and positive forces that Lewin (1999) says constantly bombard adults making the decision both harder and easier at the same time. Lewin's force field theory (Fig.1) inundates the learner with negative forces that forced him to leave school and to forgo education. This theory places the adult learner in a position that both supports and inhibits action (Lewin, 1999). Understanding the influences, both negative and positive, and identifying the strongest and the weakest and the ones that are most easy to manipulate, can give an indication of how to help someone move toward their desired goal, and in the case of adult basic education, toward the goal of education.

The student considers how to maximize the impact of positive influences that aid the student in their desire for success and how to minimize the impact of negative influences. McClusky's theory of margin speaks directly to this theme of accentuating the positive and de-accentuating the negative in order to provide the student with the "energy" needed for success. The student must choose which ones to accept and which ones to reject if he or she is going to prove to be successful.

Figure 1: Lewin' Theory



This also reflects Jarvis' theory of nine responses to an educational experience. The non-learning responses of presumption, consideration and rejection contribute to the theme of outside forces.

The student reflects on the circumstances of becoming a "high school leaver", chooses to consider them as negative or positive outside forces and then may either accept or reject them.

These outside forces may have existed as negative influences while the student was still in school or trying to finish high school. They may include physical abuse, mental abuse, family financial instability or peer problems. For the adult learner who is attempting to go to school, study and complete their education, parenthood may have quite the reverse effect and even negatively influence the ability for the student to continue in his or her education (Lewin, 1999).

The positive forces are those that enabled them to return for a GED. These forces may include support from other family members, employers, or friends, the need to set an example for children, or a new more convenient proximity to a learning environment. Billy remembered alcohol, Rachael remembered drugs and prostitution and Kyle remembers only financial instability and the need to help his parents. These were some of the negative forces Lewin perceives as impacting the adult learner to abandon the traditional, classic education format.

The third theme is that of focus. Freire's (1970) theory of adult education set in a framework of social change involves increasing the awareness of one's situation – what Knowles characterized as “Andragogy.” Freire's metaphor of “problem posing”, give an adult a problem to solve, give him the tools he needs to solve the problem and then let him solve that problem on his own, is evident in the need of the student to understand the problem and focus on a solution and the objectives needed to solve the equation.

Knowles' term, “andragogy” – teaching man, assumes that the learner comes to the educational arena with a lifetime of experiences behind him or her. The learner must then use these experiences to aid him or her in problem solving and understanding. These experiences are those that Lewin and McClusky refer to as the positive and negative influences that face all adults and may either inhibit or extend learning ability.

Through changing perspectives, the educator allows the adult learner to also change focus and changing focus allows for new insights and goals. Changing their focus was the decision that all of the participants made to improve their lives, to improve their job hire-ability, financial income and family life. Billy told of making the decision to go back to school when nothing else seemed to be going right. “I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired of being sick and tired, of working dead end jobs working with my back and that summer the school was close and I was out of a job (Appendix 2, p. 18).” Melissa recounted going back for other reasons “I went back because I knew I had to teach my son something. I had to set the example for him (Appendix 5, p.16 and 17).” They each focused on an idea of a new life and when they set their sights to achieve their goals, this focus came into sharp view, much like an out of focus telescope when the hand is guided to bring the image into view. Suddenly it seems the stars, and the future, become crystal clear.

The students must understand what the outside forces that forced them to become “high school leavers” and then to use the knowledge of the positive forces gained through reflection to focus on goals for the future.

The fourth theme was collaboration. Collaboration was the support system that existed and made it possible for these students to return to school. Many had support systems that were actually lack of support systems. For these students, there was no encouragement to succeed, no point of reference guiding them to finish high school much less continue their education in the university setting. For Rachael there was no support until she left home, married and had children. “I remember thinking that I couldn’t stand it anymore. So I left home. I didn’t want to be there, I couldn’t be there. I was 12. I remember there was no encouragement for me, no one even asked me to stay. No one cared (Appendix 4, p.3).” Lori characterized her mom as a spider. “We were born and then we were on our own (Appendix 3, p.11).” Melissa relates her lack of support in the following statement “If I don’t know it, I will never know it because there is no one to help me” (Appendix 5, p.2). Others had support systems that actually were support systems. For some it was their husband or wife or children pushing them on, encouraging them to succeed. For others it was support groups, teachers or administrators, encouraging them not to quit or give up. And for yet others, the support system was the realization that lack of education is a continuing circle. As they watched their children growing, they realized that children learn from example and in the desire to set a better example, they found themselves back in school, finishing the GED, hoping for a better future for themselves and their children.

Knox states that adult learning is important because of the position of the adult learner at the center. Knox’s theory is that of a capability to perform, i.e. vocationally and financially, if given the opportunity to do so. Stated plainly, Knox believes that if the adult is given the chance

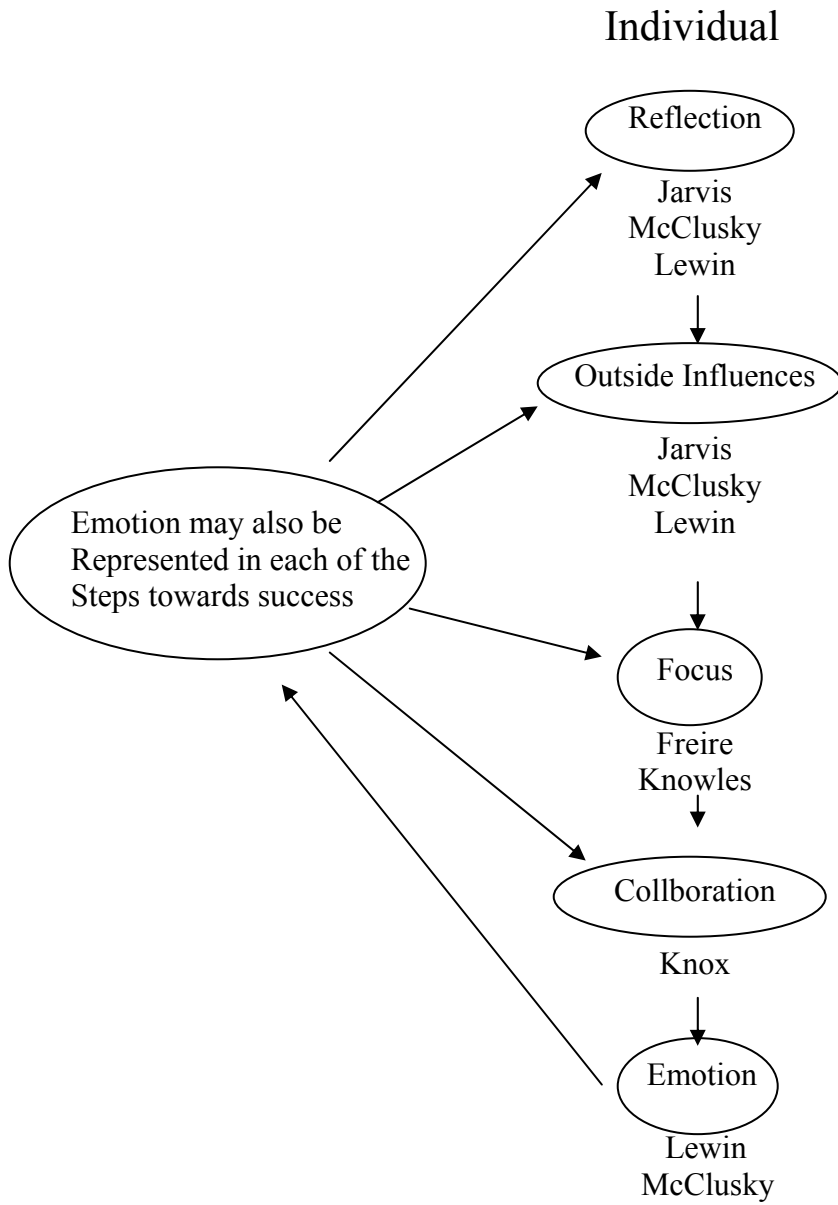
to learn, he or she will do so. An adult given the opportunity to succeed through the collaboration of friends, family and instructors will accomplish his goal.

The fifth theme was emotion. Emotion may reflect as part of each of the individual steps towards achieving a goal, however it is also a step within itself. Both Lewin and McClusky's theories are reflected here. As the positive influences increase, the negative influences decrease. These negative influences increase stress and frustration. The positive influences increase a relaxed and calming effect. The more stress the learner experiences through negative influences, the more apt the learner is to have trouble with their education and learning experience. On the other hand, the more positive aid that is given to the learner induce a calming effect on the learner making it possible for him or her to move toward the goal of literacy and an education.

This is the role that their self-esteem played in the lives of the participants, in their ability to return to school and their ability to function as active adults – financially, emotionally, and for their children. Melissa remembers thinking “I just thought either I get it or I am just dumb.” (Appendix 5, p.2) Things changed for Melissa however, when she finally received her GED. “Before I got my GED, I was miserable. But when I got it! I was raised to a whole other level. I was so happy. I could do anything (Appendix 5, p.26).” Many of the participants suffered both physical and mental abuse at the hands and mouths of their parents. It was this hurdle that they actively had to overcome in order to consider themselves candidates for the return trip to education.

These five themes can be expressed visually in the following time order diagram. The diagram was originally meant to be a concept map but as the steps towards the GED must happen in sequence, it is best to describe them as a time line instead.

Figure 2: Themes and Theories



These themes represent one way of interpreting the student's decision to leave school and reasons for returning. Each participant in this study knew that returning to school was an eventual necessity and that they would depend on themselves primarily. Although some found outside support, each had to basically rely on their own interior motivations and desire to return to school. Each had to overcome obstacles throughout their lives that prevented them from continuing school, returning to school sooner, finding jobs or becoming financially stable.

“Dropping out” of high school takes on a newer meaning than the traditional concept implied, a stereotyped student with no ambition to stay in school and no desire to succeed. Now there is a different understanding of why students leave school. No longer do students just “drop out”, many are pushed out or leave due to family problems, financial strain or relationship difficulties. Billy, one of the participants said, “I didn't think I was good enough. My mom said I was stupid. My dad said I was a bum. (Appendix 2, p.18). ” Rachael noted that it was not only her parents that were causing her problems but also a lack of close supportive friendships. “I didn't have a lot of friends and I think that that was part of the reason I finally quit. I couldn't take the pressure of being the outcast, of always feeling like I didn't belong (Appendix 4, p.6).” Whatever their reasons for leaving school, the stories of these students show that through their experiences they were aware of the benefits of an education.

Directions for Theory, Research, Policy and Practice

In the last ten years research has been done to determine the “types” of students who are now known as “high school leavers”, and many schools have incorporated alternative educational strategies into their traditional programs. These alternative educational strategies include day care centers for moms with children, specialized courses for pregnant students,

internships for students in their junior or senior year, and split scheduling which affords students the opportunity to work part time during the day. This alleviates the problem of drop out due to teenage pregnancy. It affords a method for creating family financial stability by giving the students the opportunity to work and stay in school and, through the internships, it allows students to put into practice the courses they are taking in high school. Along these lines, further changes in educational practices are still needed to retain more students and make their high school careers successful and fulfilling. This research is instrumental in implementing classroom policy that can effect better high school retention.

Discerning the reasons why students become “high school leavers” can have a real impact on the way education on the high school level is structured. Understanding the issues should help educators eliminate problems with the student at the first sign of struggle instead of waiting for the inevitable – “dropping out.” Further research might offer suggestions on solving the problems that force students to leave school – their relationships with friends and family, a true understanding of the need for education, a connection with what is taught in school with the experience needed for the job market and the unplanned obstacles such as pregnancy or family instability. Additionally, teaching methodology is critical. Student’s view “good” teachers as engaging the student and “bad” teachers as talking at the student. All individuals have different learning styles and these learning styles need to be addressed. All students are not oral learners, many need hands-on learning experiences to engage their minds. What if all the teachers were considered “good” teachers, all engaging, all making the learning process something interesting and intriguing every step of the way. Rote memorization and skills have their place, but overused, they are boring. Education should be challenging, not for one but for all. McDonald notes that “We can have schools in the twenty first century that teach all children to use their

minds well, but only if we really want such schools and then only if we re-orient our common sense about how to get them... accomplishing this requires abandonment of many conventional deep-seated beliefs.” Future research may also suggest cultures, genders or ethnicities that are more prone to leaving high school than others. A determination must be made as to how to address the problems they face. It is ethnocentric to assume that all students face the same problems and the same shortcomings and a larger study should help to widen the scope of problems faced by adult learners and “high school leavers.”

Then and Now

All nine of the case studies express a positive experience about receiving the GED and the futures and career opportunities that they feel are now open to them due to changes in their education and self esteem.

Billy remembered his mother telling him how stupid he was and his father calling him a bum and thinks about how his life has changed since the years he spent with his parents. The feelings of stupidity are gone and he believes he is moving on with his life. Now instead of feeling a sense of loss and disgust toward his “dysfunctional” family, he has decided that he can no longer change them and has made the effort instead to change himself. He has his own business, has received an Associate’s Degree and a Bachelor’s degree and seeks to further his education by pursuing a Master’s Degree. He has traveled in Europe, something he never dreamed of being able to do as a child growing up in his family of high school leavers. He describes himself as a sponge soaking up education, as “Pandora’s Box - open for new wonders and new experiences.” He has dreams of joining the Peace Corps and winning the lottery to open an orphanage in some third world country. He claims he is a better person, a better role model for his daughter and looks at his life before education and his life after education as the lives of

two different people. He does not claim to be the person he was many years ago. He claims to be better.

Lori often thinks about how her life could have been had she made other decisions. She believes that her opportunities are fewer because she does not have a high school education but at the same time understands that without the GED, those opportunities would be fewer still. Unfortunately, the statistics back up her fears. Still, she considers herself to be very lucky in the position that she is in. If given the chance to do it all again, she believes that she would have done things differently and that she would not have dropped out of school. Lori feels that the GED is not the same as a high school education and that it never will be, but that it is better than nothing. However, her ambition is to be a nurse and the opportunities that she has had since receiving her GED have aided her in her endeavors and advanced her down the path toward her chosen career. She says the things she misses most are being a teenager and having to grow up too quickly and too roughly. She claims she has not been able to do what she wanted but recognizes that this is the decision she made for herself.

Rachael sees a future for herself whereas once she did not. She sees a positive life for her, her husband and her family when once she only saw a bleak existence of being raised in a household of drugs, alcoholism, prostitution and abuse. Inside is the fight to become a nurse and to make a positive life for those depending on her. She claims it is not for the money but the desire to help others less fortunate than herself. Now that she is more in control of her life, she understands that she is not the stupid young girl her mother once told her she was. She looks back at her life and sees the pain and the heartache that she went through and recognizes that she is not stupid, but stronger, that she is a better person and that things have changed although for

many years she thought they never would.

Melissa talks about how things have changed for her. She is happy with her life even though she understands that for a long time it was considered “dysfunctional”. Her relationship with her mother is non-existent but she uses what she learned from that relationship to make the ones with her own children better. She pushes them towards school and talks positively about their futures and their education and dreams about the wonderful experiences she hopes they will have- experiences that she never had growing up in an abusive household. She claims she would change her life if she had the opportunity to do it again but in understanding that that is not possible has instead opted to go into social work to council and aid others in making the right choice about education, family, job opportunities and their own self worth.

Valerie has put aside a bitterness of losing a scholarship and has accepted the challenge to finish her Associate’s Degree and move on to a four-year college to attain her Bachelor’s Degree. She wants to start working as a volunteer while still in school and in five years hopes to be working as a radiology technologist. She says she has the courage to make the change that many people entering adult education are afraid to face. She looks at the people she went to school with and feels that if they could receive their GEDs, then she could also. If they had the courage to change their lives, then she could find that courage as well. And so she looks forward to the life in front of her instead of always regretting the one she has left behind.

Kyle recognizes that getting the GED has changed him. He knows that he was the motivator towards receiving his GED and feels that he has greater opportunity towards higher education and job potential than he did before receiving his GED. Now he is in college and has a better job, one job, instead of having to work three and four just to make ends meet for himself and his family. He says that receiving his GED has changed him, that it has made him see the

value of education but that he won't quit until he gets a diploma from college and can continue his education and job search from that vantage point instead of the high school diploma or equivalency vantage point. He feels that the road to life is ahead of him and claims that he seldom looks back at the road he is leaving behind except for a few glimpses to remind himself of where he has been.

Mark looks at how his life has changed and realizes that if he had stayed on the path he was on, that he would be dead or in jail like many of the "friends" he used to have. He has four little girls and believes that those little girls and getting the GED have given him the greatest feelings of accomplishment. He claims his life is better and knows that association with the wrong crowd led to his trouble. Before finishing his high school education he was only a follower, now he is a leader. Now he strives to make a better life for himself and his children. He believes that even though "high school leavers" feel that school is not for them, it is important for them to stay with it because it is "in not knowing what you need that can cause you to lose everything." He feels that if he hadn't gotten his GED he would be dead or in someone's jail and that with his GED he has the potential for everything.

Marcie looks at the life she has lived and she expresses regret at the decisions she has made. However, she feels that, in the long run, they have made her a better person and that she has learned a lot from the decisions she made. Her life is now on track and although she was nervous about pursuing a GED, she did earn it and now has goals to finish college. She regrets not having earned a high school diploma and feels she missed out on many things that high school would include. She claims that she is happy that everything happened the way that it did and tries to instill in her child the desire to finish school and value education as she now does. She feels that she has grown up and worked hard but understands that life is a long road ahead of

her and not the road she is leaving behind.

Finally, Bryan is back in school. After sitting out for ten years and trying to raise a family on a construction worker's salary, he understands the value of the education he was once bribed to pursue with scuba lessons. He regrets the time that he lost and realizes that he could have started down the road towards a positive future many years before he did. He looks back at the mistakes he has made and claims he has learned from them and looks to the future with a positive eye, one on his education and career instead of only vague ideas and thoughts. He claims that he is not nervous about college, just eager and knows that the clock is ticking.

For each the end result was an awakened sense of self importance, the objective of proving to themselves and their families that the task was not impossible and that they were up to the challenge of fulfilling their goals. The end result mirrored McClusky's theory of margin as the student increased the positive energy in the form of supportive family and friends and the need for a better life. In addition, they decreased the negative energy of abuse, feelings of failure and bad influences, pressure to offer financial support and those unplanned obstacles such as parenthood and the various addictions as described by Brouillette. .

Conclusion

In many respects, receiving the GED can be a life changing experience. For some students it is the end of one chapter of their life and the beginning of another chapter, the end of childhood and the beginning of a new phase of being an adult. For other students, receiving the GED represents the end of other things – unemployment, low self esteem, lack of respect from family and peers and the beginning of ideals and concepts that they had only once dreamed of. It is the beginning of better things, better employment possibilities, better financial opportunities, and the respect of their children and friends.

For most the receipt of a GED is a bittersweet experience. Although many might recognize the positive effects of receiving the GED as opposed to no high school diploma or equivalency, they also feel regret at having not finished school and deep inside wish for the opportunity to have changed something, to have chosen a different path, to have taken another route or to be given another chance at something they feel they threw away too easily.

For those who persisted in receiving the GED instead of letting negative feelings of failure, lack of control or “incompleteness” cripple them emotionally, they looked back on their decision to pursue the GED and relish in how far they have come. The feelings of stupidity and ignorance that many of the case studies reported, whether they were self induced or brought on by years of insults from families and “friends”, appeared to wash away as education and new and positive experiences took control of the emotions and self esteem of the learner.

However, even with the understanding of the changes they must make in order to achieve a better life for themselves and their families, even with the motivation to succeed, even with the support of family and friends, the odds are still stacked against those who drop out high school and receive the GED. Yes they do fare better than those who never receive the GED, but they do not do as well in the job market as those who stay in high school and earn a high school diploma (Murnane, 1999). Additionally, students who earn the high school diploma are more likely to go to college than those who earn the GED.

Yet, even with the odds against them, they still struggle and still succeed far beyond their initial expectations. For each, the clock was ticking, time was running out and their future and the future of their children was depending on them. Their decisions to get the GED was the responsible decision.

Appendix 1

Valerie

Valerie walked into my reading lab, sat down and said ‘I’m here to help you.’ I was not sure what she was talking about at first until I realized she was a reading student and that she had come to volunteer some time and history about herself for research. I was happy to see her. She was dressed very casually as it was so hot and looked very excited to be participating in the interviews. She told me she was happy to be in school even though it meant a great deal of time spent on the road getting to and from school and worrying about family and her job.

She was very animated during the interview and seemed to have a positive attitude toward her classmates, teachers and learning environment. She knew what it meant to be in developmental reading classes but she reminded me that she was glad to be in those classes because it meant she had something to learn and she was really looking forward to the learning process.

The poetry for Valerie extends from her feelings of setting goals and being prohibited from achieving them. The poem reflects her anguish at setting goals, wanting to attend school, having the desire to succeed and then being told that the goal she desired the most was out of her grasp.

Goals

To get a job,
get married,
have a house,
move,
or travel or
fail

not succeed,
be turned away
to not fulfill my goals...?

Valerie's Story

1. *Well, I think I am still the same person I was when I was in high school just a little more advanced. Since I have gotten the GED I am able to do what I wanted to do which was to go to college and further my education. I don't see me being any different than having a high school diploma because it still gives you the opportunity to be successful you know as far as going to school and setting up a career goal for your life.*
2. *Well, it all started...I was really good in high school. I was making an A/B average. I think it goes a little further than high school, back to grade school where I was a part of a program that kind of excels you to the right grade if you fail because I had failed one grade in grade school and so when I got into the school they kind of gave you a test and told me "If you can master this test we can put you in your right grade." So I did that and got put in my right grade and from that moment on I just kept excelling, you know, I did really good. I made good grades and you know, we had like a, what do you call it, a roll model week. And this guy Pat Taylor came and he offered us a scholarship in eighth grade and he said that if we could maintain an A/B average in the four years of high school than he would grant us tuition to any state college we wanted and that was pretty much what we had to do. Once getting into high school I maintained that so that I could get that because finances with my family would have never afforded me to go to college, you know. So, they would tell us, OK, I think you need 23 credits to graduate. This was mentioned to me like in 8th or 9th grade, I think it was. By the time 10th grade came along, it was the LEAP, you know and everybody kinda got like paranoid and everybody thought "this is going to ruin everything" you know*

because we were told one thing and now we have to do something else. In other words now you have to do both in order to graduate. So when it came to my 11th grade year in high school, I didn't make it on the LEAP. I failed the math by one point. At that point I was ready to give up. I was like well, you know, why finish? You know, I know I am smart, I don't have to prove to them that I am smart so I told my mom, I said "I didn't need the LEAP." And she said "Well what are you going to do?" And I was like "Well I don't know. I am not going back to school." I was not going back to that school, you know.

3. Valerie loved school and loved the thought of going to school. She wanted an education but she felt that the system had let her down by implementing the LEAP test. She rationalized that she had studied for so long and for so hard and now the system was going to give her another hurdle to pass in order to order to graduate. When she didn't pass, in desperation, she decided to quit school, she didn't want to go back. She wanted to have nothing to do with them, the school, or the educational system.
4. *They asked me why. My mom wanted to come to school and find out what had happened because she couldn't understand what would make me leave school and just be like, you know, I am not going, you know there is nothing you can say, or do unless you are going to give me that one point on the LEAP to make me go back.*
5. *That was my reason. I mean the LEAP can destroy goals. It makes me teary-eyed. I mean, forgive me, I don't mean to cry. It was a scholarship I lost. You know. This man had given me more than I could expect you know, I also told myself that once I finished here at college, before I transferred over, that I would call Mr. Taylor and let him know that I have become successful, I have, you know just to let him know that I didn't give up because of the LEAP. You know, it can hurt you ... you know you read in the papers how fourth graders and eighth*

graders are being held back because of the LEAP. They want to say that it is because of the parents but, the parents work hard to teach their kids what they need to know. And when it comes to LEAP, like right now, I am jittery because I have test anxiety and it is something that I am dealing with and a lot of kids have that, you know and they have to first deal with the problem before they can learn what they need to know. A lot of kids get nervous when it comes to testing, you know their parents are on their back, you know, you better pass, you know and um ... it gets kind of frustrating you know but you have to stick with it and just keep going until you get where you need to be. You know. The LEAP was it in a nutshell. The LEAP was it. I didn't want a GED. I didn't want it, I thought it was less, you know, it just wasn't becoming to have a GED, you know, that was like lower standards. You know when you wanted to get a high school diploma.

6. Valerie's mother was distressed by the situation. Her daughter had simply decided to leave school and there was no possibility of her changing her mind. Her mother even went to the school to find out what had happened but couldn't understand Valerie's desire to leave school after a something like scoring one point short of the math LEAP expectations. However, instead of her mother encouraging her to stay in school and continue to try to pass the test, she simply asked her daughter what she would do now. Although Valerie's mother worked hard to help Valerie study and even encouraged her to do extra work, when it came to Valerie's decision to stay in school or drop out, her mother's lack of encouragement cued the same lack of motivation and desire in her daughter to enable her to continue school. Thus her daughter dropped from the high school program and would not return for many years. Additionally, this "need" to "drop out" lowered Valerie's self esteem and desire to return to school. Valerie's only reason for leaving school was the LEAP test and she felt had she been

allowed to not take the test, she would have graduated with her class and gone on to college as she had planned.

7. *It can, for some people kill their self esteem and what little motivation they have to make them throw up their hands, find a job and to make them just stay there and just get the benefits that that job has, you know they don't worry about what they wanted to be or trying to strive to be or you know. School for me just didn't stop at school, I went home and I did extra work. My mom had her own lesson plans. I had to do my homework plus what she had for me to do that kept me knowing that my mom wants me to be a productive adult.*
8. *It hurt a lot. It hurt. It hurt. Because, I figure I had come too far to turn around. I was frustrated. I was pissed off and I was like, they don't know what they are talking about. They know I was on the right tracks.*
9. *The people had really upset me so maybe a month, two months passed and my mom would argue with me. "You gotta do something. You can't just quit. You know, you gotta go back to school while it is still fresh in your head." So, I asked around and talked around. And she asked around and then someone told her that I could go to an adult education school, instead of going back to the regular high school. Which at that time, you know, I had made a birthday and you know after a certain age they don't allow you to come back. So I went to (McDonough) 16 and I attended classes there and I would say in two months tops I was getting the GED.*
10. Valerie's return to school was finally motivated by her mother who then recognized the need for Valerie to graduate. After some time and research, they found a school where Valerie would be able to attend night classes in order to graduate and get her GED. She knew that there was no way she could make a living at mediocre jobs. She didn't want to make

minimum wage for the rest of her life and this in part motivated her to go back to school and graduate.

11. *I didn't want to stop or sit out or nothing. I just went right into it. No, no. It..it...you know I did stop and go back in that two months time because I was getting frustrated and you know, I had other things on my mind. A good job came along. I thought that was good, then as I watched people work and asked ages and how long they had been there and the type of salary they had been making, I was like, I can't see myself doing this. For the rest of my life. Which I have always been...adapted to learning. I never had a shot at going to school. My mom had been a wonderful support behind me as far as education, you know. She didn't have a bad attitude as a parent you know. So that kind of helped me to decide to go back to school.*
12. *It was kinda sad though because I didn't think anything was really different. No, I still felt as though I was shafted. I felt like I deserved to get a high school diploma which the people at the adult education center were like, "Don't worry about it, it is the equivalent. It's the thing. It says you completed something and you know what you know." But in my heart, I went from Kindergarten to 11th grade, why can't I get a high school diploma? So I didn't feel like it was completed. So I kind of went back and talked with some of the counselors at high school to find out how could I still get a high school diploma and she was like "well you would be considered a fifth year senior." This was like six years later. "You could come back and take the LEAP exam with a group of our seniors and we will see how you do." They allowed me to do that and that one time I had more credits than I would have and then I got shafted again. They told me you don't have enough credits. So I said, my cumulative shows that I have more than enough credits. But they were like "No you see, you failed this and you failed that." I don't care if I went to a bank and robbed a bank, these credits they are mine,*

however I accumulated them. They are mine. They were like, well no they don't count. I just stuck with the GED and didn't worry about it. It was best.

13. Even with the GED, Valerie's desire for education could not be bottled and she went back to a local high school to find out about getting a diploma. Unfortunately, she did not have enough credits to graduate and after frustration and arguments amounted to nothing with the high school counselors, she decided to give up and accept the GED as the completion to her high school education.
14. *In the meantime, I just worked and in that time I was trying to get into college, trying to find out what was best, what I really wanted to do. I have what I need now to do it. I really say, I am going to do it now. Will they accept the GED? Would I be looked out as the same? As any other student? So that kind of went around that I had a good job and didn't want to leave the job and I had a kid to take care of, and so... and I stayed with the job. I was working as a dispatcher for an offshore company. I was pretty much the driver. I did clerical work, you know, in order for me to have gotten the job I had to have a high school diploma.*
15. *So, you know, landing the GED kind of got me the job so I figured that was good enough. But when you start thinking about your childhood and ambitions and stuff, you start thinking about what you really wanted to do. You know, when you are little, you are like, well I want to be a firefighter, I want to be a policeman, so I kind of like just went back and thought about and thought about what I wanted to do...and that motivated me to come to college and just apply.*
16. *Now I am planning on being an x-ray tech and I am looking to go further in that field as being a ... a bachelor's degree. That is like a higher form of radiology that you can take. I want to transfer to the university after I leave this college.*

17. Valerie now plans to finish her Associate's degree as an x-ray tech and then transfer to a four year university and take radiology. She wants to work in the medical profession and set an example for her own children to not accept what is handed to them but to continuously strive for something better.
18. *I wouldn't have gotten the GED if I hadn't motivated myself, if I hadn't wanted the education so bad. I would still be stuck in a dead end job, might have become a supervisor at most because most managers, you have to have a high school diploma, and so many years of college to actually do the job or you just be there so long and you just know it and they just promote you and you know, I just couldn't see myself like that. You know, my son kind of motivated me as well because I want him to have a choice. I mean it is good that you can go to high school and if something doesn't work out that you can get something so that you can further. If there wasn't that choice, a lot of people wouldn't be able, they would be stuck.*
19. *I really have a lot of motivation, and you know, when you set your mind to do something, you know, you have to follow your mind. Sometimes, if you don't have that motivation, you might just be a knucklehead and just say, well forget it. I have a lot of friends that just dropped out of high school just because they didn't want to learn any more. They just didn't have any one to say well it's important that you go. Look what you can do if you go and finish high school, you know. Back when my mom was my age or younger, her parents only expected her just to finish high school, you know. They wasn't looking for her to go to college. And she didn't go. You know. After years and years, she decided she wanted to take up something that interested her. So she went to a little community tech college and took up book keeping but she never could do the job afterwards.*

20. *I guess when it comes down to it though, I was the motivation to finishing school. I would have to say myself. My parents were pretty strict. My dad was like really strict, he was a math wiz. He liked to drill it in your head what was a positive and what was a negative things about not going to school. I kind of grew up reading books and in the summer time, "You can't come outside and play until you know your four times tables." You know. That's how I got the motivation to do it, because your parents were like, this is what needs to*
21. *I think I have taught my son the same thing. I motivate him to learn. My goals would be first him to be a productive adult, as far as, you are going to go to college, you are going to join the military but you are going to do something. And I try to make it a wide variety of things that he can do. I try to take him to different institutes. Like he always used to talk about being a firefighter, so I brought him to the fire station and they kind of talked to him and showed him the things that they do and he watched a video. I brought him to the hospital and let him see that men can be nurses, and help take care of people. You know, I just want him to be productive in what ever he chooses.*
22. *The day I threw up my hands it was like, everyone anticipates that thirteenth year and getting out of school. Just to graduate, I was like, I am sick of school, you know. What for, I really was discouraged as far as school. I just couldn't care, but I knew in my heart. I knew I wanted to go to school. I just have to do it.*
23. *Sometimes I think about where I will be in five years. In five years? If the Lord is the same, I hope to be finished with one of these degrees, you know, just absorb as much knowledge as I can and to just do some volunteer work while I am in school and the field that I am in to get a better idea what I will be doing. In five years I can hopefully be working a job in the radiology tech field and going to school at the same time.*

24. *I know that courage is change and that change takes courage and that a lot of people that I have met in adult education have a lot of courage because they were much older than I was, I would say like thirties, forties, they were learning, hadn't been in school for so long, and they were trying to start new careers this late in their lives. Which I thought took a lot of courage. Just to go back to school in general takes courage.*
25. Valerie says that her motivation comes mostly from her son and the desire to see him succeed, so she feels she must set a better example for him to strive to better himself and improve his education. She believes that courage and motivation were also a big part in returning to school and she realized that education was the primary vehicle by which to achieve the things that she wanted and to succeed at her goals.
26. She ended her interview, looked at me and smiled. Would she be able to get a copy of the transcript? Would she be able to tell me things she had liked and didn't like? Would she have some say in what had transpired? She told me she was glad it was over, not the interview, which she reminded me again and again how much she enjoyed, but the feeling of having no direction that not having a high school diploma had left her with.
27. Where would she be in five years? For that matter, where would any of them be in five years? Would they have accomplished the goals they set out to do? Would they still be on the same track of education and careers and financial ability that each had expressed as a goal in life? Or would fate play its own hand and have the trappings of low self esteem and low motivation come back to haunt them with destroyed ideas and dreams of what could have been as only that – dreams.

Appendix 2

Dark Alleys of Growing Up

I first met Billy when we shared a class together. I had no idea the influence he would have over my writing project but when he found out that I was interested in writing about students and education and GEDs, he became the first volunteer to speak to me. He had come a long way since dropping out of school early in his education. He had run himself through the gambit of difficult decisions and experiences – alcoholism, incest, marriage, children, divorce, sexuality, low self esteem, loss of sense, loss of control – and come out on top on the other side. He poured himself out and I listened. All I had to do was listen, I didn't ask questions or anything – there was not any time. He seemed in such a rush to tell me everything that I was surprised he could breathe between sentences. He told me that he liked to talk about his education and his background, that it made him feel stronger...better. Thinking about his past became his way of healing himself and preparing for his future.

Fate Points a Finger (3)

Why didn't ya'll notice this child
Screaming out for help?
Acting out?
Crying out?
The claw marks are on the wall
When you fail every other grade.

³ All poems used in the case studies are original poems inspired by the words of the participants and taken directly from those transcripts.

Billy's Story

1. *I got a bachelor's degree in general studies but you would never believe it if you knew where I had been. I started school in Orleans Parish. I grew up in a typical suburb and went to a grade school on St. Roch, right across from my house. I went there through third grade. Then we moved with the white flight to Jefferson Parish and I was one of the many people who got caught between a huge growth. Just about every year we went to a different school because of the population boom in Jefferson Parish so I started out third grade at another school and I think I did 3rd and 4th and then we went to yet another school part time. I left there and then we went to a middle school ... and the same thing happened, too many people. So they built another middle school and I went there I think my last two years of middle school and the same thing with the two high schools I attended. So every year it was a different school, a different principal you know ... so nobody really got a track on me and was able to keep track of me and so from Kindergarten I failed one, three, five, seven and nine. I failed every other grade. I don't know, people didn't notice me. There was a lot going on in my life, a lot of problems with my family and stuff. I either repeated grades and then a lot of times it was just, after a while it was just, social promotion. I was too old, I was too big, and they would push you through to the next grade. I don't remember which grades I went double. It's been too long to remember.*

2. Billy's lack of a stable school environment had a severe impact on his ability to succeed in school. After repeating every other grade and attending at least six schools, it seems that someone would have caught the pattern of failing behavior and intervened before Billy got to the ninth grade and was already seventeen years old. His continued

experiences with failure did not aid in his self esteem and the spiral downward continued, unabated until he became a “high school leaver.”

3. *I was failing every other grade. I didn't really realize [what was going on] until I started going back to school and trying to get my GED and then I started running into old teachers who said “What happened?” and I would reply, “You know. Why didn't ya'll notice this child screaming out for help?” I was just crying out for help and no one answered. Oh, I mean the claw marks are on the wall when you fail every other grade. You know. But my parents had no education. They had third or maybe fifth grade education. They were country farming people. So, they didn't know any better when they told me to just drop out.*
4. The lack of encouragement that Billy received from his parents was not surprising. Because they had nothing further than a third grade education, there was no reference point from which they could understand the need to stay in high school, to graduate and then to go onto college. Once Billy had finished grade school, their only objective for him was to get out and get a job, one that provided a stable income. Billy never entertained the thought of college; it was never even an issue.
5. *I was screaming for help. I wanted someone to tell me that what was happening was wrong. I wanted someone to guide me and tell me where to go. Someone who could help me make the right decisions. I was most probably ADD but that was before anyone knew what that meant. You know and I just couldn't sit still, couldn't concentrate. I didn't have any one. I had six brothers and sisters. They were in school and ahead of me and everything. Nobody really said, you know “Do your homework.” or you know “You can do it” or any kind of encouragement. It was a pretty chaotic kind of alcoholic household.*

Both my parents drank and still do. There was no normal life, nothing stable, nothing I could rely on at home. There was nothing from my family, no encouragement, nothing. Instead they would say things like, "why are you wasting your time?" They still do. They want to know if I am going to be a career student but I am the first one in my family, from either side to get a degree, the first one to even consider college as an option.

6. *I might have had one or two teachers along the way, that you know, tried, to help me, tried to convince me to stay in school, tried to tell me that school could be different, that life could be different. But I was so old by the time I got to high school and so big, you know... I am six foot five. I was bigger than the other kids and I was older and everything else. I was like an adult.*
7. *We were all getting into all kinds of trouble [in high school] and you know ... bombs, and I got into trouble and my dad went with me to school. I got suspended and he had to go with me. I remember walking up the stairs at high school and he said, "You know, you're making more money than me," because I was working as a chef at the time, "you're making more money than me why are you wasting your time with this school, why don't you give it up?" and that was the end of school. That was in the ninth grade. Actually, that was the second time I tried ninth grade.*
8. It was not that his parents didn't have the money to continue sending him to school, it was simply they didn't recognize future education, including high school as directly contributing to the amount of money Billy made. His father's only point of reference was his own job, and because he had left school in the third grade, did not realize the value of education on job opportunities. Not realizing it for himself, he could not realize it for his

9. son either. His son made more money than him and to the father that was enough to warrant encouraging his son to leave school.
10. *You can't give what you don't have. He had no point of reference, no value for education. He worked hard all of his life to raise seven kids. What could he compare my need for education to? But I was seventeen already. What seventeen year old wants to stay in school, particularly being seventeen and being in the ninth grade? I think he made it easy for me you know. So he said, "Why don't you just give this up and work full time?" I was working for a country club in Kenner and the chef had kind of taken me under his wing and trained me from a cabana to a small kitchen to a formal kitchen. It was all brand new. So you learn through doing it and I learned to be a chef.*
11. Billy did not seem to consider himself an academic learner. In other words, Billy seems to have learned best through hands on experience, one of Gardner's seven learning intelligences. However, high school education and a majority of grade school education involves more "lecture style" learning and this does not seem to fit Billy's learning capabilities. Had there been a method for teaching Billy in a more tactile fashion, it is possible that his grade school and high school years would have been more productive.
12. In addition, Billy's drinking, ADD and lack of encouragement from his family compounded his problems in high school and made it increasingly difficult for him to continue. He was not diagnosed until much later with ADD and had his earlier grade school teachers been able to determine that he had ADD, the learning experience and grade school and high school years might have been more successful.
13. *I still didn't know anything about college. I didn't know that I could further my career or even have a career past being a chef. I had no point of reference. Nobody in my*

family, nobody that I knew had ever been to college. I had never, ever dreamed of finishing high school much less going to college. Well, I can't say that I didn't dream of it. I had a fantasy about college and parties and frat houses and you know that image. In my twenties I kind of felt like I was missing something. But I didn't have any point of reference for that either because nobody had a college degree and maybe half of my brother and sisters and I had a high school degree.

14. *So I just got to the point where I was a sous chef and I just woke up one day and said, "I don't ever want to work in a kitchen again in my life." I had done it while I was in school for working in the Pitt Grill and Steak and Egg and little restaurants since I was nine. I cleaned floors, mopped floors, worked in restaurants ... I just got to the point one day still young and still drinking and still full of hell and I said I don't want to do this anymore. I want to quit. So after that I just bounced around for a while. I tried to start my own business and I did that from maybe seventy-seven to eight-one. I had a delivery service. Sometimes I had better jobs. I worked at Kentwood for a long time and worked my way up through the ranks. But the guy that gave the testing for the new employees told me I would never make it at Kentwood because I couldn't do the "m-a-t-h" word. That year, right here, on this route in Lakeview, I was there not even ten months, ten eleven months and I was the first rookie salesman of the year and they could NOT let a rookie take the trophy away from 150 drivers so they made two salesman of the year that year because they could not stand that, they couldn't bear that. But I was the kind of person to think, "Don't ever tell me I can't do something." I thought, "I'll show you." I learned the math by repetition. It's just like, you kept your own books, it's just like two bottles is this, four bottles is this, you know, after a while it got to be a repetition, and that's how I*

- was able to do it. I am a very kinesthetic person, you know... You know, show me. If you just show me one time, I got it. He just told me one time that I couldn't do it and two years later I was in middle management and two years later I was in upper management. And all I had was a ninth grade education.*
15. *And my dad would laugh at me. I went to work for one of the competitors. And I had an office in Mobile and my dad would sit in my office and I was hiring people for a management position and I wouldn't talk to them unless they had a college diploma. And all I had was barely a ninth grade education. But I came up through the ranks, I learned from the school of hard knocks, but these guys were coming in off the street and they wanted to be a manager. And if you wanted to be a manager you had to have at least a bachelor's (degree). My dad said, "You don't have a high school diploma and you're talking to these guys and telling them that they can't work for you without a college degree" and it was just amazing, it blew him away.*
16. *Then for no real reason I just stopped. I had an early mid life crisis. The alcoholism came to a head, my own alcoholism that is. I was married and we lost our first child and the alcoholism blew up in my face and when that happened everything came back to haunt me. I didn't know that the way I was drinking was leading to my problems. I was drinking you know. I would go to school; we would drink Boonesfarm and Mad Dog. It was real popular then. We would drink so much Boonesfarm at night all you had to do was go to school the next day and start drinking water and you would get a buzz all over again. I knew I had to go back and get a high school diploma.*
17. *Billy got tired of job after job, not realizing that jobs came and went because he was not cut out for them. After staring and stopping a variety of jobs, drinking and divorce, he*

realized the answer was not in yet another job that he wouldn't like or in which he could not succeed, it was in education and to succeed in education, he had to begin with high school.

18. *I had tried many, many times from the time I left, maybe two or three or four years after to go back. One of my siblings, my eldest sister kept encouraging me to go back. She had done it. She was the one that kept pushing me and I would go and I would take the test but I knew I was so stupid that I never would go back and get the results because I couldn't do the test. You can only do half of it or parts of it or whatever and I would get so frustrated, I would never go back and get the results. I would put my tail between my legs and walk away. I knew there wasn't even the remotest possibility that I could pass.*
19. *In 1992, I hit thirty I was sober, sober about a year or two and I got tired of working menial dead end jobs. I had destroyed Kentwood and all that by drinking and everything else and I was just working driving trucks and doing sales. I was living in Norco and the adult education school was right across the street from my house. So I went over there to take the test, but I knew would never go back. I would go over there and they would give me a couple of worksheets and said "practice with this" and I wouldn't go back. And somewhere in '92 I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired of being sick and tired, of working dead end jobs working with my back and that summer the school was close and I was out of a job. I guess I knew I had to do something. I was sick and tired of being sick and tired of being sick and tired. I guess fear was the biggest motivator for me. I was so afraid to go back and get the results. I remember the last time I was going to go back and get the results, or the last time I was going to take the test. I was crying with my sponsor on the phone. I was petrified. I think it's something my mother used to say, I just*

knew I was stupid. I just knew...somehow it was ingrained. My mother used to say "you are going to be nothing, a no good bum like your father." I can't believe it. Oh sure. She's a wonderful woman. And my father was an insurance salesman, just a menial job, barely making ends meet. And then I was selling insurance and it hit. Here I am, full circle. I am thirty years old and I am my father. It was an awakening. I went to those classes every day, they had GED classes in the morning, a shift in the morning, a shift in the afternoon, a shift at night and a lot of time I just got to that point where it didn't matter, I wanted it. I wanted to go. I wanted to be there. So at that point, I applied to school at the local community college and they let me in conditionally because my GED wasn't even finished and I had to finish it and I did.

20. It was luck that Billy lived across the street from the Adult Education Center in Norco. After his friends began going back to school, he knew that what he wanted more than ever was to be there as well, to receive his GED, to achieve, to succeed.
21. *I remember being the only white person there (in the GED classroom), but the people were absolutely wonderful. There was just no prejudice, they were just super supportive. At every turn they would tell me that I could do it. They would work with me, if I would work with them. I felt stupid, I felt afraid. Even though I am a big guy, I was beat down from an early, early age, physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally... But with help from my sponsor and with my friends I was able to overcome it, overcome, just get in there you know, bring the body and the mind will follow and a lot of the clichés that they have in AA and I just had encouragement that I had never had before. Encouragement from my sponsor, encouragement from my friends, encouragement from that one sibling, my older sister who really kind of raised me you know ten year difference. She was*

encouraging me and my ex-wife was encouraging me. My ex-wife had always encouraged me to do it. My daughter was young but she was still encouraging me ... so I had enough people kind of cheerleading for me. Vocational rehabilitation kind of came in and there was a counselor there and they were kind of encouraging me and really coming in like gangbusters to help out every way they possible could.

22. *The day I got my grades was not long after the day I had to go take that test and I was crying on the phone and I was afraid to go. But it wasn't to long when I got them, I was elated, still didn't believe it that these were my grades and I had done it. I learned that I wasn't stupid. I stayed on the dean's list the entire time I was at the community college. I was on the dean's list at the four year college that I went to after that too. I had a 4.0 for quite a while. I graduated from the community college with an Associate's Degree and from the four year school with a Bachelor's Degree and I had a 3.5 G.P.A. It took certificate after certificate after certificate to really convince me, and after a while I started playing Jeopardy or playing Trivial Pursuit with friends and I would say "Damn, I'm really not that stupid." My father was intimidated at some point; he used to always say, "You think you know some shit." But he was intimidated. I had a little more education than he did. Actually I had a lot more than he did. He was scared. He was scared because I was better off. Because I had more education. Now they don't even understand. It's like they think I am wasting time and money. When I went to get my GED they asked me where I wanted to get my diploma from and I told them I wanted it from the high school I had gone to and I walked back up the same set of stairs, probably ten or fifteen years later, and the same counselor who had suspended me in the first place was there, there to give me my diploma. He hugged me.*

23. *I'll never forget him. I cried. I am kind of an emotional person. Oh we were both in tears. Cause he knew me, he knew. He remembered me. I was just in so much trouble then and he was a counselor and a coach, Coach Jackson. I had gone to school drunk and skipped out of school and just did stupid shit. Sixteen years later I walked up the same set of stairs that I had walked down with my father when he told me I was wasting my time. I went back with a friend and I just cried the whole way back up the stairs to pick up my diploma. It was awesome.*
24. After receiving his GED, Billy discovered that a world of new opportunities opened up for him. And more than those opportunities, he also discovered that he was not stupid, that his mother had been wrong. He went to a community college and received a two-year Associate's Degree and then continued to a university where he received a four year Bachelor's Degree. From there he earned certificate after certificate and began the graduate program at the university for a Master's Degree as well, each time trying to convince himself that he truly was not stupid and that his mother had been wrong after all.
25. *Mother was wrong. I am not stupid. Mom and dad are no longer in my life, by their choice. I can't afford for them to be. They thought I was the crazy one, not them. They are still alive but I never see them. They don't even acknowledge that I've gotten all of this great education. They don't even know. It's their loss.*
26. *The only thing that hurts me is because of my daughter. She misses them a lot. They drink every day and they are in their own dysfunction. I have done everything in my power. I can't do anymore. I have to go on with my life. I am older now and I can't live my life the way they seemed to have wanted me to. I have to be my own person. Education*

has opened doors for me that I never would have dreamed of. I went to Europe. Now it's like I can't get enough. I am like a sponge. You know some sponges you put in the water and they just keep soaking and soaking. I just can't get enough once I have opened Pandora's Box. I want to go in the Peace Corp. I keep promising God that if he lets me win the lottery I am going to go down there and open an orphanage but that's obviously not what God wants me to do because I haven't won the lottery yet. What I really want to do is third world, health organizations. Kids you know I am a fanatic for kids.

27. *I am a better person for this; I am a better person for my daughter, a better role model, someone my daughter can look up to and be proud of. I am not the same person I was back then.*

Reflection on Billy Lewis

When he finished talking, he just stared at me. For a moment, I was too amazed to say anything and then he just smiled and looked away. He had dropped out of school because there had been no one there to tell him not to, no one had been there to help him and tell him how to succeed, to motivate him toward studying and learning and college. His mother and father had nothing better to say to him than call him names and insult him. They had no point of reference from which to encourage him to stay in school, to go to college, to get a good paying job and a good career. Instead of what he could have done, he dropped out and started drinking as a way to console himself for past mistakes. It was not until years of trying and failing that he began to realize that the problem was not bad luck just bad choices. With the understanding that he could make something better for himself, his family and his future, he set out to achieve the GED. At that success, he understood that nothing was holding him back and the road to success became a much easier one.

He plans to finish his graduate degree studying urban planning and then to use his education to help others. He talks of the Peace Corps and traveling, two things that seemed far fetched to him at one time, when he was seventeen and in the ninth grade.

I saw him take a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipe his eyes with it. Discretely, he put the handkerchief back in his pocket, looked at me and smiled again. As he was the first person I had spoken to, I could not imagine that the stories I would hear in the weeks to follow would be anything as traumatic as Billy's had been for him.

He apologized to me for getting so upset and told me that he hoped what he had said would help. He ended by telling me he was looking forward to talking to me again.

Appendix 3

When I was Seventeen

By the time I met Lori, I had done lots of reading on what it meant to get a GED. I thought that Billy's experience with education would enlighten me to the progress and pains that GED recipients must face in their decision making and in their choices for post high school experiences. But I had yet to speak to a woman and it was her point of view that opened a whole new door on the GED and post high school education and careers.

On the day of the interview, Lori sat across from me nervously. She was dressed in overalls, a t-shirt, a flannel shirt and tennis shoes. She explained to me that she and her husband had been sick all week and that the kids were sick as well. She used her hands to tell her story and she didn't hold back on some of the terms she used when expressing her true feelings about her mom, her grandmother and the way they all reacted together. She looked tired but I didn't know if that was because she had been sick or if the efforts of having a full time job, being a full time student and being a mom to a full time family were taking their toll.

She was very interested in talking to me. She kept reminding me that she wanted to let other girls know how difficult it was to get pregnant in high school and then to try and continue with an education and a career. She was very intent on letting me know how her life had changed once she knew she was pregnant and how her dreams for the future suddenly became something she was not prepared for.

"Along Came a Spider" was written with the aid of Lori and a few of the phrases chosen from her interview. It is intended to express briefly the feelings of abandonment by her mother

and the mistakes she feels she made because of the lack of a structured adolescence.

Along Came a Spider

I was interested in having fun.

I dropped out...

When I found out ...

I was pregnant.

It was a lot more fun to get out
skip school, get into trouble.

I was self indulgent

I did what I wanted.

I made the choice.

I have regretted it...

Every day of my life. It was a choice I made.

Big ... big mistake.

My mother had the maternal instincts
of a spider.

I wouldn't do that to my kids. She couldn't hack it.

You give birth ...

and that's it ...

you're on your own.

Girls today. They don't think twice about that.

Getting pregnant
and unmarried
at seventeen
is not appropriate.

Lori's Story

1. *I got pregnant. At that time, seventeen years ago you didn't really stay in school. It was not as common as it is right now. So I just decided to leave, I thought it was best. My head wasn't on at that point. I was too interested in having fun and doing things I shouldn't be doing and so I decided to drop out when I found out I was pregnant. Two*

months after that I went and got my GED because I felt like I at least had to have that.

I was pregnant when I went and got my GED. It was the worst mistake I ever made in my life. Don't get me wrong. I would never change anything as far as my children are concerned but I would not ever recommend to anyone to drop out of high school. You lose so much, you know? And there are a lot of ...issues with yourself. I have regretted it everyday of my life.

2. *It's not easy to tell people that I dropped out of school, but I got my GED, you know. And that is supposed to make it OK, but it doesn't. It doesn't make it OK. It just makes it a little bit more tolerable. I was more than that but I didn't see that at the time. You don't ever see that at the time. I try to impress on my kids to do the right thing. Prioritize your life, because you don't think about that you know?*
3. *I was always a very good student. I never had a learning disability or anything that would cause a lot of kids to not want to go to school. I always did very well in school. I was just very self indulgent, probably more so than most. It was a lot more fun to get out and skip school and get into trouble. I never got into serious trouble but I wasn't thinking about what it was going to be like later.*
4. *I really couldn't tell the exact reason why what happened happened. There was never a problem with me and alcohol. I just didn't want to be there. I wanted to be some place else. It was a lot more fun to be out at the Lakefront during school hours than it was to be in school. My husband said it was because my grandmother spoiled the s—t out of me. You become a very self indulgent person when you are allowed to do what you want to do. I had to do a lot of things that most teenagers didn't have to do. It was a lot of responsibility and I guess in the end that's also a part of it. I missed a lot of school. But*

grandma didn't insist. She didn't insist that I go to school. If you wanted to stay home a day just because you didn't feel like it... that was OK. It wasn't that she didn't encourage me. She wanted me to go to school. She was very educated. She just allowed me to do what I wanted to do. I guess she was trying to compensate for the fact that my mother bailed on my sister and I. I think she just over-indulged us a lot in that respect. I am sure she didn't like it when I said I was dropping out because I was pregnant. It was a choice I made.

5. Lori liked being in school, there were just too many distractions for her and the decision to attend school or skip was left up to her. When she did skip, her grandmother was either not notified or simply allowed Lori to make her own decisions. She was trying to compensate for the lack of caring that both Lori and her sister received from their mother. Instead of allowing them to have control of their lives and to show support for them, Lori's grandmother's plan spiraled allowing Lori to do as she pleased and with no supervision.
6. Lori does not attribute alcohol, drugs or the lack of encouragement to her leaving high school; instead it was simply that there were things to do that were more interesting than being in school. It may be that the educational teaching style at Lori's school was not conducive to her increased learning and that a different style of understanding and learning may have been more conducive to a better learning atmosphere for her.
7. *It's pretty funny when I think about it now. I don't think I have ever really thought about how she reacted. I don't think I ever really thought about it. Seventeen years old telling your grandmother, you know this is it. She was a control freak. She had to have things her way. But, at the same time, as soon as she got a grip on herself, she was like,*

“I will do anything I can to help you.” Which she did. You know, we were very young and needed help and she was there, she was always there.

8. Lori’s grandmother was not pleased about her decision to “drop out”. However, according to Lori, there was little she could say. Lori was pregnant when she made the decision to leave school and so high school was set aside for things that were considered more important – a family. In the rush to have Lori and her boyfriend married, school became less important and to compensate, Lori’s grandmother helped the couple in any way she could and became supportive of them in their new endeavor.
9. *After I found out I was pregnant, things obviously had to change. I knew what I wanted to do before I found out that I was pregnant. I had every intention of going into the military. I was going into the navy but you know things didn’t happen that way. And then once I found out I was pregnant, there was no choice as far as I was concerned. I was committed to the fact that now I was going to be a mother. I didn’t even question it after that. So now I kind of had to do the right thing by my kids. That has a lot to do with the fact that my mother couldn’t hack it and left my grandmother with my sister and I. I was determined that I wasn’t going to do that to my kids.*
10. Lori left high school because she committed herself to being a mom. She promised herself that she would not make the same mistakes that her mother had made and abandoned the child to another caregiver. She wanted to provide her children with a loving, stable environment and if this meant giving up high school temporarily, then that was what she would do.
11. *I was going to be different from my mom. She left me when I was three. My sister was right under a year. She’s still in my life. I won’t say a part of my life, she just couldn’t*

deal with it. My grandmother used to say she had all the maternal instincts of a spider. You give birth and that's it, you're on your own.

12. *But I didn't want that. I didn't want that for my kids. I never really questioned it because that was what was needed to be done for my children and I never really worried about it until they were in grade school. Their lives would change to the point where my life would change.*
13. *I didn't want to drop out but I knew that I had to. I talked about it with my grandmother but she didn't insist that I get my GED because I had already made that choice. I am sure if I had said, I am not going to worry about that, she would have been up my but to do it, to at least have that. I wish I had been in school when it was at that time that you could go to school pregnant. Girls today, they don't think twice about that. When I was growing up, it was very much frowned upon, at that time.*
14. *I can't remember wondering what I was going to do. It seems like ages ago. I didn't tell people for a long time that I was pregnant. I know I felt relief that I wasn't going to have to be there in that situation with all my friends. I didn't feel comfortable being there. It was easy to go get my GED. I walked in and passed the GED like nothing. It was a lot easier to do that, to go in there and take it and get it over with then it would have been to have to sit through every day, getting larger and larger. I just didn't think for myself that I could do that. Getting pregnant and unmarried at seventeen is not appropriate. I don't care where you come from or what you...it's not. I don't regret my children but I do regret the fact that it happened that way. I wasn't comfortable enough to stand up for myself and finish high school. It's done.*
15. *Lori made the decision to return to school to receive a GED because the lack of*

education had always been an issue for her. She knew that she needed a high school education in order to succeed, but her plans changed when she became pregnant with her first child. She was not daunted however and returned shortly after the birth of her child to receive her GED. She didn't want to have to explain why she hadn't graduate from high school and although the GED was not what she considered to be the same as receiving a high school diploma and graduating with her class, it was at least a starting point.

16. *I can't say that it was mother's fault. I never really considered her to be my mother anyway. My grandmother was always there. My mom was there too, just not in the capacity of a parent. It was never like, I am going to crash at mom's for a couple of weeks.*
17. *So I stayed home and raised my kids. It was a while before...before I even thought about something for myself. I went back to work. I even went back to school. I learned computer tech skills and basic secretarial skills...that sort of thing. I got a job with the parish...I went to work for them for about four years. But there was something missing. I mean it wasn't bad. They kept reallocating me to different positions but not paying me for the work. So, that's kind of irritating when you have gone through school. I had two years of school. At that point that's when computers were really starting to take hold. I did more work with computers but not as much as I would have wanted to. So I left there. So I had jobs here and there, nothing that really had, you know, the need for brain power. I worked in a shoe store, worked in a feed store for a while.*
18. *But I knew I had to go back to school. There had to be something there to take care of me when I was old. Something, not someone. I wanted to be able to rely on myself, to*

know that I could do it on my own. I wanted it all, retirement, savings account. I knew that there was the possibility that social security would not be there. I wanted to know that, when I am my in-laws age and quit working that I am going to have enough money to support myself. Or the fact that if my husband dies tomorrow, I am not going to have enough money to take care of my kids. It's just not going to happen. What I do now, the money is decent but it's not enough. I happen to get benefits because of where I work. Most people in that position don't get benefits. They don't get anything. You are on your own sort of thing, I want a good retirement package and a 401K. It's been really hard. Every penny that my husband and I made since we got married has been accounted for. We managed to save money. Of course, you know if something happened. Like you know, life takes over. The washing machine and dryer breaks. Or the kids get sick. I just know that I need to make more money just in case.

19. *I want to go to nursing school. I want to have a good paying job with benefits. I think about the decision that I made and I think it could have been a lot easier on me if I had just stayed in high school. I regretted the decision from the day that I made it, to quit high school. My husband quit too. He's two years older than me. He had a lot of issues too. Getting my GED is something that I am proud that I accomplished. Especially considering that not many people walk into the GED and pass it right off the bat. I was glad at least that I walked away from high school with something but I didn't want to settle and that's what I felt like I was doing. At least I was able to get the GED and to know that at least, if I would go and get a job, the application wouldn't have a blank that I couldn't fill out. That someone couldn't say "oh you didn't finish high school?" It's a lot better to say that you got your equivalency. It's still not as good to say that you*

finished high school. Even getting my GED isn't a completion. Finishing high school and getting a high school diploma would have been a completion. I dropped out of high school. Completion would have been to finish high school. So, although I got my GED, it doesn't take the place of actually doing it.

20. After receiving her GED, Lori tried a variety of jobs but none of them seemed to be what she was looking for. None offered the benefits she wanted or the retirement plans she needed. Finally she decided to reenter school and started working on a nursing degree at a two year community college. She feels she has to succeed because she believes the stigma of leaving school before graduation still follows her and she does not want anyone to ask her if she finished school or not.
21. *I tell my kids all the time "you have to finish high school. I am telling you what I know. You can not drop out of high school." They don't want to though. My oldest son is an honor role student. He is in his fourth year of English as a junior. He is an excellent student. He just has every intention of finishing high school and going to college. That's what we want. We can't allow him to do the things that he wants a lot of times. There are consequences for everything. You come home with a crappy report card, your privileges are taken away. If that had been done when I was...my grandmother never really, you know, you need to do better next time. Maybe if she put her foot down a little bit more.*
22. *I can't help but think about how different my life would have been. I wouldn't be going down this particular path. The opportunities are lessened because I didn't get a high school education; they are lessened more when you don't even get a GED. I guess in that respect, it certainly would have been changed. I guess in that respect, I have to consider myself very lucky.*

23. *If I had the chance to do it again, I wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have dropped out of high school. The GED is not the same, it will never be the same, especially now. You need to have that education. It's just like telling young girls that, but they don't listen. Don't get pregnant at seventeen because you know what, it's not all that. It really isn't. I love my kids, but I missed my teen years and my young adult years. I am a very responsible person, but there's a time in your life when you should have some responsibility for yourself. Now not having gone directly into college from high school and making that progression that young adults do, I haven't been able to do what I wanted.*

Reflection on Lori Anderson

Lori has decided to enroll in nursing school and is taking classes at a community college in order to qualify for nursing school. She believes that example is the best form of motivation and works to maintain her grades not just for her benefit but for the benefit of her children as well.

Lori, too, had begun to cry by the time she reached the end of her story. I offered her a box of Kleenex. She took one and when I asked if she would be okay, she replied that she was much better already. She told me that there were very few people interested in listening to her just talk and that it had been a while since anyone had asked her about how she felt, especially about her education and about having a child as a teenager.

She sniffed and then smiled and without warning jumped up and thanked me for the opportunity to get it off her chest. She told me she would be happy to talk to me again, said thank you and then almost ran out the door on her way to class, an appointment a sick child or anything that reminded her of the normalcy her life had become. In those brief moments in time when she

had expressed her true feelings and emotions about receiving the GED, she seemed to be the child again, faced with the decisions only adults should have to make.

Appendix 4

Rachael's Life

I remember meeting Rachael for the first time. She was in a developmental English class at a community college and she struggled through the class the whole semester. She struggled through all of her classes. She never struggled with the English though. She was very good at English. It was her memory of being told that she would never make it in college that she fought with. Every day that I saw her she seemed worried and would tell me that she was sure she wouldn't pass the exit exam to get out of the developmental class. I spoke to her instructor often to see if there was any way that I could help, to offer free tutoring or something that might make Rachael's education easier. Her instructor always told me the same thing, Rachael's problem was not school, she was getting all A's and B's on her assignments. She would come to class every day and spend extra time working outside of class with tutors in the reading and composition labs.

Rachael's problem, instead, was her self esteem, worn down over time by parents who didn't care and family members who offered no encouragement for her to stay in school when she was a child. Not just no encouragement, but nothing. It was almost as if she hadn't been there at all, that she was never a part of the family that she had been born into. She was different from all of them and it seemed that they could not accept that. She was sober, they were alcoholics. She was clean, they all did drugs. She longed for education, her mother was a prostitute who often reminded her and her sister that the best that they could do was to lie down and work. She was smart, none of them wanted to have anything to do with school. And so for a long, long time, she was also on her own.

When I first asked her to share her story with me, she told me no. She was not sure she could talk to me about something that hurt as much as it did. One week later, she came to me again and told me of a conversation she had had with her husband. He had told her he loved her very much and that he wanted her to get over the feeling of emptiness and stupidity that she continued to carry with herself. He felt that talking to me about it would lead her to better things and so she opted to tell me about her decision to drop out of school and eventually get her GED even if it meant rethinking the pain of not being wanted that she had lived with for much of her life.

Like both Lori's and Billy's poems, the words of Rachael's poetry come directly from the narrative itself. They help to condense Rachael's need for education without dampening the effects of her words and emotions on the narrative.

I Loved School

I isolated myself from groups.
 I was happy in school.
 I remember that.
 I was happy in school.
 I didn't want to leave school.
 I wanted to stay at school.
 I was a good student.
 I was always helpful to my teachers,
 always obeyed any kinda rules that they had,
 I was REALLY into education.
 ... she laughs... she cries ...
 I really wanted it bad
 but I had certain problems.
 I had a home.
 They prevented me from getting the education that I wanted.

Rachael's Story

1. *It's been a long time since I remember being called stupid. I think I have come a long*

way from the days when no one seemed to care. I remember that I isolated myself from groups. I was happy in school but I was afraid to make friends with the other kids. I didn't want to leave school. I didn't want to go home. I am not sure if that is because I didn't like it at home or if I liked it too much at school. I was a good student. I was always helpful to my teachers, always obeyed any kinda rules that they had. I was really into education. I remember when I first went to school, at the time I could remember, I was really into the education, I really wanted it bad but there were certain problems that I had at home that prevented me from getting the education that I wanted.

2. *I do remember wondering if the problems that I faced at home were the same problems everyone else had. I can't remember thinking that I was alone in that. My mom and dad, my whole family was on drugs at the time and I was pretty angry about that. I was angry that I was the only serious one, I was interested in school and no one else was. They weren't even interested enough in me to encourage me to go to school. I would isolate myself from them, go hide in my bedroom and cry. I was angry with everyone in my family. I had to take care of my brother and the house. I was pretty much the wife, the mom, the dad. When I went to school, I was just the kid. That was my only responsibility. I didn't want to go home. That was the reason.*
3. *Finally, I remember thinking that I couldn't stand it anymore. The feeling of growing up too fast, of anger and frustration. So I left home. I was 12. I remember there was no encouragement for me, no one even asked me to stay. No one cared. How could they? They could barely help themselves, much less me. I remember when I was home my mom would come up with some kind of reason why I had to stay home from school. I couldn't go to school. She would be on her drugs and she couldn't stand up half the time to do*

what she was supposed to do. I remember one morning when I got up, she goes “You can’t go” and I said “Well why can’t I go?” and she said because you have to take care of us. You have to cook for your little brother. You have to get him to off to school or keep him home. She didn’t care. So neither one of us had any type of support and that’s what made me leave.

4. Rachael loved school and loved to be in school, more than she wanted to be at home. Often she would find reasons to stay after school so that she wouldn’t have to go home. Learning intelligences had nothing to do with Rachael as she was an avid reader and loved education. Instead, it was her family that became the cause of her becoming a “high school leaver.” The lack of encouragement and support that she received from her family coupled with the feelings of being too responsible too soon, caused her to feel that even her own education was not worth the pain and sorrow she was caused by living at home.
5. *When I left home I went and stayed with some people that took me in and I went to high school for a little while and got up to ninth grade and then I had to quit. That’s all there was. I just grew up to be very, very angry.*
6. *I was afraid of people. I didn’t know how to interact with them. But I wanted the education. I wanted to be in school so I went anyway. I didn’t have a lot of friends and I think that that was part of the reason I finally quit. I couldn’t take the pressure of being the outcast, of always feeling like I didn’t belong.*
7. *It’s funny because as stupid as I felt that I was, I never got held back. I never failed a grade or a class. I actually skipped a grade once. I got to skip third grade. I went straight from second to fourth. It was like an award to be able to do that. I never skipped classes. I was always...I wanted to go to school. I knew what it took to get an education. It’s to*

attend school, study, do whatever you had to do to get any information to get your high school diploma. I knew that as a child. I was a pretty smart child. I knew what was right and what was wrong and I was going to go for whatever I could and go in the right direction. But then I left.

8. *My mom used to call me up at the house were I was living. She would call me and harass me about needing me at home. Now that I think about it, that was kind of strange because she would also call me and tell me she never wanted me to come home again. I wasn't like the rest of the people in the family. She didn't like me, and she would tell me she didn't like me. There was never any doubt about that.*

9. Not only did Rachael's mother know of her decision to leave school, she encouraged it. Being addicted to drugs and alcohol, she relied on Rachael to handle the family's day to day situations and needs. Cooking for the family, taking care of siblings and cleaning house became a part of Rachael's daily routine. All at the age of 12. Rachael attributes her need for leaving school to the overwhelming pressure her mother bestowed upon her and to the stress she attributes to living in a drug and alcohol addicted family. The final straw that broker her back and forced her to leave her mother house was her mother's implications that she should resort to prostitution to help make money for the family.

10. *So I left school because I was depressed. I couldn't do anything else. I had no one to talk to, no one to turn to who could explain to me what was going on, why my family was the way they were, why they hated me so much. I was so isolated. The day I left school, she called to tell me that she hated me because I wasn't like my sister. So I quit school, regardless of my best effort to stay in. And that's what made me more angry at her and wound up hating her. I wound up going to live with another family who took me in. I lived*

with them for three years and then I got a job and an apartment and being in that apartment and having my own job and my own money, that was the first time I remember being in control of my life. I was seventeen.

11. *I have always thought about school. I have always wanted the education. I knew that I would go back because that's where I wanted to be. So I was sitting on my couch one day and I happened to be going to a junior college and I remember something wasn't right with the school because they actually had to help me pass the test to get in. I knew something was wrong. In order to pass to get in, just to pass the entrance exam, I had to do that test by myself and they helped me which, at the time, I thought was real nice but then later on I thought about it and I thought, there's no way. I have to do this. And I remember being in classes when I couldn't even understand what they were saying and there grew more anger towards my family, not towards the school.*
12. *It was hard for me to think that high school was the answer. No one in my family had graduated from high school. There was no point of reference for me or for them. Most of them were on drugs, some were working as prostitutes to support their habits. My mom used to tell me that that was my goal. "lay down and make your money." I hate her for that. She couldn't be a mom to me though. She didn't know how. She didn't care.*
13. *She's not alive any more, which I guess is a good thing. None of them are. None of my family are alive. I had a brother. He was 21 and he was another one that left home because he couldn't deal with the drugs. I think he was 15, and he left home and when I was 13, he got killed working for T.L. James. When I heard, I was hurt because he understood and he would sit there and talk to me. When I was little, he was the one who said, "I am going to take care of you when you're old enough to leave" and then he died*

and that grew to more anger. That was it. I would never see him again.

14. *None of my family members on my mom's side wanted anything to do with her because they disagreed with her on how she was raising her kids. So any time she would call her sisters they would hang up on her, which I don't really blame them. I would hang up on her too. I never really knew her family because they didn't want any part of our family.*
15. *Well, like I said, I went to Phillips Junior College and I knew that the education was what I needed to make a difference in my life. I remember sitting in that class being angry. I paid all that money to go to school. My dad had left me an inheritance and I paid for Phillips College and I remember sitting in that class and I didn't understand anything the teacher was saying. Absolutely nothing. Math to English. Nothing. I was angry, I just left because I was afraid. When I decided to go back, that's when I met the guy I would marry. I remember sitting on my couch after I got married to Joe and watching TV and I thought this is not the life I want. This is not the life I am going for. And then I remember going into another community college and going to look around at the school and I was scared. I was looking at the students looking at me. And, you know how you walk the halls and everybody is looking at the students that are passing? But when someone would look at me I got intimidated so I walked out of that community college. I did that four times before I actually said this is it. I don't care who looks at me, I have to do it. It took me four times, it took my husband actually going with me just to get enrolled.*
16. *Rachael decided to go back to school when she realized that the life she had was not the one she wanted. She was frustrated with herself and her lack of ability to do the things*

she wanted to do. Education was the only solution and Rachael knew she had to take the opportunity.

17. *The first year after I started attending the community college, I started an EKG program. And they knew I didn't have a GED and everybody kept saying no you don't need it, no you don't need it. But I knew I needed it, I knew I needed it. I needed that regardless of what other people said. When I attended the EKG program, I made a 4.0 and I was so proud of myself, I was so happy and I thought if I could pass the EKG program, I can do a GED. So after I passed the EKG exit exam, that's when I thought OK I am going to go further. So I went into a phlebotomy program. Then I passed that with a 4.0 average. I still didn't have my GED at the time because, the EKG was like a two semester program and then from there I went into the phlebotomy program which had no prerequisites involved. But then I finally decided I had to go, I had to get the GED. I was 21.*
18. *I always wanted my high school diploma but being because I was older, I thought, OK, there's got to be another way. So my husband kept telling me that I had to get my GED. He knew it would make me feel better about myself. So I remember laying in bed one day and saying "I am going to do it." That's when I called East St. John High school. I made the decision. It was the happiest day of my life, being able to get my GED and go to college.*
19. The motivation Rachael needed to achieve the GED came when she began to qualify for certificates. Understanding that she could achieve in school made her realize that the GED was not entirely out of her grasp. It was the encouragement of her husband and the knowledge that she was not stupid and that there was no reason to be afraid to try, to

succeed that brought her back to the educational arena and helped her to achieve the GED.

20. *Now I feel like I have a future. Not then, not before I got my GED. I knew that I had determination and I had a lot of courage and I was going to fight. No matter what I had to do I was going to fight and it seemed as if when somebody would bring up my family that would make me push more because I hated them so much that it just...it would it would make me angry inside and that would just give me more of a push. But then I remember when my husband would talk about my mom, he would say... "your mom" and I would get angry with him and say that's not my mom. I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear her name. I would think more and say, I am going to do this regardless of what they think.*
21. *I am happy with myself now. There is still anger there, there are still times I do cry. Because I think back on my family but I am going to make it regardless of what I have to do. I have got that fight inside of me. I am going to become a nurse anesthetist and I am going to be a good nurse. I have got the heart for it. It's not money. A lot of people say "well hey lets go for the money" but it's not the money, it's the person inside. You have to have the heart for any type of medical field. You have to have the heart. If you don't have the heart then you might as well go into another field because those are innocent people lying there begging for you to help them from a child to an elderly. You are in control of that person's life.*
22. *I felt stupid. But now it doesn't matter because I know that I am not stupid. All the pain I went through. All of that. I learned from it, grew from it, became a better person because of it. Things have changed. I have changed. I am not stupid.*

Reflections on Rachael Perez

Rachael now feels like there is a future that she can look forward to. Now matter what she wants to achieve the giant step of the GED is behind her and she is much happier with herself.

Rachael's husband sat next to her throughout the interview. Her children had played outside, skateboarding and playing with the dogs in the neighborhood. Every now and then one would come in and ask her if she was okay and want to know why she was crying. She just smiled and looked at them and told them that everything would be alright. When they would leave the room, she would tell me again and again how proud she was of her children and that the focus of her family was education and sense of worth. She wanted her children to never feel the way she felt as she was growing up.

Finally, she got up to leave. She reached over, clasped my hand and shook it but never said a thing. Her husband, too, grasped my hand, said "thank you very much" and walked out the door. I heard her calling her children outside, her voice not tinged by the emotion that had been there only moments before.

Appendix 5

Melissa

Melissa volunteered to talk to me when her Reading teacher told her about the study. She walked into the lab I was in and told me she was very interested in talking about her experiences with her education. At first, I wanted to tell her she was in the wrong place. I was only interviewing students who had received GEDs. I should have known better to attach a stereotype to her but I hadn't really expected her to come in and I was not sure at first what she was doing standing in my lab. But she sat down and proceeded to tell me about her life and where she had been and her GED and how she felt it had affected her and her career choices. I may not have even asked her the questions, I just remember listening and she poured everything out to me reminding me once again how open some people can be. She was dressed very casually. She seemed very assured of herself. There was a feeling behind it, an emotion behind it – sure, but the pain that she remembered feeling over her education was in the past and she expressed that talking about it was her way of facing it.

Like the other poems, the words of Melissa's poetry come directly from the narrative itself. They help to condense Melissa's desire for education regardless of the feelings she harbored toward her mother without dampening the effects of her words and emotions on the narrative.

College is Not For Everyone

She would get mad ...
I didn't catch on you know, right away,
...so she would abuse me.
She would hit me.

I just thought either I get it or I am just dumb
"College is not for everyone."

If I ask somebody for help...
 I will get abused again.
 If I have to just in order to learn
 I have to be abused...
 you know...it hurts,

I was raised if something bad goes on in your life,
 you know,
 be quiet.
 I was raised like that.
 If something bad goes on in your life,
 keep it to yourself,
 shut your mouth.
 So that's how I was raised.

I said,
 'How many boyfriends did you have?'
 POW.
 My mother knocked my head so hard in the wall,
 I could hear
 the sheet rock
 break.

They didn't care. They never asked me

Melissa's Story

1. *I would have graduated in 84. I was supposed to graduate in 84. I loved elementary school but I hated high school because of my mom. Because I never got help at home as a child. You know like homework and stuff like that. You know all kids are interested in things but if there is no one to help them they become disinterested. So that is what happened to me. When my mother had to help me with things she would get mad because I didn't catch on you know, right away, so she would abuse me. She didn't want to help me...because she just didn't want to help me. She would hit me.*
2. *It wasn't that I hated high school to be a rebel or because the high school wasn't a good experience. I hated high school because of my mom and I associate high school with her. I loved school but if I didn't get any help... what was the use of going? If I*

didn't get any help. Back then tutoring wasn't a big word like it is now. Everyone stresses tutoring which is great, but I never knew about tutoring. I never knew that I could have an alternate person, other than the teacher that could help me. I never knew that. I just thought either I get it or I am just dumb. Either that I get it or, not that I am dumb, either I get it or I don't. If I don't know it, I will never know it because there is no one to help me.

3. Melissa liked school but the association she made between her mother and physical abuse and school soon smothered her natural desire to go to school. Melissa did poorly in some subjects and when she would ask her mother for help, her mother would hit her. She became more and more afraid of asking her mother for help and so her grades began to fall even further. Melissa was caught in a downward spiral of lack of encouragement, low self-esteem and a school's systems inability to step in and lend a hand to a struggling child.
4. *I never got any help. It was never an option and then my mother would say things like "College is not for everyone." She would talk down about education instead of speaking highly about it so that I could achieve it. She never did that. My mom quit school also I think and she had no point of reference when it came to encouraging me to stay in school. To her education had no meaning. There was never a reason to stay, to achieve, to succeed and because there was nothing there for her, she couldn't help me when I was wondering what was in it for me.*
5. *My mother was very smart in high school, my grandmother told me that she was, she just decided to leave school and never talked about it, never bothered to tell us why. For a long time I thought my mother had graduated from high school. I didn't find out that*

she didn't until I was like 20 or 21.

6. *When I told my mom I was dropping out she told me I had to go to work. Just like that. No argument, no nothing. So I went to work at Burger King. I also worked odd jobs in hotels, stuff like that. There was no argument from my mom, no nothing, just "go to work." I really didn't have any feelings about the jobs that I was doing. I was just doing what I had to do at the time and just living day to day, you know not having any goals or aspirations - just living.*
7. *Melissa's mother should have little interest or support in keeping Melissa in school. Melissa made her decision to drop based on the continuing fear and threat of abuse and when she confronted her mother, her mother's nonchalant attitude about school further convinced Melissa of the need to leave school. Her only response to her daughter's decision was that she should "go to work."*
8. *I think that at one time, my mom wanted me to go back to school but going back to school meant being abused all over again and I was pretty sure I didn't want that. She wanted me to go back to school when I was living with her. She wanted me to go back but I thought that if I went back I would have to go through the brutality of asking somebody for help and if I ask somebody for help I will get abused again so I said forget it. If in order to learn I have to be abused...you know...it hurts, because I really wanted to learn, I really wanted to learn but there was no one to teach me.*
9. *I didn't know where to go. And then I was raised if something bad goes on in your life, you know, be quiet. I was raised like that. If something bad goes on in your life, keep it to yourself, shut your mouth. So that's how I was raised. I have an older sister and a younger sister too. They were obviously doing better in school than I was. They never*

needed the help that I needed. My sister older than me finished and my sister younger than me finished. I was the middle one and I was the only one that didn't finish. They didn't need the help, but I did. And you know, it was like I'm not going through this no more. That's why it took me so long to get my GED too.

10. Melissa believed that because her older sister and younger sister were doing better in school than she was, that there must have been something wrong with her. She felt lacking, insufficient. She knew that she wanted to learn, she wanted to achieve, she wanted to succeed but there was no one to teach her, no way for her to learn. She believed that asking for help meant getting hit and the abuse she had stood had been enough. She attributes her problems in high school with the lack of help and encouragement that she needed to succeed in high school. Abandoned of the support she needed from her mother and failing to find the necessary support in her high school, she felt that there was little else to do but drop from high school and get a job.
11. Additionally, Melissa chose to leave school because of the overwhelming burden of having to raise her first child at thirteen, clean house, go to school and work. Goals were non-existent and the thought of a future never crossed her mind.
12. This problem could be alleviated by high school teachers, administrators and parents recognizing the signs of trouble and intervening before the trouble worsens. Setting goals, or helping to set goals for a student, often puts the future into perspective and helps the student to understand the reason for finishing high school.
13. *I dropped out when I was sixteen and I got my GED seven years later when I was twenty three. I was in denial. I was on welfare and I had two kids. My first one I had when I was only thirteen. It was horrible. I mean I am happy I have him now but I mean*

- back then it was a child having a child. It was bad. It was really bad. I was learning but I was learning the wrong things in other words. Because I wanted to learn. I know now that every child wants to learn and if you don't teach them, they are going to learn something. It's up to you what they learn. It's up to the parents what they learn because they are going to learn, but instead of me learning the right way, I learned just survival skills. Just how to survive instead of how to live which was bad. I knew all the street stuff. I had a lot of common sense. But I didn't know how to live properly. I was just surviving. I wasn't living. That's what I called it. I had no goals. None. I had no goals. It was just day to day. I would get up, clean the house, take care of my son, you know stuff like that, but I had no goals of achieving to have a degree or buying a home or anything like that.*
14. *I finally realized that I had to get away from my mother. I stayed with my family and never had goals. But as soon as I broke away from them... I always had them, but I was scared to do something about it because of the abuse. I was scared to entertain it, because I knew if I entertained it I would not have the love of my family.*
15. *My mother continues to abuse us. It's not physical abuse any more. She can't beat us so she tries the next best thing. Now because we are adults, it's no more of the physical it's the mental. My mother would play with your mind. She knows she can't beat you any more so, it can't be physical any more because you are an adult. She messes with us mentally. That's why my mother and I don't have a relationship today. My son wanted to go to college. My oldest son and he was telling her about all his classes and he was excited like any teenager would be and she told him, college is not for everybody. So she tried to do the same thing to him that she did to me.*
16. *First I was outraged at her because I felt that she was afflicting the same abuse on*

him that she did me. But she only did his verbally and she did mine physically. He was angry too, he was angry. Because he didn't grow up like that. See I never really let him have a relationship with my mother because we lived in a different area. So when she said that, that angered him like, "Is she jealous because I am going to college?" It angered him and I explained it to him. I told him about growing up in her household. He doesn't have a relationship with her now either. He will talk to her every now and then but he doesn't have a relationship with her. Now he is graduating from college. I had to tell him though. I had to explain why I dropped out of high school and why I went back to get a GED so that he would understand and so that he wouldn't make the same mistakes I had made.

17. *When I left school, I was relieved. I was relieved. Because of the abuse. I was relieved. That's the truth. Because in order... when you are in school, you have to go further and further and further. I knew some things, you know, I knew how to read and write. Whatever. But other things I needed help with but I knew with the help came ... and I said forget it. I was relieved. And the older I got, I needed more help and more help so I just couldn't deal with it any longer. So I just...when I quit I was relieved. I was sixteen and a sophomore in high school.*
18. *I ended up calling my mother and telling her, my teacher telling her, "Melissa needs help." Calling her or something. They didn't... I don't know how they said it but she relayed it back to me like that. She relayed the message and I was like "Forget it. If I need help, forget it." You know. Help to me meant negative things that I didn't want to think about. So I was like forget it. You shouldn't have to...you shouldn't have to...in order to go further in life you shouldn't have to be abused. So I said forget it. I don't*

want to learn no more. So I just stopped. I stopped. I stopped reading things, I used to love to read. I used to write poetry, I stopped writing. I just stopped. I couldn't take it no more. I just stopped. I said forget it. All I could think of was that if I wanted to go further in life, if that meant abuse... in order to go further in life I have to be abused? Forget it. You get tired of being abused. You really do, you get tired, you just get tired.

19. *So that's how it happened. I started skipping, that's how it happened. The classes that I could do I went because I loved them. The classes that I couldn't do I skipped and then skipping came into not going for one or two days and then one or two days turned into weekly and then that turned into weeks and weeks and then months and months. And no one ever called to find out why I wasn't there. I don't even know because ...because I think subconsciously when I quit, a part of me died so...I can't even remember that part. That's a mental block. I think it is so hard for me to think of. My mind, dealing with life, my mind let me forget about it. And now, every day, I regret the decision that I made. Every day. Every day. Every day.*

20. Melissa remembers feeling elated when she finally left high school. To Melissa, “dropping out” meant escaping the pain her mother had inflicted on Melissa for being “not smart enough.” When others eventually tried to help, by the time Melissa was in high school, she had already begun to associate help with the help her mother offered her, a slap or a beating. She rationalized that if that's what help meant, she didn't want it from anyone, even her teachers at school. She knew that even if they didn't abuse her, her mother would when she got home. If getting an education meant having to withstand abuse, she wanted nothing to do with it.

21. *When I finally got away from my family and I got away from my mother, I saw a whole*

other life. I found out that I could go back to school and I don't have to deal with her any longer. And I...and I... and I started seeing where you could get an education, have a career, think about a future, a future that didn't include the abuse that I was used to. There are tutors. There are people that can help you and I didn't know that then. I didn't know that back then but I know it now. You know. She's out the picture now. Now I can ask for help. Anybody I found that was a little hostile like my mother, I would just stay away from.

22. *I remember going back to school to get my GED. I found out about it because it was right across the street from the house I was living in and I remember thinking "God did this." Why else would there be something this close. Just what I needed right when I needed it. God put me right here and I knew it was time for me to go. I got my GED in four days. I wasted seven years of my life and solved my problem in less than four days.*

23. *That's how I feel now. Because when I first went...when I first walked in the GED class, I had mixed feelings. I was nervous and excited. I was nervous, I don't know why... I was excited because I liked school. And I knew nobody could stop me now. I knew nobody, my mother...nobody could stop me from going. You know. When I went. I grasped everything so quickly. The teacher was so like, "You haven't been to school in how long?" I was just reading and reading and when the class was over I was mad. I was mad when the class was over. You know I was like I want more you know, I want more. I was the first one in the class to finish, the first one. And then I remember crying. I cried. I cried. I cried for three days. I cried for THREE days! And I told my husband, I said, I said, I can do this. I can do this. I could have done this. I could have graduated with my*

friends. I wasn't as stupid as I thought.

24. Melissa wanted to go back to school and buy a stroke of luck that she believes to be the hand of God, she moved into a house right across the street from a GED testing service. After seven years of struggling and heartache, the GED was within her grasp and she finished in four days. The feelings of wanting education and loving education washed over her again as she absorbed more and more and finally admitted to herself that she was as stupid as she thought or as stupid as her mother had tried to convince her that she was.
25. *After I got my GED, I started getting into programs. I started finding out about all types of programs because I was like, I don't think I can go to college. I didn't know you could go to college with a GED. I didn't know. I just didn't know. Well I was just like, I better go into these programs instead of going into college because I will never get into college unless I have a diploma. I went into a little medical assistant program. Little programs in the area. I did phlebotomy and I did well in that. Stuff like that. I was still raising my kids. My kids were small and they were going through their childhood illnesses. That's it. Now I want to get a master's degree! I love psychology, I love the study of the mind and I would like to, I would like to study why people abuse each other the way they do. I would just like to know why. Cause I came from that. Normally families just kind of go to a vicious cycle and they can't stop. But I did. I stopped it. So now I want to know why and how I can help you know that process, you know, just stop. You become a liberal, you know, stopping what you went through as a child. I just love psychology. A lot of people do the things they do you know... I would love to work with children. If it would help them to never get in the situation that I was in. And if they are in the situation I was in, to give them avenues to get out. And if not to get out, how to deal with it until*

they are able to get out, you know because it is difficult.

26. *Before I got my GED, I was miserable. But when I got it! I was raised to a whole other level. I was so happy. I could do anything. I didn't have to put up with shit! Oh God, I was in heaven. I was in heaven. I was like, Oh my God I was just... I couldn't believe it... it was like, somebody had just lifted a gorilla off my shoulders. I was like ... me. I had to like, look in the mirror, you know. It was phenomenal.. it was the best. I was happy. It was fantastic. It was great. I am much stronger... a much stronger person. The person I always knew I was, you know... I could be. I'm happy. I'm telling ya, I'm much happier. It's like a whole...this is ... this is... I know this is not heaven, but if this is close to it, I'm in heaven, ya know... I lived with so much abuse and ...really it was more mental abuse than physical, ya know... stopping me from growing. I hated that... I hated that, like 'why can't I talk?' 'why can't I express how I feel?' 'why I can't say..' One day I asked my mother a question like this... I said...it was just a question any teenager would ask their mother. I said, 'how many boyfriends did you have?' POW. My mother knocked my head so hard in the wall, I thought the sheet rock was going to break. Ya know, ya can't talk, ya can't say... you know, I'm a young girl. You can't do anything, you know... The questions that I wanted to ask, I was doing.*

27. For Melissa, there was and is an obvious dichotomy between her feelings about herself and her level of self-esteem before she got her GED and her level of self esteem after she got the GED. Before receiving her GED, Melissa claims that her life was miserable, no future goals, no focus, just day in and day out working to survive. To Melissa nothing mattered but making money and taking care of her children. After she received her GED, her life changed. She started to receive certificates and with certificate

after certificate, finally realized that college was a possibility. Her future goals are to attend a four-year university and receive a master's degree in psychology so that she can study abusive characteristics in people and determine ways to sort out abusive behavior.

28. *I tried to explain all this to my son. I tried to tell him about my mom. I tried to tell him how she had been but I couldn't put it into words. He couldn't understand how someone could be the way she was. Maybe that's for the better. You see, my mother had me when she was twenty-six. My mother was married. My mother...she had the ideal life. She didn't have her first child until she got married. She didn't even live the life that I lived. So I'm like, she didn't even have to do the things that ...She just freaked out. I really don't know. I really don't know, because I never really asked her about it, because I really didn't care. Because I felt I had to take care of me. She's closing... she's closing herself up... I'm trying, ya know... I tried to get her to open up to me a couple of times, and she wouldn't. So, I just let it... I just left it alone. It doesn't matter, because I have to raise my daughter now, ya know. And my sister wants me to let her visit my daughter, and I said no way. No way, my mother's second husband molested me and she's still with him. I wouldn't let my daughter see my mother. Why? So she can break my daughter's self-esteem right now? My daughter is very happy right now, so I can't handle it. And she's [my mother] the same way... she hasn't changed. I don't want my daughter [to be around my mother] ... I asked my sister 'was she crazy?' when she asked me that question. I said you need therapy! You really need to go to therapy because I had to go to therapy. I had to go to therapy, because I thought that I had the wrong feelings about my mother because I grew up with that, so I didn't know that it was okay for you not to love abuse. You may love your parents or whatever, but I thought that is was wrong for me not*

to break from her. I thought that was wrong. But I found out that I did the right thing. She was nuts! She didn't want me to do anything in life. When I broke away, I felt guilt. So then I had to go to therapy because I was really having a nervous breakdown. I've had so much confusion in my brain, so I went to therapy, and they helped me straighten it out. I knew. They had just confirmed what I knew all along.

29. *I was always stronger than my mother and I knew it.. I always was. I think she knew it, and that's why she beat me so much. I would tell her things, and she would beat me for telling her the right things. It was weird. Any mother would love having a daughter like that. But, she didn't. Getting my GED had a lot to do with changing my life.*

30. *When I was in elementary school, I loved school. I was in school plays. I was always the head person in the school plays. I was the one in charge. I got everything together. I loved school. I loved everything about school. I can still remember my first bad incident. I was in the fourth grade, and we were doing greater and less than. With the arrows. At the time, I couldn't distinguish what was greater and what was less than. I had so much on my mind as a kid. I had to do my homework. So I was at the kitchen table, and I asked my mother, I think I was about nine or ten, and I asked my mother, I said 'Momma..' She was like, 'you don't know it yet?' I don't know what she was doing in the kitchen, but I was at the table by the back door. I could see it. She was walking through the house. I was trying - trying to distinguish between the two. Trying to get her to help me, and she hit me so ... and when I told her I couldn't do it I said, 'momma just please help me with, help me with this one. Just, I got the rest, just ... I don't know what I said. She hit me so hard that I heard my eardrum pop. I mean, I couldn't even hear in my ear. I just put the whole book-sack up. I just put it up. She said, 'you finished?' I said, 'yeah, I'm*

finished.’ It was just easier to lie than to do it. I just say, ‘I’m finished.’ I’ll never forget that. She hit me so hard... I mean, I couldn’t even hear from that ear for like an hour or two. I was real - when I was nine and ten, I was so skinny. I was so little. Of course, I’m not that tall now. I was so... and my mother’s a tall woman, like five-nine almost five-ten, five-eleven. I was just like...I can’t handle it. It was bad. Getting my GED changed that. It raised my self- esteem. It made me feel like nothing was impossible.

31. *My mother was the model neighbor... your everyday woman living on the block. My mother was ... my mother was one of those people like ... she was very clean, very neat... never cursed. And that’s weird, huh? Food everyday... we had nice clothes. She had a good job... that doesn’t even fit the part, huh? Everybody, when I tell people ... when I tell my girlfriends about my mother... my girlfriends who knew me when I was little... they’d say, ‘Melissa, we never saw that...’ I said, ‘because ya’ll don’t know what goes on behind closed doors.’ She had... my mother had a clean house... and I mean, paid all her bills. Ya know how some kids, their mother’s would say their lights were cut off and anything like that... My mother would pay her bills before it was time to pay them... She was one of those kinda people. But behind closed doors, she was horrible. She was a jealous-hearted person. She was... she was a jealous-hearted person. My mother never drank. My mother never drank... wine, beer, nothing. My mother never went out. Never. And if she went out at night, it was work, and she rarely worked at night. Never... it was like, what happened huh? Everybody asks that same question... But she married horrible men. She married... my mother married herself... she married herself, because her second husband is like her, and her first husband. I tell her all the time, ‘that’s you... that’s you. You married yourself. That’s why you get along so well. You just don’t wanna*

see it.'

32. *That's why I obsessed about my kids, about their education. It's just that I want them to learn. Wanting them to learn so much. I had to back away a little bit. I told my daughter why... 'oh I understand momma', I thought something was wrong. You want me to learn every book, you want me to read everything.*
33. *My children are in elementary, well my older son goes to middle school. Now I stress education. All my children are still in school. All three of them. I had to back off a little bit because I wasn't giving them a break. I wasn't giving them a chance to be children because I wanted the education so bad so they wouldn't ever be in my shoes. But by doing that I was kind of hurting them it was too much I was overloading them with too much information at one time. They were like OK, we get it back off a little. Then I had to sit down and recollect my thought and tell them why I did that. I said, I didn't mean to, I am sorry but this is why I did that. Now they understood. At first they thought I was a warden, you know. Homework all the time, this all the time, you know, momma back off! We did it, we're making the grades, what's the problem now you know. But I found out I was just reliving my childhood, you know, not wanting them to go through it. My kids are really smart.*
34. *I am glad things worked out the way they did, but if I had the chance to do it all over again, I would change it. There are so many things I would change.*

Reflections on Melissa

Melissa finished her story with a giggle. It's over, she reminded me. That part of her life

was over and things would never be the same. She had moved on from her mother, had changed the path of low self esteem, low sense of self worth and low education that her mother had helped to instill. She had recognized the need for something different in her life and had changed it to suit what she knew she would need in the future.

She was no longer the child at the command of the adult but had taken on the responsibility of her own education and the improvement of her children's education. There were no tears in her eyes as she left my lab, she was already far beyond the feelings of hurt and pain her mother had tried to instill in her. She was far beyond associating pain and hurt with education and love.

She better understands now the need for education, the need to finish high school, to graduate and to go to college. Her own experiences have molded her and aided her in supporting her children in their academic endeavors. Education has increased tremendously in importance and she stresses the need for education and good jobs to her children.

Appendix 6

Bryan

I actually met Bryan through a friend of a friend. He was wild and liked to drink and have fun and at twenty-five still acted like he was eighteen. He didn't actually calm down enough to assume the responsibility of being an adult until he and his girlfriend got married and she already had had a six year old little boy. He accepted the responsibility of an instant family and everything that came with it like slowing down on the alcohol and getting a job that he could actually support his new wife and son with.

The poem used for Bryan's narrative, like the first narratives, describes Bryan's outlook on his education and gives insights into why he felt high school was not important enough to make a priority.

I Drank

I drank
and ran around with my friends
and stayed out all night
and got in with a bad crowd
and doing drugs at an early age
and I was just your basic rebellious teenager.
I didn't want to go to school
the thought of getting up
in the morning
made me depressed.
I hated it so much.

Bryan's Story

1. *I went to Lee Junior High School. It was a small school, small country school. I started there at age five. I went all the way there to the ninth grade. I started there. It wasn't bad. I didn't have any real problems there. Kind of enjoyed it. It*

was a small school. I went there with people I grew up with. Didn't have to change schools or deal with that or anything. Went to high school for one year, my sophomore year. And after my sophomore year I dropped out. I had problems with school...attendance was my biggest problem. I felt like I didn't want to go to school starting in about seventh or eighth grade. I decided I didn't like school anymore, I didn't really want to go. So I stopped going. I would show up, take a test, show up for a week or two straight, skip a week or two and so I had to go to summer school to pass the seventh, eighth and ninth grades.

2. *My eighth grade year, my parents sent me to another school. They figured that would be a more disciplined environment, I would do better there and it was way to discipline for me and I did much worse there. They pulled me out after one semester and put me back in the public school and I stayed in public school until I dropped out. I dropped out pretty much...I had planned on joining the military since about the age thirteen and I had been in a junior ROTC program the whole time from age thirteen 'til seventeen. Then I dropped out at seventeen, went to a military preparatory program at a college in the city so that the military would...so that I would have enough college credits to be accepted by the military without having a diploma or a GED. And at seventeen, I joined the Navy.*
3. *I enjoyed grade school. I didn't like high school too much. I wasn't really a social person and I...what I got out of high school was the...the social activities in high school seemed to be more important to the students than the education was. I don't know if it was that particular high school that I didn't like or just high school in general. I think I would have felt the same about any high school that I*

would have attended. I don't think it would have made a difference which school.

4. *I was really frustrated. I was just frustrated. At the time I didn't think that they had anything more to teach me. I felt that if I had stayed in school until my senior year...in my mind it would have been nothing more than repetition of classes and subjects that I already knew and social preparation. That was what I got out of high school. That's what I thought it was. For high school. Junior high school. I thought that they had taught me everything that I felt that I needed to know by the ninth grade. For me to continue on...for me it would have been pointless and a waste of time. I was in a hurry, like every other kid, I was in a hurry to get out, to get out of school. Get into the world. I wanted to travel. I was unhappy at school. I was unhappy with the teachers, I was unhappy with the peer groups that I had. I was just arrogant and rebellious and wanted to drop out and join the navy and see the world.*

5. Bryan did not enjoy going to school at all. He felt that it was repetitious- that each year he was learning only what he had learned the previous year. Bryan was essentially bored with school and instead of suffering the boredom that school presented for him, he began to skip classes and only show up for the test. Eventually, days would lead to weeks and Bryan's frustration increased. He spent the summer in summer school three consecutive years. As a solution, his parents put him in another school where he dropped out after one semester. Bryan was too preoccupied with thoughts of travel and seeing the world and wanted to join the Navy as soon as possible. He saw high school as a hindrance toward the goals he

had set for himself.

6. *When I told my parents, they fought it. They...um...my father actually offered...he told me that if I would stay in school and finish high school, he would pay for scuba lessons which was something I had always wanted to do. I had always wanted to be a diver. And so I agreed. I said o.k., you pay for my lessons and I will stay in school. And he paid for the lessons and I stayed in school maybe another two semesters after that. I actually finished my sophomore year and then never went back. When the year was over...when the next year started I just didn't go. I refused to go. I was seventeen, I just said sign the papers. I had my parents... I just basically told them this is what's going to...I am not going back to school. You can either, I can either join the navy now, at seventeen with your permission or you can wait for a year and for a year I will do nothing until I am old enough to go on my own. So they agreed that I was planning on doing it anyway and might as well go ahead. It was my decision and there was no way around it and sign the consent form and so they did. They were very much against it. No one in my father's family ever graduated from high school. No one in his family ever got a college degree, never even graduated from high school. Our family, my father always wanted for his clan to be high school educated and then go on to college so it was a big deal for me to be dropping out. My sister had graduated and went on to college, my brother had graduated and went on to college. Both of them with honors, I was supposed to be the last one to complete the circle of having a whole family of high school graduates and I dropped out. They were very upset. They didn't want it at all. They were not supportive of me*

dropping out in any way. They tried and tried and I tried. You know, tutors, to try and find some way to make learning enjoyable and it just wasn't working. Not at all. They wanted me in school and they cared about my involvement in school. I just stopped applying myself. No more interest in it and so I would...ah...because I didn't have the attendance, I wasn't there to get enough grades to stay on the honor roll. I was doing what teenagers do. I was off drinking and running around with my friends and staying out all night and got in with a bad crowd and I was doing drugs at an early age and just your basic rebellious teenager.

7. Bryan's family was not happy about his decision to leave high school. Both of Bryan's brothers and sisters had finished high school and entered college and he would be the first not to do so. They finally became to frustrated in their attempts to keep Bryan in school that the bargained with him in order for him to stay in school. This bargaining with Bryan didn't work and he dropped out of school again, this time, not to return.
8. *My whole plan had been to join the military and I had planned on it at the time to make it a career so not having the high school diploma wasn't necessarily going to keep me from getting a job. The military would have accepted me with a GED had I gotten one at the time or they were going to accept me with the military preparatory program. So I wasn't concerned about finding a job without a high school diploma because I was going to be in the military for twenty years and it wasn't going to be an issue. So that wasn't on my mind. I wasn't concerned that if I dropped out I would never find a job. That didn't bother me at all because*

I had planned on being in the military for a career. That didn't work out. My experience in the military wasn't what I thought it was going to be and so I ended up getting out after four years and after that just sort of uh... by that time, to me, the diploma, getting the diploma didn't really make a difference. I still had always been able to find any job that I wanted up until that point, without the diploma being an issue.

9. *I had been wanting to drop out for a long time and either was not old enough to drop out or just kept trying and trying to finish it. You know stick to it, trying to stick it out and it just didn't happen. I had trouble with teachers, just basic personality conflicts with teachers, I didn't want to go, the thought of getting up in the morning would make me depressed. I hated it so much. Basically there wasn't anything to go back to.*
10. *The people that I hung out with probably had something to do with me not going to school I guess. A lot of them were already drop-outs and were just misfits and deviants and delinquents, you know, people that just didn't care about school. They had no plan for their future. They didn't care if they worked at Popeye's or pushed grocery carts for the rest of their lives. They didn't care. As long as they could drink beer and smoke grass. Those were the kind of people...most of them were older than me so I had that kind of feeling that you know, I am hanging out with the older kids and the older kids get the younger kid into a bad scene and you are kind of following along with them. So, out of trying to make my bones with my friends had a lot to do with me dropping out. It took me ten years to finally go back.*

11. *I dropped out in 1989 when I was seventeen, actually sixteen. Yeah sixteen I dropped out, that's when the legal age to drop out was sixteen and then as soon as I turned seventeen, I signed the papers to join the military. Ten years later I went back to get the GED because I ...by this time I was married and it was beginning to make a difference in finding a career. I wanted to join the fire department and in order to join the fire department you had to have a high school diploma or have a GED. Before you can even take the Civil Service Exam. So that's what I planned to do was to join the fire department so I had ...in order to do that you have to have a GED. So I went and I got my GED.*
12. Bryan's return to school was motivated by his marriage to a woman with a child. He knew he would have to play a big part in supporting all three of them and he wouldn't be able to do that with miscellaneous jobson construction sites. Having a GED meant a difference in finding a job that would support him and his family. Even Civil Service jobs requested a GED before taking the test and thus receiving the GED became a priority almost ten years after leaving school.
13. *But until then, I spent ten years doing a lot of nothing. After I got out of the military, I had a bunch of money saved up and ...from being out at sea and having nowhere to spend it, so you have a bunch of money saved up. I went to Mexico for about a month. Pretty much all I did from '94 until '97 was tend bar and I would go from California and I would work a couple of months in New Orleans, save a bunch of money and I would go out to California, spend it, for a couple of months come back and do that back and forth about three times a year every year. I did that until '97 when I got married. Then I got into construction work and did*

construction work. That's what I was doing when I got my GED. I am still doing construction work but I am registered to start at the university in the fall. Actually in June but I will probably wait until the fall. So now my goals are to go to college and I am not really sure. I don't have a specific career or field yet so I am working on spending eight years and absorbing education. I would like to be able to take a nice vacation after I graduate from college. That would be my first goal after college – a vacation. I don't know. It is sort of open ended. I would like to do something that is not terribly boring but I am not sure what it is that I want to do. I don't want to confine myself to one area and then put so much into it that I find out down the road that I don't like it. So I want to just sort of go into this open ended.

14. *I think having it, like having a diploma is kind of like having a ...step if you are looking to achieve all your educational goals, a college degree and whatever comes with a college degree. Like a diploma, you have to have it. It falls in line, you know. You can't have one without the other. You shouldn't have one without the other. You should go and get a high school diploma. You should get a GED and then you should go to college and get a college degree.*
15. *I felt like I should have gotten it a long time ago but that I had just been lazy and had never gone to get it. But I never had had a real reason to get it. But I was nervous because it had been a long time since I had been in a classroom or taken any kind of a test of any kind. I did a lot better on it than I thought I would. I sort of just got it. And the day I got it was great! I felt great. I got the highest score out of the whole group. 188 people. That felt good. I was surprised. I felt like I had*

done it. It really raised my self - esteem. I think it did. I did a lot better than I

16. thought I was going to do. I should have had more confidence in myself. I did this, why was I second guessing myself, I was pretty good at that.

17. When I look back I would have liked, I would have preferred to stay in high school and gone to a graduation with all the guys and girls that I went to school with. Not knowing anyone else in the room, there wasn't that feeling of being in a class, graduating with a class. I went in, one day took the test, sat in the classroom took the test, came back two weeks later and that was it. No classes. I enjoyed it though. Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I should have done it a long time ago and I could have had it. I could have started down this road a lot earlier. I could have gotten the GED a long time ago.

18. I am not nervous about starting college now. I am eager. It was taking the GED...that was the first test I had taken since high school, ten years earlier. Tests, papers, the clock ticking on you. I am glad it's done.

Reflections on Bryan

When Bryan looks back at the education he has had, he considers himself lucky to have a future now that he has received a GED. He feels that he should have started down the road towards a GED or even a high school diploma much sooner and that he has wasted time in the ten years of small jobs and small income. He looks forward to college with a new set of eyes and feels that the possibilities are endless. To him, the clock is ticking.

It was not until Bryan had gotten out of school far enough that he could look back on his life and see what education actually meant. The older he got, the more his lack of education

bothered him until he realized that it was the lack of education that was holding him back from all of the things he wanted to do. He made the active decision to go back to school and get a GED and from there, furthered his ideas and concepts about what his education really meant and enrolled in a four year college.

Getting the GED was an entirely different experience for everyone I had met. Each one seemed to learn something entirely new and altogether different than the experiences of the person I interviewed prior to them. I began to wonder how I would tie all of these experiences together what they common threads would be, what would have mattered to all of them as the most important and crucial moment in their lives? I began to question turning points and decisions. What were the critical ideas that it would be necessary to analyze?

Appendix 7

Human Subjects
Consent Form

1. Title:

Returning to School:

Narratives, Stories and Experiences of “High School Leavers” and how the General Education Diploma Affects Career Choices and Educational Opportunities

2. Project Director:

Lauren Tarantino

Work: 280-6605

3. Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to highlight the reasons students leave high school and their reasons for returning to receive a GED. Included in these narratives would be discussions about when the students returned to school, the experiences surrounding their return to education in order to get their GED and how they felt after receiving their general education diploma. It will look at their career trajectory immediately following the receipt of the GED diploma and narratives on educational and career opportunities and how they might have changed following receipt of the GED. The purposes of this research, therefore are:

*to learn about why students, including women and minority students, leave the traditional high school scenario for other opportunities.

*to contribute to a body of information about career choices and the effect of having a GED on choosing a career.

*to collect stories, experiences and narratives about education and different tracks men and women, regardless of ethnicity, may follow other than the traditional high school to university trajectory.

*to analyze these experiences and stories in an attempt to locate common reasons for leaving high school.

*to analyze these experiences and stories in an attempt to locate common reasons for returning to the education arena to receive a general education diploma.

*to discuss how receiving a GED has changed these students and if it has influenced their career opportunities positively or negatively

4. Procedures for the interview:

The student will be involved in interviews consisting of two individual interviews and one focus group interview. All interviews will be strictly voluntary.

5. Potential Risks:

There are no potential risks to the interviewee. However, if the interviewee should feel any discomfort at any time during the interview, they are free to contact the Project Director or Faculty Member listed in number 2 of this consent form.

6. Potential Benefits to you the interviewee or others:

There are no potential benefits to the interviewee. The only benefit this interview would have to others is to contribute to a potential body of information which may be used in the retention of high school students.

7. Alternative Procedures:

There are no alternative procedures. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw consent and terminate participation at any time without consequence.

8. Protection of Confidentiality:

All interviewees will be referred to as a pseudonym in transcripts and analysis. Never will the contents of an individual interview be discussed with anyone except for the interviewer's faculty advisor.

I have been fully informed of the above described procedure with its possible benefits and risks and I have given permission of participation in this study.

Signature of Subject

Name of Subject (Print)

Date

Signature of Interviewer

Name of Interviewer (Print)

Date

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Vita

Lauren Tarantino is a graduate student at the University of New Orleans in New Orleans Louisiana. She has a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction in Education and is currently working on a Doctorate in Adult Education also at the University of New Orleans. She has taught for seven and a half years at Delgado Community College in the fields of English, Developmental English, Developmental Reading, Human Development and English as a Second Language. She plans on working in the university or college setting with adult students in need of additional education to further their career plans.

She is also currently working on a related project involving graduate assistants, the experiences surrounding being a graduate assistant and how their assistantships affect their education and career related potential and relationships with other students, the faculty and the university system. This can help study the career trajectory of students based on education and educational opportunities.

She has written two non-published papers on adult education: "Andragogy vs. Pedagogy: The Education of Man" which focuses on the differences between teaching children and teaching adults and how the approach for teaching adults must depend on their past experiences, independent needs and individual backgrounds and how this theory of andragogy may also be adapted to better educate children and "Can Teaching Spelling Affect the Way Students Learn to Read and Write" which focuses on teaching spelling to adult learners who may not have been taught how to spell and the rules of spelling in the hopes of improving their reading and writing capabilities.

She has also presented at the International Reading Association Conference concerning the uses of technology in improving the way students learn and teachers learn to teach students about technology.