Deconstructing “Non-Traditional”:
What it Means to be a “Non-Traditional” Undergraduate Student

By

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to Leah, Roy, and Thalia. Thank you for giving me, and those who read this, the gift of your stories. Thank you for taking time to share your stories even when you had no time in the day left to give. Thank you for recalling memories, which were, at times, difficult to relive. Most of all, thank you for allowing me to be part of your journey.

This dissertation is my way of honoring and giving voice to your stories. Each story has forever changed me and I am thankful beyond words…

Acknowledgements

It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters in the end.
Ernest Hemingway

First and foremost, I give thanks to Leah, Roy, and Thalia for allowing me to be a part of their journey. It is through their strength and wisdom that I have a deeper understanding of the journeys they traveled. They have taught me about life and the ability to reflect, thus allowing me to reflect on my own journey and to give thanks.

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Throughout this journey, I often felt that if cancer didn’t kill me, this dissertation just might. Well, thankfully, neither turned out to be true. If anything, both having cancer and completing this dissertation made me stronger. I am changed in ways that I never anticipated at the start of this journey. I am better. I am stronger. And to everyone that was a part of my journey, I am forever grateful.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Educational researchers are interested in people and their learning experiences. They conduct research on a given phenomenon, and then make their understanding public and "subject it to scrutiny and criticism" (Anderson, 1998, p. 257). Each researcher works from a conceptual framework that influences his or her research choices including methods and interpretation of data, which ultimately determine their findings.

As an educator of nearly two decades, I believe in the power of stories. I believe that to better understand my students I must *listen.* In listening to my students, I learn about their lives. In other words,

> Educators are interested in life. Life, to borrow John Dewey's metaphor, *is* education. Educators are interested in learning and teaching and how it takes place; they are interested in the leading out of different lives, the values, attitudes, beliefs, social systems, institutions, and structures and how they are all linked to learning and teaching. Educational researchers are, first, educators, and we too are interested in people. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii)

This study emerged from my interest in stories. After teaching kindergarten and early childhood special education for 10 years, I was ready to undertake a professional endeavor that would challenge me in ways that I had not been challenged previously. The next step in my professional journey was training the educators who would soon be placed in early childhood classrooms. I began teaching undergraduate and graduate courses at a public state university[1] and I found the work very fulfilling. While I missed working with young children, I felt satisfaction knowing that I was affecting the lives of young children by educating both pre- and in-service teachers. At the same time, I began

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[1] I use pseudonyms for all geographic locations, names of participants, and names of institutions.

my doctoral studies, and so I was simultaneously a full-time educator and a full-time graduate student, although at different universities within the same state system.

I especially enjoyed teaching undergraduate students, most of whom were considered traditional students because they arrived at college immediately after high school graduation. My students were enrolled in the Early Childhood Dual Licensure Program at River State University (RSU) and were members of cohorts that contained approximately 30 students each. The undergraduate students were mostly White, middle class, female students who grew up within a few hours of this rural midwestern state university. Despite the lack of cultural and linguistic diversity among these undergraduate students, these pre-service teachers were learning to teach in contexts in which their students would be culturally and linguistically diverse. I began to realize that in many ways, these undergraduate students were not fully prepared to teach, in part because they had not reflected on who they were or how that might affect the students they were going to teach.

After four years of teaching in this program, I decided to make another change in my professional career. Although I had not yet finished my dissertation, I was offered a job as an assistant professor at a private midwestern university. The job allowed me to focus on my two areas of interest: literacy and early childhood education. As an instructor in a bachelor's degree completion program for students who had previously completed an associate degree in early childhood education, I worked with a culturally and linguistically diverse cohort of students during their first semester. The students in the program ranged in age from approximately 24-50 and were working full-time jobs in the field of early childhood education.

The student's first semester coursework was focused on personal narratives, and during class discussions I was increasingly amazed by the powerful stories these students shared. I realized that these students were very different than the "traditionally" aged students with whom I was working at the state college. I also realized that most of these undergraduate students had already been working in the field of early childhood education for many years, and thus had an experiential knowledge of young children that my former (traditional) undergraduate students did not have.

I also recognized that the students found the coursework and written assignments quite challenging; most had never had to complete formal writing assignments in their previous studies at the technical college. However, many students were fluent in a language other than English (LOTE).[2] As an instructor, I began to note the challenges students were facing and the supports students were using to navigate the program, and I noticed that students seemed to become more confident as they progressed through the program. I also noted that that for them being a student wasn't easy because the university in which they were enrolled seemed more tailored to meet the needs of "traditional" students, while "non-traditional"[3] students were often marginalized and treated as "other."

As a new faculty member, this situation disturbed me and I started to advocate for my students. Rather than viewing students from a deficit perspective, I was in awe of

[2] I consciously chose the phrase "Language Other Than English (LOTE)" rather than "English language learner" or "limited English proficiency" because I believe that the latter terms evoke the deficit perspective, which I am trying to argue against.

[3] Throughout the literature, when referring to students, the term "non-traditional" is represented in a variety of ways (e.g., "non-traditional," "nontraditional," nontraditional, non-traditional). I chose to use "non-traditional" because I view the term as a category, and I "trouble" the term later in this dissertation.

their life experiences and the gifts (such as bilingualism) that they brought to the program. Each student had lived a life filled with powerful experiences and as I listened and reflected, I grew as an instructor because I was able to better support my students, advocate for them, and build on the many positive qualities and life experiences that were part of who they were.

Despite the diversity among these students, the university placed them all in the same category: "non-traditional" student. I began to think about this term and what it *really* meant. I became frustrated because the more I searched for answers, the more questions emerged. Ultimately, I realized that the way I defined my students and the way the university defined the students were not the same. Not even close.

Statement of Problem

As I began to research "non-traditional" students, I discovered that rather than highlighting the experiences and knowledge adult students bring to higher education; colleges and universities often view these students from a deficit perspective. The customary classification of students as "non-traditional" and "traditional" extends beyond age differences (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). While "non-traditional" students are often considered the "antithesis" of the traditional student, they warrant consideration because in some contexts (such as community colleges) "non-traditional" students outnumber traditional students (Levin, 2007, p. 6).

Over the past several years, the number of undergraduate students has risen continually. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "between 2000 and 2009, undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions

increased by 34 percent, from 13.2 to 17.6 million students. Projections indicate that it will continue to increase, reaching 19.6 million students in 2020" (NCES, 2011, p. 34).

Historically, educational institutions have grouped undergraduate students into two categories: "traditional" and "non-traditional" students. Most previous research on undergraduate students is based on the model of a "traditional" student between the ages of 17 and 22; the curriculum and institutional culture was designed exclusively for this age demographic (Kasworm, 1990). The category of "non-traditional" student is a bit more complex because researchers have proposed a variety of definitions and interpretations of the term.

While I examine definitions of "non-traditional" students in detail in Chapter Two, the following characteristics are often cited when defining the term:

> Most often age (especially being over the age of 24) has been the defining characteristic for this population. Age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives. Other variables typically used to characterize "non-traditional" students are associated with their background (race and gender), residence (i.e., not on campus), level of employment (especially working full time), and being enrolled in non-degree occupational programs (NCES, 2002).

A closer examination of the existing definitions of the term "non-traditional" students is needed to problematize the label's use in categorizing undergraduate students. According to NCES (2002), the term is often an inaccurate label:

> The term "non-traditional" as applied to students who do not follow an educational path historically perceived as traditional—enrolling full time in college immediately after graduating from high school—has become a misnomer. A clear majority of undergraduates diverge in some manner from this path whether they begin their postsecondary education later in life, interrupt their education and return, or just take longer to progress due to reduced enrollment intensity. (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp)

If this description is accurate, then should the category of "non-traditional" student still be applied the same way it has been in years past?

While this is an important question, there is an even larger problem. I argue that much of the current literature provides an inaccurate portrayal of "non-traditional" students by using a deficit model to describe "non-traditional" students as underserved or underprepared. As Compton and colleagues explained,

> Institutions tend to focus on the obstacles adult students face when returning to school (such as finances, family obligations, and time constraints), as they have a direct impact on the role the institution recognizes for the adult learner, that of student. Some scholars would argue that adult learners are actually more capable of learning than their younger counterparts because of their ability to use their prior experiences in order to process new ideas and situations and that the obstacles faced could actually be seen as strengths for adult learners. (Compton, Cox, & Lana, 2006, p. 75)

Like Compton and colleagues, I believe that adult learners come to college with life experiences that are *assets* to their education and learning rather than deficits. Therefore, researchers must consider what students bring to college, rather than simply focusing on what they lack.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of three "non-traditional" undergraduate students in the early childhood (EC) program at Assisi University (AU). At the time of the study, 27 students in three cohorts were enrolled in the EC program, which was designed to target students from diverse linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. These three cohorts were selected because their members were "non-traditional" students enrolled in a bachelor completion program. All students in the program have already earned an associate degree in early childhood education.

Students were considered "non-traditional" based on age and their status as full-time workers, and because they were completing coursework during evening and summer sessions. This group of students was also selected based on their unique educational needs, including a lack of basic skills and limited English proficiency (Bernheimer, 2006).[4]

AU's early childhood program focused on preparing early childhood educators to provide developmentally appropriate instruction that supports young children's language and literacy development. Prospective students were those who had earned an associate degree from a local technical college and aspired to earn a bachelor degree and teaching license. The program was designed to run in a cohort model, with classes in the evenings, and allowed students the opportunity to complete their fieldwork in the current early childhood classrooms in which they worked. The unique program design supported the academic development of "non-traditional" undergraduate students, many of whom had been out of school for years or were unprepared or underprepared for the academic rigors of higher education.

The EC program was situated within the context of the larger university, a community that had historically catered to the needs of a more "traditional" student demographic. In the 2009-10 school year, AU reported a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3,070 students. About 28.6% of all undergraduate students were "minority" students (22.4% African American, 3.9% Hispanic, 1.8% Asian, and 0.5% Native American) In stark contrast, 85% of the undergraduate students enrolled in the EC program were "minority" students, including many who reported coming from a low

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[4] "Lack of basic skills" and "limited English proficiency" are phrases used within the larger university.

socioeconomic background. Latina students made up 54% of the total enrollment in the EC program. These statistics show that the demographic composition of the students in the EC program differed significantly from the demographic composition of the larger university; as a result, students and professors in the larger university community had certain perceptions of the EC program students as well as questions about who *these* students were and their ability to achieve success within the program. Many AU faculty and staff believed that "non-traditional" students did not belong or that they lacked the skills to be successful students. Many of these assumptions resulted from AU's history of serving a specific type of student, and many faculty were not willing to change their beliefs or teaching practices in order to meet the needs of *all* students.

The EC program at AU provided a context to examine the unique characteristics of adult undergraduate students and how they successfully navigate through a bachelor's degree program. This research perspective provides a counter example to the deficit perspective that researchers frequently adopt when discussing "non-traditional" students. Data from this study will provide invaluable information about adult students at the university level, who are often "invisible and silent" members of the undergraduate community or treated as "other" compared to traditional-age students (Donaldson & Renfro, 2004).

I began this study with two central research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of "non-traditional" students in an early childhood baccalaureate completion program? (2) What sorts of knowledge and experiences do participants in this study bring to AU?

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized as follows: In Chapter Two, I examine the characteristics and definitions of "non-traditional" undergraduate students and discuss the literature related to early childhood teacher preparation. In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the theoretical framework used for this study. In Chapter Four, I discuss the study's methodology and the advantages of using a narrative approach. The chapter concludes with an overview of the study participants. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven are the analytical chapters in which I share the story of each participant. Finally, in Chapter Eight, I present a cross-case analysis and discuss the implications of the findings for three groups: researchers, teacher educators, and institutions of higher education.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Childhood Teacher Preparation

In this chapter I first discuss the literature on early childhood teacher preparation, and then examine the characteristics and definitions of "non-traditional" undergraduate students. An initial search using the terms "early childhood teacher education" and "early childhood teacher preparation" yielded limited findings. The extant research is sparse and based primarily on studies by researchers at the University of California-Berkeley and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In this review I focus on two specific areas of the literature: 1) teacher credentials and preparation, and 2) the value of teacher educational qualifications.

Teacher Credentials and Preparation

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), the number of young children in early childhood programs has risen dramatically, with more than half of all 3 to 4-year-old children now attending some form of early education programming. The need for high-quality childcare continues to grow, and early childhood teachers play a significant role in caring for children. Despite the important role of early childhood education (ECE) teachers,[5] the ECE field is characterized by low entry criteria (specifically minimal education requirements), limited growth opportunities, poor compensation, and high turnover (Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008). Not surprisingly, there is a lack of high-quality ECE teachers. In 2001, no more than 50% of lead teachers in center-based early childhood programs have a four-year college degree (Early &

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[5] I use "early childhood education" (ECE) as a broad term describing the education of and programming for children from birth through age 8. ECE is one of several terms often used in the literature.

Winton, 2001). Further, because childcare teachers often earn less than half as much as comparably educated women in other jobs (Early & Winton, 2001), there is little financial incentive for ECE teachers[6] to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Although researchers and policy makers have often expressed concern about the lack of educational requirements for early childhood teachers, no national standards or certification processes have been established for teachers of young children. As a result, there is a great deal of variation in the level of teacher education within the United States. In 2007, in response to some of these concerns, Head Start (a national program serving children ages 3-5 and their families) mandated that:

> By September 30, 2013 at least 50% of Head Start teachers nation-wide must have a baccalaureate or advanced degree in Early Childhood Education or a baccalaureate or advanced degree in any subject, and coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education with experience teaching preschool children (U.S. Department of Health and Services, 2008).

As a result of this requirement and other policy changes, the demand for bachelor's degree programs in early childhood education has risen significantly. In addition, "interest in expanding access to higher education has been driven by concerns about ethnic and linguistic stratification with the early childhood workforce, and building a pipeline for diversifying the ECE field's leadership" (Whitebook et al., 2008). These demands as well as the current concerns in the field of ECE have led to a significant debate regarding the importance of having a bachelor's degree for early childhood teachers. However, the results of empirical research on the value of teacher educational qualifications are quite mixed.

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[6] ECE teachers include "all personnel whose primary role is to provide direct instructional services for young children" (Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008, p. 5).

The Value of Teacher Educational Qualifications

According to Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, and Kipnis (2009), arguments favoring higher levels of education have been based on studies that suggested quality of care and instruction in ECE programs is higher when teachers hold bachelor's degrees than when they do not. Bowman (2011) agreed, concluding that a large body of evidence shows that increased teacher education and training leads to "good outcomes" for children. While Bowman's language is somewhat vague, his assessment seems to reflect the general consensus among researchers in the field of ECE. Despite this consensus, the debate about the importance of a bachelor's degree and its impact on both teachers and students continues.

The literature examining the impact of teacher education includes a range of results. One group of studies suggests that a bachelor's degree is important and teachers with a degree are more responsive to children and provide more activities related to language development and emergent literacy than their non-degreed counterparts (Barnett, 2003; Howes et al., 2003). Similarly, some research has found that teachers with a bachelor's degree and some additional educational content focused on early childhood education perform better than teachers without these qualifications, and are considered to be qualified teachers (Barnett, 2003; Whitebook et al., 2001). These studies support the hypothesis that having a bachelor's degree and receiving specific training in early childhood affects the quality of childhood classrooms (Saracho & Spodek, 2007), and thus support of Head Start's mandate to require a bachelor's degree in the area of early childhood education.

Other scholars examining teacher education and classroom quality, however, have found no convincing evidence of an association between teachers' education and either classroom outcomes or children's academic gains. Scholars consistently cite the work of Early et al. (2007) in debates about the importance of a bachelor's degree for early childhood educators. Early et al. (2007) examined seven major studies of early care that attempted to predict classroom quality and children's academic outcomes based on the educational attainment of their early childhood teachers. Findings indicated largely null or contradictory associations, suggesting that "policies focused solely on increasing teachers' education will not suffice for improving classroom quality or maximizing children's academic gains" (Early et al., 2007, p. 558). While these findings do not imply that teachers' education is unimportant, they identify teachers' education and teacher quality as two separate but related constructs. In other words, the results indicate that many factors contribute to the making of a quality teacher, and while teachers' education may be one significant factor, many other factors should also be considered. In response to policies that require a bachelor's degree for all early childhood teachers, Early et al. (2007) argued that such policies *alone* are unlikely to yield significant results. Instead, the authors highlighted the need for an "increasingly multifaceted and nuanced" approach that includes a focus on teachers' education, training, and professional development.

Kelley and Camilli (2007) offered an alternative interpretation of the findings of Early et al. (2007), arguing that "the bachelor's degree effect is small but recognized in a wide assortment of studies" (p. 31). Using meta-analysis techniques, Kelly and Camilli (2007) found that outcomes in early childhood classrooms are more positive when teachers have higher levels of education, particularly a bachelor's degree.

In addition to these studies, a recent publication edited by Zigler, Gilliam, and Barnett (2011) devoted several chapters to the debate surrounding early childhood teacher credentials. Barnett (2011) contended that different methods, different specifications of the proposed models, and differences in educational levels all complicate the analysis of the impact of teacher education. Others have asserted that a degree is important, but not sufficient, and have concluded that teachers need both a bachelor's degree *and* more individualized professional development (Kagan & Gomez, 2011; Pianta, 2011).

Focusing on whether EC teachers need a bachelor's degree is problematic for some scholars, who have argued that the existing debate regarding the importance of a bachelor's degree restricts the issue to a single question about teacher preparation, quality and, child outcomes. Whitebook and colleagues (Whitebook et al., 2009) argued that this question is impossible to resolve using the extant research because these studies do not consider the type of training teachers have received and the effects of workplace environment on teaching practice.

In addition to the inconclusive findings about EC teachers, the data regarding the educational attainment of ECE teachers is also inconsistent. ECE teachers participate in a variety of formal education[7] programs of teacher preparation including two-year, four-

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[7] According to Kagan, Kauerz, and Tarrant (2008) formal education refers to "the amount of credit-bearing coursework a teacher has completed at accredited education institutions including 2- and 4-year colleges and universities" (p.26). In this dissertation study, I focus on reviewing the literature on formal education models because these are the types of educational programs the participants experienced. It is important to note, however, that some ECE teaching positions do not require a 2- or 4- year degree; many positions require only a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.

year, and bachelor's completion programs. Some studies have indicated that nationally, most ECE teacher preparation occurs at community colleges, with a limited number of programs at four-year colleges and graduate departments (Whitebook et al., 2005; Whitebook et al., 2009). Other research has shown that the educational attainment of ECE teachers varies according to the population sampled (Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008). For example, in a national sample of center-based teachers and directors, 30% had at least a bachelor's degree, 41% had an associate degree, and 30% had a high school degree or less (Herzenberg et al., 2005). In contrast, a study of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs found that 73% of teachers had at least a bachelor's degree, 14% had an associate degree, and 13% had a high school degree or less (Gilliam & Marchesseault, 2005).

These studies highlight a gap in the existing research, and indicate a need for further discussion of effective teacher preparation. Based on these findings, the most unanswered question for current policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in ECE is what type of education best prepares students to become skilled and effective teachers of young children (Whitebook et al., 2009).

"Non-traditional" Students

> In 1999-2000, 7.1 million adults age 24 or older constituted 43% of all undergraduates in U.S. institutions of higher education, compared to 5.73 million adult students enrolled a decade earlier (1989-1990). When defined as people 25 and older, adult students constituted 27% of all undergraduates in 1979-1980 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 1995, 2000). The growing proportion of adult undergraduates has become a significant source of enrollment and income for numerous institutions for which the proportion of "traditional age" students (typically defined as between 18 to 22 years of age) is shrinking. (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007, p. 27)

Unfortunately, despite the continual increases in the number of "non-traditional" students described above, adult students have had and continue to occupy a marginal status in research, policy, and institutional practices (Chao & Good, 2004; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Rather than highlighting the experiences and knowledge that adult students bring to higher education, students are often viewed from a deficit perspective that extends beyond simple age differences when defining students as "non-traditional" and "traditional" (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).

I have chosen to review literature that covers a variety of "non-traditional" students including community college students, undergraduate students, and adult learners; however, this study specifically examines the experiences of "non-traditional" *undergraduate* students. I have opted to use Kasworm's (1990) definition of adult learners to describe students who are 25 years of age or older and enrolled in an accredited academic program. In this section, I examine multiple definitions of "non-traditional" student, and show how these varied definitions often result in research that groups students from many different postsecondary educational levels in a single category of "non-traditional" students. A large portion of this literature focuses on "non-traditional" students in the community college context. Given that all participants in this study completed an associate degree at a technical college before pursuing their bachelor's degree, a broader examination of "non-traditional" students provides a helpful context for exploring the "educational biography" of each participant (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

"Non-traditional" Undergraduate Students

Initially, I conducted a broad review of the literature using the term "non-traditional undergraduate students." Consistent with the findings of Donaldson and Townsend (2007), the majority of the results included articles in academic journals with three distinct foci: undergraduate adult students, community college students, and higher education. In addition, articles that examined student services often appeared in counseling journals, and while counseling was not the intended focus, I concluded that it was important to examine these articles, at least initially, because they often centered on student support, an area I did plan to address. The search resulted in a broad group of studies on "non-traditional" students, including work that adopted multiple definitions and focused on a variety of contexts. I outline studies that examine the following pertinent topics related to "non-traditional" students: historical perspectives, definitions of "non-traditional" students, adult students and how they are constructed in the literature, and the barriers these students experience.

Historical Perspective

According to Ogren[8] (2003), "the term 'nontraditional' implies that these atypical students are new to higher education and that colleges and universities traditionally have not served people like them" (p.641). However, rather than positioning these "atypical" students as if they are out of place in higher education, educators must consider their stories in their entirety. Looking to the history of higher education highlights the rich historical experiences "non-traditional" students have had in the higher education system,

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[8] I cite Ogren (2003) extensively in this section because this work is one of only a few studies that examine "non-traditional" students from a historical perspective.

and illustrates the ways in which universities have served “non-traditional” students for many decades.

Normal schools played a central role in mass higher education in the nineteenth century, although the story likely is not familiar to many readers. Much of the history of higher education has focused on elite institutions, often ignoring the rich history of normal school students and their experiences. Just as today’s “non-traditional” students are often marginalized in the literature, normal school students—possibly some of the earliest “non-traditional” students in higher education—have also been ignored, yet an examination of their experiences can contribute a great deal to the literature.

Findings suggest that gender, socioeconomic status, age, and race are all factors that have consistently differentiated “non-traditional” students from traditional students both currently and throughout the past century (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Ogren (2003) conducted a socio-historical analysis of students who attended state normal schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and examined “normalites”[9] in relation to “non-traditional” students in the current literature. Like many of today’s “non-traditional” students, women were a considerable majority at state normal schools. The large population of women flocking to normal schools was “a result of their status as an ‘unwelcomed minority’ on many coeducational campuses and it reflected the normal schools’ mission of preparing students for the female-dominated profession of teaching” (Ogren, 2003, p. 643).

Along with accepting women, state normal schools granted access to students from a variety of ethnic, minority, and socioeconomic backgrounds; this practice resulted

[9] The term normalites refers to normal school students.

in normal schools developing a reputation for serving the poor. Many of the students came from working class families and traditional higher education was not an option. In addition to low socioeconomic status, most normal school students were older than the minimum state requirement of 15 or 16 years, and were considered "mature" in age (Ogren, 2003). These older students brought with them work experience; many had taught for several years prior to coming to school and others attended on a more "part-time" basis, alternating between working (often as a teacher) and attending school. Similar to today's "non-traditional" students, many normalites had to balance working and going to school because of financial limitations. Although these older students had significant life and work experience, they were considered unpolished and "rough around the edges." Ogren (2003) explained:

> Although work experience as well as age must have fostered a certain level of maturity among normal-school students, they were hardly worldly-wise. In fact, socio-historical examination of normalites reveals that many were quite provincial, or lacked sophistication. This significant characteristic is curiously absent from the literature on nontraditional students, but is unmistakable in accounts of normal schools. (p. 647)

Normal schools were credited with "bringing higher education to the people" (Herbst, 1989, p.142). Flexible admission requirements, campus and loan funds, tuition wavers, alternative payments for tuition, and the creation of a comfortable and supportive atmosphere for students ensured access for *all* students. Faculty included students in a "rich intellectual and social community and encouraged them to reach beyond their unprivileged backgrounds" (Ogren, 2003, p. 658). While not advertised as such, the unofficial mission of many normal schools was to serve "non-traditional" students.

"Non-traditional" students had a presence in higher education as early as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The findings of Ogren (2003) and other scholars cited

in this section serve as a reminder that current administrators and researchers are not the first to encounter "non-traditional" students who come to higher education with various backgrounds, needs, and experiences. Key findings indicate that, in the form of normal schools, higher education positioned itself in a service capacity, recognizing that all students deserved an education that was accessible and affordable, and serving students from very diverse backgrounds.

Unfortunately, this scenario began to change as normal schools attempted to improve their status by shifting to a (state) university structure. During this shift, the former normal schools seemed to lose their identities, including their mission of serving "non-traditional" students. The new universities marginalized the needs of "non-traditional" students. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the higher education system expanded in modern industrial societies, and transitioned from an elite institution to an institution serving the masses; this change led to a different, more heterogeneous, student population (Agbo, 2002; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Definition(s) of "Non-traditional" Students

Historically, institutions of higher education have viewed women as what Studdard (2002) termed "imposters" in the academy, revealing a "gendered phenomenon prevalent among student populations" (p. 24). Despite this "imposter" status, women represent an important target market for colleges and universities; however, until recently researchers had conducted few studies of this important segment of the student population (Shank, Winchell, and Meyers, 2001). Shank et al. (2001) estimated that 26% of the total population of college students consists of nontraditional women (p. 65), and Gershuny and Rainey (2006) estimated that 75% of nontraditional students are women (p.

124). Although a variety of studies have targeted “non-traditional” women (Bowl, 2001; Gershuny & Rainey, 2006; Jacobs & King, 2002; Shank et al., 2001; Studdard, 2002), many have not specified where the “non-traditional” women were undergraduate or graduate students.

While there is extensive literature targeting adults as “non-traditional” undergraduate students, there are some discrepancies between the definitions of the term “non-traditional” student. Most previous research on undergraduate students has been based on an understanding of a “traditional” student as an individual 17-22 years of age, and the curriculum and institutional culture has been designed exclusively for this age demographic (Kasworm, 1990). Historically, the main identifying feature of a “non-traditional” undergraduate student was age, with age 25 and over typically being classified as a “non-traditional” student (Kasworm, 1990). Other studies have defined “non-traditional” students using ages ranging from 21 to 45 and older (Bennett, Evans, & Riedle, 2007; Donaldson & Rentfro, 2004; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Gershuny & Rainey, 2006; Kasworm, 2003, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Donaldson and Rentfro’s (2004) analysis of the literature from 1990-2005 indicates that age is a “distinguishing characteristic of adulthood” (p. 4), with age 25 or more being the “most frequently employed age criterion” and age 24 the second most frequent threshold (p. 4). While age is overwhelmingly used throughout the literature to define “non-traditional” students, Donaldson and Rentfro (2004) found that others defined adult students as “being out of school for five or more years, being enrolled in degree completion or other specifically designed program for adults, or being defined as adult by others” (p. 4). Notably, the authors of over 25% of the articles in the adult

education literature simply labeled students as "adult" with no additional explanation (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2004), thus leaving the interpretation of adult undergraduate to the reader.

"Non-traditional" also has been used to refer to various student background characteristics including ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Kim, 2002). This use of the term has included the following characteristics: low income, first-generation college student, and employment status and is considered a more inclusive definition that takes into consideration the competing demands of work, school, and culture often faced by "non-traditional" students (Rendón, 2006).

Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that the term "non-traditional" student is not precise, and suggested that in addition to age, part-time status is also a common characteristic of this group of students. In 2002, The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a study of "non-traditional" undergraduate students; the organization identified "non-traditional" students as individuals who meet any of the following criteria:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school)
- Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year
- Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children but sometimes others)
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents)
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school) (Horn, 1996)

The NCES (2002) study and its “trait framework” is cited frequently in the literature on “non-traditional” students. This framework is used as a way to define “non-traditional” students using a continuum ranging from minimally “non-traditional” to moderately “non-traditional” based on the number of these characteristics present (Horn, 1996). Horn (1996) asserted that based on these criteria and continua, almost three-quarters of all undergraduates are in some way “non-traditional.”

Offering yet another definition, Levin (2007) extended the work of Horn (1996) to create a continuum of non-traditionality ranging from minimally “non-traditional” to beyond the customary “non-traditional” framework. Levin (2007) incorporated a new class of students that he termed “beyond the margins,” proposing:

> Welfare recipients, the working poor, and students with both physical and mental disabilities, and undocumented immigrants who are non-English speaking constitute a portion of that class of students who are either ignored in scholarship or merged with students who have distinctly different characteristics and face harrowing circumstances. (p. 30)

Levin’s (2007) extension of the “non-traditional” continuum was partly in response to the “trait framework” (p. 22) used by NCES (2002), which relies heavily on conceptions of individual traits to identity and define “non-traditional” students. Levin (2007) argued that the trait framework creates a binary in which “non-traditional” students with certain traits are differentiated from traditional students. Using this model creates a comparison in which “non-traditional” students are viewed as deficient in certain areas and in turn are “less likely to meet the standards, expectations and markers of attainment than traditional students who are not deficient” (Levin, 2007, p. 23). This type of deficit view recurs throughout the literature on “non-traditional” students, and Levin (2007) and others have

argued that this view must be changed, starting with the way "non-traditional" students are defined.

Over the past decade, there have been significant changes in the enrollment of "non-traditional" students. Historically, "non-traditional" students were a minority within an elite higher education system, but recently they have come to form a "new majority" (Levin, 2007, p. 313). This shift in enrollment is important because it emphasizes that "non-traditional" students are not only present, but also comprise a significant proportion of enrollment in undergraduate programs.

Belcastro and Purslow (2006) created an alternative definition to represent this new majority. The authors use the term new-traditional when one or more of the following are present:

> First, the student has responsibility for the care of another, such as a child or elderly relative. Second, the student is employed more than twenty hours per week. Third, the student is over the age of 25. Fourth, the student is independent of parents. Finally, the student has a delay between high school and college attendance. (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006, p. 2)

Other scholars have also altered existing definitions. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) called for alternative definitions to replace the deficit view of "non-traditional" students that refers to "socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the population" (p. 313). The authors argued for a more comprehensive understanding of the types of learners present in higher education, and identified three criteria critical to defining "non-traditional" students:

> *Educational biography*: The biographical stages of the—in the case of non-traditional learners—mostly winding path to higher education, and the varying significance and motivation of studying a person's life cycle.
>
> *Entry routes*: Access to higher education and time of enrollment: regular (that is, after secondary/grammar school with a school leaving certificate

> or a regular university entrance exam) or alternative (for example on the basis of work experience or after a special admission test for students without the conventional higher education entry qualification).
>
> *Mode of study*: The patterns and intensity of studying (actual rather than bureaucratic definitions of full-time or part-time) and the interaction between study and other major commitments, including in particular, work, domestic, and social. (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002, p. 313)

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) argued that these criteria are more effective than factors such as age because they reflect the changing needs of learners. In addition to these criteria, the authors argued for reform of the higher education system, including a shift from the classifications of students as "traditional" and "non-traditional" to a view of students as lifelong learners.

As the literature suggests, definitions of a "non-traditional" undergraduate student or an adult undergraduate vary across studies, often leaving it to the reader to discern the exact definition. Unfortunately, inconsistent and often vague definitions of "non-traditional" students make the study of this population quite difficult. This complexity further contributes to the construction of adult students as both invisible and silent.

Construction of Adult Students

Kasworm's (1990) review of past research perspectives yielded significant findings that have shaped the direction of future research on "non-traditional" students. Using a qualitative meta-analysis methodology, Kasworm's (1990) review of over 345 articles, books, papers, and research reports on adult undergraduate learners in higher education from 1940-1986 produced several significant findings. First, the majority of early research assumed simplistic distinctions between adult students and young adult students, and thus employed "dichotomous comparative samples" (Kasworm, 1990, p. 363) often based on age. The findings of these early studies indicated that adult students

were different from young students. Next, Kasworm (1990) posited that the majority of past studies drew upon frameworks developed from research on young adult undergraduates. Finally, Kasworm (1990) suggested that the study of adult undergraduates should reflect a continuum based on adult developmental theory. Kasworm (1990) further argued that although age was often used as the defining feature of a "non-traditional" student, chronological age was not the key variable. As discussed later in this dissertation, age was simply a reflection of certain critical characteristics connected to life experiences, educational experiences, sociocultural contexts, and psychological beliefs (Kasworm, 1990).

Despite the significant body of literature on undergraduate students, researchers have not paid sufficient attention to adult students as members of the undergraduate community (Kasworm, 1990, p. 366). Building on Kasworm's review of past research and findings through 1990, Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel (2000) found that 10 years later, adult undergraduates continued to occupy a marginal status in research, policy, and institutional practices.

Donaldson and Rentfro (2004) found a similar lack of research on adult learners, and noted that they are treated as "other" when compared to traditional-age students. Using content analysis, Donaldson and Rentfro (2004) examined articles published from 1990-2005 to determine the frequency with which adult undergraduate students were the focus of articles in the fields of adult education and higher education. The analysis provided "insight not only about how adult undergraduates are treated within the field, but also how the field constructs adult undergraduate students" (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2004, p. 2). Comparing the portrayal of adult undergraduate students in the adult

education literature to the portrayal of these students in the higher education literature yields noteworthy findings. In addition, the adult education literature included articles on adult students of color and women, while higher education journals contained few articles on minority students. These findings indicate significant differences in the fields of adult education and higher education regarding the scholarly discourse used to construct adult students and how they are portrayed in the literature.

Using content analysis, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) examined seven refereed higher education journals published between 1990 and 2003 to determine how adult undergraduates were treated in the articles. Findings indicated that the construction of adult undergraduate students was inconsistent, with researchers either treating them as different "but not positively different" (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007, p.45) or accepting but not embracing them. Based on their analysis, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) classified the scholarly discourse about adult undergraduate students as adopting one of four perspectives: invisible, acknowledged but devalued, accepted, and embraced (p. 38). The authors concluded that the field needs new research on adult undergraduate students that does not treat them as invisible or problematic based on their "non-traditional" status.

Next I examine the limitations of using a single term to describe such a heterogeneous population of students and further consider what it *really* means to be considered "non-traditional." "Non-traditional" students have been defined in many ways, including based on age, background characteristics, and risk factors. Age has been the characteristic used most frequently to define "non-traditional" students. However, this definitional approach has limitations. Despite being lumped into a single category, students 25 years of age and older do not represent a homogeneous group. Additionally,

students who are *under* 25 may also share characteristics with students who are *over* 25 (Kim, 2002). In other words, students under 25 may also work, have families, and/or come from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, traditional students may have much in common with their older counterparts, and could benefit from pedagogical approaches and services similar to those accessed by "non-traditional" students (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). In addition, using age perpetuates the binary of "non-traditional" and traditional student. Although grouping students by age may be an easy way to collect and analyze demographic information, it is not an effective way to define "non-traditional" students or assess their strengths and needs.

Although using background characteristics and risk factors to identify "non-traditional" students is more inclusive, this approach also has limitations. This method tends to result in a definition that is too broad. For example, the use of an expanded definition means that a significant majority of community college students are considered "non-traditional" (Kim, 2002). According to NCES (2002), "73% of all undergraduates are nontraditional in some way, making them the majority rather than the exception on today's campuses" (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, p.73). What does such a definition really reveal about "non-traditional" students? Can the term "non-traditional" effectively define such a heterogeneous population of students?

In addition to outlining the limitations of current definitions, Donaldson & Townsend (2007) concluded that scholars in this area of research view adult undergraduates as "different" and in need of "adjusting" to the institution and its traditional norms. In this discourse, "non-traditional" students are described as having significant needs, and these needs are also considered detrimental to the needs of

traditional students. This perspective views “non-traditional” students from a deficit perspective and does not acknowledge their strengths or the responsibility of the institution to make adjustments to meet the needs of *all* students.

Kasworm (1990) suggested that researchers must adopt a new perspective in order to capture the reality of the “transactional relationship between adult students and the undergraduate institution” (p.365). In this sense, the goal does not have to be *either* the “non-traditional” student *or* the institution changing, but rather having both work together to identify and build on the strengths of adult students, which can make a positive contribution to the academy. This additive approach would offer a very different perspective on “non-traditional” students that starkly contrasts with the current view of these students as “high risk” and/or weak academically.

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) also suggested that the field needs new models that incorporate adult students’ contributions to higher education, in which “difference would be seen as richness and multiple lenses would be used to capture the complexity of *studentness*” (p. 46). Such interpretations would position “non-traditional” students as having significant contributions to offer, rather than viewing them from a deficit perspective. Levin (2007) suggested using the term “new” “non-traditional” student to represent a large population that is “comparatively distinct” (p. 10). While this definition offers another perspective, continuing to use any part of the term “non-traditional” may still imply a comparison to “traditional” students, and thus encourage a deficit view in which “non-traditional” students still lack something that the other group has.

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) identified three criteria that they consider central to the definition of “non-traditional” students: educational biography, entry routes, and

modes of study. In this framework, each student has a unique educational biography that tells the story of his or her journey to higher education. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) argued that much can be learned through a consideration of these criteria. This perspective counters the deficit perspective by providing the opportunity to embrace "non-traditional" students and the knowledge and experience they bring to higher education.

In this section, I examined multiple definitions of "non-traditional" students and the limitations of these existing definitions. These definitions have contributed to students feeling marginalized based on their status as "other" when compared to traditional-age students. Next, I discuss the research on the barriers faced by "non-traditional" students.

Barriers Experienced by "Non-traditional" Students

"Non-traditional" students experience a variety of barriers that impact their college experience and performance. Cross (1981) described three types of obstacles experienced by students: situational, dispositional, and institutional. In this section, I use these categories to examine the barriers facing "non-traditional" students.

Situational barriers are situational aspects of a person's life at a given time. Barriers in this category are among the most common described in the literature and include issues related to family, employment, time constraints, and lack of college preparation (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Cross, 1981; Valadez, 1993). Financial barriers often are concerning for students, and rising tuition costs have resulted in increasing financial burdens for many "non-traditional" students. Specifically, a common concern is the notion of "financial poverty" (Bowl, 2001) among female students. Based on demographic and anecdotal data, Gershuny and Rainey (2006) posited that "adult women

students often have more than one child and may be the primary caregiver for up to four people while simultaneously [being] enrolled in classes and working forty hours a week as an employee" (p.124). These competing roles often contribute to financial concerns, and the cost of tuition is an added financial strain for many, especially for women from working class backgrounds.

Jacobs and King (2002) refer to idea of the "competing-role thesis" (p. 214), which states that the more roles one acquires, the less time can be devoted to role of "student," and thus having more roles often decreases the likelihood of an individual finishing college. Similarly, Gershuny and Rainey (2006) argued that attrition rates are higher among "non-traditional" women than among "non-traditional" students in general because of the "serious life issues" (p. 126) that these women face.

Dispositional barriers are those related to attitudes and self-perceptions, and include stress, adjusting to college life, and competing with younger students (Mercer, 1993). Dispositional barriers are cited in the literature less frequently due to the subjectivity of the focal issues. Despite the lack of research in this area, past studies suggest that dispositional variables are primary determinants of academic persistence (Cross, 1981; Mercer, 1993; Sorey & Duggan, 2008).

One of the most common themes in the literature is attainment and the low completion rates of "non-traditional" students (Horn, 1996; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Until recently, few studies have directly examined how completion rates vary by age, although Horn (1996) found that older students are less likely than traditional age students to complete college within five years. Similarly, other studies have found that "non-traditional" students are much more likely to leave college without a degree, with as

many as 50% of "highly nontraditional students in bachelor's degree dropping out within three years" (Dukakis, Bellm, Seer, & Lee, 2007). In general, roughly half of "non-traditional" students who depart institutions do so within the first year (Dukakis et al., 2007). The ability of students to navigate the college system influences a student's motivation to continue and graduate.

Enrollment status has also been identified as a key correlate of degree completion, with part-time students considerably less likely than full-time students to graduate (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Part-time students take longer to complete a degree program, have more limited interactions with instructors and fellow students, and are less likely to be eligible for financial assistance. Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) found a significant positive link between financial aid and educational outcomes among college students. Despite the negative factors associated with part-time enrollment, it is often the only option for students with limited financial resources.

Most research has continued to view adult undergraduate students solely in relation to younger students (age 17 to 22 years), even though the proportional size of this "non-traditional" group of students has grown (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Historically, "non-traditional" students (defined by age) have been identified as "high-risk," suggesting that these individuals have weaker academic skills than their younger peers (Kasworm, 2007). However, a study by Calcagnoa, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2006) indicated that

> …after controlling for differential enrollment patterns and cognitive mathematics ability, older students are more likely to graduate in each period (of the study) than younger ones. We show that age of entrance is not the barrier to degree completion that previous studies have shown it to be. (p. 23)

Justice and Dornan (2001) also found that "nontraditional aged college students perform as well or better than their younger counterparts" (p. 237). In addition, Bennett et al. (2007) showed that "non-traditional" students and traditional students differed significantly in academic performance, with "non-traditional" students having a higher GPA than traditional students. These findings overwhelmingly suggest that despite "non-traditional" students being viewed as having less academic success than their younger peers, they often perform at the same level, if not better than, their younger peers based on grade point average. In addition, researchers have found that the motivations of "non-traditional" age students are quite different than those of their younger peers, and these motivations often contribute positively to academic performance (Bennet et al., 2007; Justice & Dornan, 2001).

Institutional barriers consist of practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities. Scholars have described these "foundational needs" as the basic needs that must be met for students to enter and succeed in college (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). Examples of foundational needs include childcare, tuition funds, financial aid, access to varying delivery methods and models, safety, convenience, flexible and available services, accessible location, and compatible scheduling. The literature also contains discussions of institutional barriers specifically related to access including admissions procedures, placement tests, and support services that are difficult to access (Studdard, 2002; Valadez, 1993).

Institutional financial aid is often limited or lacking altogether for "non-traditional" students as many are limited to part-time enrollment because of their other life and familial responsibilities. In addition, several studies have indicated that the need

for and lack of access to affordable on-campus childcare contributes to the stress and financial strain experienced by many "non-traditional" female students (Bowl, 2001; Gershuny & Rainey, 2006; Jacobs & King, 2002; Shank et al., 2001; Studdard, 2002). Still other barriers may specifically impact first-generation, low income, or minority students including "Eurocentric curriculum, pedagogy that promotes passive learning or completion, or cultural insensitivity" (Kim, 2002, p.75). These institutional barriers, as well as financial concerns and the competing roles women assume, combine to create an experience that can be an emotional strain for "non-traditional" students.

Although it is important to consider how certain obstacles can hinder students' success in completing a college degree, it is also necessary to examine the ways in which these barriers may also be strengths. Compton et al. (2006) and other scholars have argued that much of the current literature provides an inaccurate portrayal of "non-traditional" students as underserved or underprepared:

> Institutions tend to focus on the obstacles adult students face when returning to school (such as finances, family obligations, and time constraints), as they have a direct impact on the role the institution recognizes for the adult learner, that of student. Some scholars would argue that adult learners are actually more capable of learning than their younger counterparts because of their ability to use their prior experiences in order to process new ideas and situations and that the obstacles faced could actually be seen as strengths for adult learners. (p.75)

Moving away from a deficit perspective requires viewing students as capable members of institutions who have many strengths that can contribute to their college success. Therefore, researchers must examine the dispositional factors that contribute to the success of "non-traditional" students. Many studies have found that self-advocacy is a critical factor in successfully navigating the college system (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Other studies have found a relationship between college student success and self-

regulating behavior (Ley & Young, 1998; Ochroch and Dugan, 1986). Byrd and Macdonald (2005) highlighted student strengths in connection to college readiness; the authors found that both life experiences and being older contributed positively to the development of the skills necessary for college readiness.

The results of studies that examine the successes of "non-traditional" students must be considered to serve as a reminder of the importance of a college experience that *promotes* student persistence (Sorey & Dugan, 2008).

Conclusion

> Adult education discourse plays an important role for the field, for practitioners and for higher education scholars in constructing the identity of adult undergraduate students. Are adult students "other," different, and more needful and deficient when compared to traditional age students? Or, are adult students individuals who also belong in the academy and enrich it by virtue of their presence? (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006, p. 6)

As this review suggests, the definitions of "non-traditional" students offer various interpretations of this unique population. Extant research that focuses specifically on "non-traditional" undergraduate teacher education candidates is lacking. In addition, given that the majority of both "non-traditional" students and teacher education candidates are women, research should focus on "non-traditional" female teacher education candidates. While few studies address this specific population, many educational programs are producing teachers from this pool of students. Knowledge of the contexts in which "non-traditional" teacher education candidates live, study, and work would offer valuable information regarding their experiences and how they achieve success.

Indeed, a crucial step toward creating teacher education programs that meet the needs and support *all* undergraduate students is gaining a better understanding of "non-

traditional" undergraduate teacher education candidates' lived experiences both in and out of school. Research must link each of the broad categories described in this paper and analyze them through the lens of "non-traditional" teacher education candidates. The focus must begin to shift from viewing both programs and students from a "traditional" framework to recognizing and valuing the heterogeneous mix of current teacher education candidates. Only then will the field move one step closer to a model that regards both traditional and "non-traditional" students as each having something valuable to contribute, and only then will the research offer insightful, critical information to teacher educators in a variety of institutions of higher education.

Furthermore, it is important to thoroughly examine the label "non-traditional" and consider whether the term appropriately describes the heterogeneous mix of teacher education candidates in current undergraduate programs. I discuss the implications of the findings for future research in the final chapter of this dissertation and further "trouble" the definitions of "non-traditional".

Chapter 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation, conceptualized through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), examines the lives of three "non-traditional" undergraduate students and the journeys they took to complete their bachelor's degrees in early childhood education. It is through this assets-based framework that I underscore the strengths and forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006) that each student brought to his/her educational career. Community cultural wealth is a CRT theory of empowerment that serves to counter the deficit view of "communities of color." Like Yosso (2006), rather than viewing students from a deficit perspective, I have tried to "instead focus and learn from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69).

Like Villalpando and Solórzano (2004) and Yosso (2005), I adopt a broader interpretation of the traditional definition of cultural capital. In other words, rather than narrowly defining cultural capital as White, middle class values, I argue that indeed there *are* forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups possess—forms that traditional cultural capital theory has neglected to recognize. The three "non-traditional" students in this study are each members of groups that are marginalized, sometimes in very similar ways and other times in strikingly different ways. Roy is a White male childcare teacher in a predominantly female workforce, Thalia is a Latina female for whom English is a third language, and Leah is an African American female and single mother of two children. Using an assets-based approach, I critique the assumption that "non-traditional" undergraduate students come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies, and instead

highlight the strengths and forms of capital that study participants bring to their educational experiences.

I began this study with two central research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of "non-traditional" students in an early childhood baccalaureate completion program? (2) What sorts of knowledge and experiences do participants in this study bring to their experiences? Embedded in these questions are issues that center on a deficit view of "non-traditional" students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this project emerged in response to the deficit view that currently defines "non-traditional" undergraduate students. Thus, I developed the asset-based framework for this study. Before introducing the study methodology (Chapter 4), it is critical that the reader understand the research and literature that informed the development of my theoretical perspective.

The following chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework for this dissertation. The topics covered include: (1) an explanation of the sociocultural lens used in this study; (2) an examination of the deficit perspective in education; (3) a discussion of cultural capital and cultural reproduction theory; (4) an introduction to critical race theory (CRT) and its application in higher education; (5) descriptions of community cultural wealth (CCW). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relevance of these topics to my study.

Sociocultural Perspective

> The ultimate border—the border between knowledge and power—can be crossed only when educational institutions no longer reify culture, when lived experiences become validated as a source of knowledge, and when the process of how knowledge is constructed and translated between

> groups' location within nonsymmetrical relations of power is questioned. (Gonzalez, 2005, p. 42)

I believe in the power of stories and view the lived experiences of my participants as integral to my creation of educational experiences that honor their knowledge and experiences. Ultimately, I study this topic through a sociocultural lens, one that views student identity as socially and culturally constructed.

Like Marshall and Case (2010), I view learning as "more than a cognitive process, needing account to be taken of broader aspects of the student learning experience which might not have been previously considered under the topic of 'learning'" (p. 492). Grounding my approach is a framework that "situates understandings of the undergraduate adult learner identity within a broader, postmodern framework of psychological, sociological and cultural orientations, framed within both constructivist and situated learning perspectives" (Kasworm, 2007, p.5). I believe that knowledge is constructed through interaction and experience, and that what is "true" for one person may not be true for another.

Thus, this study utilized an asset-based framework to explain the educational experiences and the journey of three "non-traditional" undergraduate students to the completion of their baccalaureate degrees in early childhood education. Rather than viewing the participants in this study from the deficit model frequently used to describe "non-traditional" students, I focused instead on the resources and assets participants brought to their educational experiences. By examining the lived experiences of these students, this study both recognizes and gives value to these resources in an attempt to begin to alter the deficit view of "non-traditional" students.

Deficit Thinking and Education

The phenomenon of deficit thinking has been present in educational research, leading to a focus on the inadequacies of students and the perpetuation of stereotypes among educators and policymakers (Delpit, 1995; Garcia and Guerra, 2004; Smit, 2012; Valenzuela, 1997). Deficit thinking developed as researchers and policymakers sought to explain school failure, particularly among economically disadvantaged ethnic minority students in the United States (Valenzuela, 1997).

Scholars such as Valenzuela (1997) have drawn attention to the "politics of difference" and the dichotomy that exists in schools:

> Immigrant and U.S.-born youth participate in the construction of "otherness" even as they are collectively "othered" by institutional practices that are ideologically invested in their cultural and linguistic divestment. The development of "we-they" distinctions in their social world reinforce[s] achievement patterns and schooling orientations manifest in cross-generational analyses. (p.18)

This is of particular importance because of the changing demographics of the U.S. population:

> More immigrants arrived in the United States in the past decade than ever before, such that there are now more than five million ELLs [English Language Learners] from all over the world attending public schools in the US, and speaking at least 460 languages (Kindler, 2002), reflecting an increase of 84.4% in this student population over the last decade. (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2004)

The US Department of Education predicted that ELLs will compose 25% of all public school students by the year 2025 (2006). Given the changing demographics of the nation, scholars must think critically about our students and consider the "ongoing predominance of an essentialized 'deficit' model which focuses on the gaps and the individual 'disadvantages' students are seen to have" (Marshall & Case, 2010, p. 492).

The deficit-thinking model, however, is not limited to society's view of those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Another population that is often viewed as deficient is adult undergraduate students, a category that often overlaps with other categories such as working class students and students of color. Because the "non-traditional" category and other student categories often overlap, it is difficult to determine what issues are related specifically to being considered "non-traditional" and what issues are related to race.

Despite the difficulty of the endeavor, it is imperative to consider the deficit view that often accompanies descriptions of adult undergraduate students. According to Smit (2012),

> Students arrive at higher education institutions and are told, in effect, that they stand very little chance of succeeding, and that they are lacking in a number of aspects and that they have to "catch up." They are marked and separated from the "mainstream" by virtue of their deficiency and their "other-ness" is reinforced. In these ways students are in effect alienated from the very system they have worked so hard to be a part of. (p. 373)

Historically, adult undergraduate students have been defined based on the perceptions of society, higher education, and research literature, which suggest a deficiency in performance (Kasworm, 1990). It is necessary to further extend the definitions of traditional and "non-traditional" outlined in Chapter 2 to focus more specifically on cultural and linguistic diversity among undergraduate students. According to Warren (2002),

> Traditional students are defined as ones who enter higher education shortly after completing secondary schooling and who are considered to be better prepared for higher education due to their prior socialization, schooling and attainment. By contrast, non-traditional students are diverse in terms of age and educational, class, language and cultural backgrounds. They are often from lower socioeconomic groups and some use English as an additional language. (cited in Smit, 2012, p. 370)

The definitions provided thus far serve as a sorting mechanism and attempt to categorize undergraduate students into two groups: traditional and "non-traditional." The students included in the "non-traditional" category are also frequently labeled "nontraditional," "underprepared," "disadvantaged," and in some places, "minority students" (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Smit, 2012; Warren, 2002). This type of terminology creates a deficit discourse of undergraduate students. Put simply, "students are referred to in terms of what they are not: *not* traditional, *not* prepared for higher education, *not* in a position of privilege or advantage (Smit, 2012, p.370).

Thus, scholars such as Garcia and Guerra (2004) have called for the "deconstruction of deficit thinking" (p.152) as a means of challenging existing stereotypes and developing more appropriate responses to diversity within the student body. Likewise, Smit (2012) called for an examination of the readiness of higher education to respond to a diverse student population:

> It is important that higher education grapples with ways in which to address the very real challenges faced by students from academically diverse backgrounds. Describing "disadvantage" primarily in terms of poverty or socioeconomic status gives an under-nuanced perspective. Employing a deficit model to frame student difficulties acts to perpetuate stereotypes, alienate students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in the barriers to student success. In the process, universities serve to replicate the educational stratification of societies. (p. 378)

Indeed, a crucial step toward creating a group of teacher education programs that meets the needs of and supports *all* undergraduate students, is gaining a better understanding of the nontraditional undergraduate teacher education candidates' lived experiences both in and out of school. The focus must begin to shift from the viewing both programs and students from a "traditional" framework to recognizing and valuing

the heterogeneous mix of current teacher education candidates. Only then will the field offer insightful, critical information to teacher educators in a variety of institutions of higher education, thus getting one step closer to a model that regards both traditional and nontraditional students as each having something valuable to contribute to the field of education.

Cultural Capital and Cultural Reproduction Theory

Cultural capital was defined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) as an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed and often inherited by members of privileged groups in society. Furthermore, scholars have suggested that "families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not have the privileged opportunities that families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds possess" (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2004). Researchers such as Yosso (2006) have argued that Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital "exposes White, middle-class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (p. 76). Put simply, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor.

Bourdieu (1977) argued that "schools and other social institutions legitimize and reinforce the values, behaviors, and practices associated with middle-class Whites, and, as a result, reproduce society by sorting classes into their predetermined positions" (Valadez, 1993, p. 31). In essence, this cultural reproduction model "attempts to link culture, class, and domination and argues that culture is itself the medium through which the ruling class maintains its position in society. Schools validate the culture of the ruling

class and at the same time fail to legitimate the forms of knowledge brought to school by groups not in power" (Valdes, 1996, p. 19).

Cultural/social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977) has been used to examine the lack of equal access and preparation for higher education within the United States. Scholars such as Apple (2004) have extended the theory to include social fields, "the way of thinking about education in the reproduction and transformation of various forms of capital and how education and these conversion strategies are situated within social fields of power" (p.180). Delpit (2006) critiqued the hegemonic aspects of schooling and asserted that power is distributed unequally among students, especially among those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She argued that "some [students] come to school with more accouterments of the culture of power already in place—'cultural capital' as some critical theories refer to it—some with less" (p. 28).

Delpit included the following five descriptions in her explanation of the "culture of power":

1. *Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.* These issues include: the power of teacher over students; the power of publishers of textbooks and of developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world presented; the power of the state in enforcing compulsory schooling; and the power of an individual or group to determine another's intelligence or "normalcy." (p.25)

2. *There are codes or rules for participating in power, that is, there is a "culture of power."* The codes or rules relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, and ways of interacting. (p. 25)

3. *The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.* Success in institutions such as schools and workplaces is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power. (p.25)

4. *If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.* Members of any culture transmit information implicitly to co-members. However, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down. (p.25)

5. *Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.* For many who consider themselves members of liberal or radical camps, acknowledging personal power and admitting participation in the culture of power is distinctly uncomfortable. On the other hand, those who are less powerful in any situation are most likely to recognize the power variable most accurately. (p.25)

Consistent with the literature examined thus far, the "non-traditional" students in this study were members of a university that was originally designed to meet the needs of traditional students. In many ways, these "non-traditional" students were often viewed as "others" and individuals who were not privy to the same types of schooling as their traditional counterparts. Further, power and access were often unevenly distributed among the students at the university, with "non-traditional" students having little power or access to even the most basic kinds of support services that would help them successfully navigate their undergraduate studies. Ultimately, I felt the need to examine the "contradictory ways in which universities operate with their potential to oppress and marginalize while also emancipating and empowering (Solórzano & Villalpando, p. 1998).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) emphasizes the socially constructed nature of race by examining the ideology of racism (Yosso, 2005). CRT draws from a variety of literatures including areas such as law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Matsuda (1991) defined CRT as:

> The work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination. (p. 1331)

Scholars such as Closson (2010) believe:

> CRT, alternately referred to as theoretical and/or interpretive framework as well as a movement (Monaghan, 1993; West, 1995), draws together premises and strategies derived largely from critical theory, but related directly to racism, and is being increasingly used by educational scholars to analyze education (Dixson & Rousseau 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). (cited in Closson, 2010, p. 264)

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) extended this definition, arguing that

> CRT advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal in opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin" (p. 25).

Critical race theory (CRT) challenges the dominant discourse on race, gender, and class as it relates to education by examining how theory, policy, and practice work to subordinate people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, Solórzano, 1998). CRT has gained prominence as a framework that education researchers use to examine racial subordination (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), with CRT theorists in education seeking to explain the continued inequities that people of color in experience in educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The goal of CRT in education is to "develop a theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical strategy that accounts for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 472).

According to Solórzano et al. (2005), at least five defining elements form the basic assumptions, perspectives, research methods, and pedagogies of CRT: the centrality of race and racism, a challenge to dominant ideology, a commitment to social justice and praxis, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and a historical context and interdisciplinary perspective (p. 274).

The centrality of race and racism. The most basic premise of CRT is that race and racism are defining characteristics of U.S. society. With respect to higher education, race and racism are embedded in the structures, practices, and discourses that guide the daily practices of universities (Taylor, 1999). At the individual level, race and racism are central constructs that intersect with other components of identity such as language, generation status, gender, sexuality, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Valdes, 1996). For people of color, each of these elements of identity may relate to other forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1993), yet no dimension can fully explain the others.

The challenge to dominant ideology. In the field of higher education, CRT challenges universities' traditional claims of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. The theoretical framework reveals how the dominant ideology of color blindness and race neutrality act as camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society (Calmore, 1992; Delgado, 1989)

A commitment to social justice and praxis. CRT entails a fundamental commitment to a social justice agenda that struggles to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, generation status, and class subordination (Matsuda,

1996). In higher education, CRT is conceived as a social justice project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000).

A centrality of experiential knowledge. CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination. The application of CRT to fieldwork in higher education requires that researchers center the experiential knowledge of people of color and view it as a resource stemming directly from their lived experiences. This experiential knowledge can be gathered via storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos, testamonios,* chronicles, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Carrasco, 1996, Delgado, 1989, 1995; Olivas, 1990).

An historical context and interdisciplinary perspective. CRT challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most educational research. In the field of higher education, CRT scholars use interdisciplinary methods to analyze race and racism in both historical and a contemporary contexts (Delgado, 1984, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Harris, 1994; Olivas, 1990).

These themes form a “theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the way race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). This framework is useful in exploring the ways in which “race and racism affect the structures, practices, and discourses within higher education” (Solórzano et al., 2005). Several educational researchers have employed CRT, in part as a way to critique deficit thinking, one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2004; Yosso, 2005).

Researchers seeking to examine the ways in which race and racism play out for particular groups have developed subareas of critical race theory (e.g., AsianCrit, LatCrit, and TribalCrit) as a way to "challenge civil rights activists to rethink the ways they conceptualize race and civil rights" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 101). Iglesias (1997), a legal scholar in the field of LatCrit theory, defined LatCrit as the exploration of

> how Critical Race Theory might be expanded beyond the limitations of the black/white paradigm to incorporate a richer, more contextualized analysis of the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of white supremacy, particularly as it impacts Latinas/os in their individual and collective struggles for self-understanding and social justice. (p. 178)

Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) in education is a subarea of CRT that serves as "a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that affect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 479). Importantly, LatCrit is not contrary to CRT, but rather "is supplementary, complementary to CRT, and should be utilized as a 'close cousin related in real and lasting ways'" (Valdes, 1998, p. 26). LatCrit research that identifies the role of race, racism, and racialized experiences of undergraduate students in higher education is particularly pertinent to the current study (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano et al., 2005).

Community Cultural Wealth

Another subarea of CRT that is of particular interest to the current project is the concept of community cultural wealth. Yosso (2006) created the term "community cultural wealth" to counter traditional deficit views, and to describe a CRT-based lens through which to "see" ways in which "communities of color" nurture cultural wealth.

Yosso's (2005) framework includes six forms of capital that overlap to create a community of cultural wealth honoring the assets of people of color. From a CRT perspective, "communities of color" nurture cultural wealth through aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Yosso, 2005). The following are the forms of capital as described by Yosso (2005):

> *Aspirational capital* is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without objective means to attain those goals. (p.77)
>
> *Linguistic capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. (p.78)
>
> *Familial capital* refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition (see Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002). It engages a commitment to community well being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship. (p.79)
>
> *Social capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions (see Gilbert, 1982; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). (p.79)
>
> *Navigational capital* includes the skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. (p.80)
>
> *Resistant capital* refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Delgado Bernal, 1997; Freire, 1970, 1973; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This form of cultural wealth is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color (Deloria, 1969). (p.80)

In his delineation of these six forms of capital, Yosso (2006) emphasized the knowledge, skills, resources, and abilities that students of color and their communities

possess. Yosso's work counters traditional interpretations of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and the deficit thinking its adherents have often attached to the concept. Yosso's (2006) forms of capital affirm that all communities have cultural capital, while Bourdieu's class-based model refers to the "specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups" (p.75). Ultimately, community cultural wealth is a theory of empowerment that recognizes communities of color as "places of strength," and thus shifts the focus away from a deficit view and toward communities' cultural assets and wealth (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005).

Relevance of Critical Race Theory to the Dissertation

As I developed the theoretical framework for this dissertation, I was drawn to critical race theory, and more specifically to the community cultural wealth perspective (Yosso, 2006), because of their critiques of deficit perspectives in higher education and because many "non-traditional" students are also students of color. In the following section I explain the relevance of critical race theory to my study. The topics covered include: (1) moving away from a deficit perspective; (2) acknowledging that race matters; (3) "troubling" hegemonic notions of education; and (4) viewing experiential knowledge as an asset.

Moving Away from a Deficit Perspective

Thus far, I have introduced what I perceive to be a deficit view of "non-traditional" students. I have argued for a call to "trouble"[10] existing terms such as "'non-traditional' student," because like Smit (2012), I believe that using these terms "presumes

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[10] I am grateful to Carl Grant for challenging me to "trouble" the term "non-traditional student."

some typology of an ideal student attending the university" (p. 374). And like Donaldson and Rentfro (2006), I have pondered the two following questions: "Are adult students 'other,' different, and more needful and deficient when compared to traditional age students? Or, are adult students individuals who also belong in the academy and enrich it by virtue of their presence?" (p.6). In response to these questions, I countered the assumption that "non-traditional" undergraduate students come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies. I chose to adopt the CRT framework because of its use as an analytical lens to critique the deficit perspective prevalent in U.S. classrooms and institutions of higher education. I drew on CRT, and in particular community cultural wealth, to highlight the strengths and forms of capital that study participants enacted throughout their educational journeys.

Acknowledging that Race Matters

I was also drawn to critical race theory because "as a form of oppositional scholarship, CRT challenges the experience of Whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color" (Taylor, 1988, p. 122). I understood that residents of the United States live in a society in which they are surrounded by forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin. Simply put, I recognized that race matters, and thus I would need to think about race and its consequences deeply as I considered the students in this study and their experiences.

Thus, while the three students in this study all belonged to the category of "non-traditional" student and were in some ways very similar (e.g., they were similar ages, and all worked full-time while attending school and struggled to pay tuition), they were also

different in significant ways (e.g., they belonged to different racial groups, were different genders, and spoke different language). Thus, I needed to consider the journey of a White male in relation to the journey of a Latina female or an African American female. I needed to analyze the role race played in these students' educational journeys. Ultimately, I wondered if this type of analysis would be complicated by the fact that two of the students in the study were considered both "non-traditional" students and students of color, making it difficult to separate which issues were related specifically to race and which were related to being "non-traditional."

"Troubling" Hegemonic Notions of Education

Like Solórzano and Yosso (2002), I view CRT in education as "a framework, or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (p. 25). As a researcher, I also understand CRT an analytical tool that I can use to "explore ways in which 'race-neutral' laws and institutional structures, practices, and politics perpetuate racial/ethnic educational inequality" (Solórzano et al. 2005, p. 274). Furthermore, like Kress (2011), I drew on the tenets of CRT "to trouble existing hegemonic notions of education" that existed at Assisi University (AU), and I utilized CRT as a tool to better understand "the dialectical process which is represented by the individual, the collegiate environment, and the broader world of the learner" (Kasworm, 2007, p. 5).

Ultimately, I found the CRT framework useful in "pointing out contradictory ways in which universities operate with their potential to oppress and marginalize while also emancipating and empowering" (Solórzano and Villalpando, 1998). While Assisi

University in some ways marginalized Roy, Leah, and Thalia, ultimately, all three students were also "empowered" by their experience at AU.

Experiential Knowledge as Assets

One of the main reasons I adopted CRT as my theoretical framework was that, like Villalpando (2004), I considered the experiential knowledge of my participants to be "an asset, a form of community memory, a source of empowerment, not a deficit." (p. 46) Critical race theorists (CRT) in the field of education seek to explain the continued inequities that people of color in experience in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2006). Like other educational researchers who have employed CRT, I view the knowledge and experiences of my participants as strengths. I drew explicitly on the lived experiences of my participants, using a narrative approach to honor their stories and give voice to those who are so often silenced. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), CRT "recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (p. 26).

In an effort to counter the deficit perspective, I argued for the need to utilize an asset-based approach in which individual students' knowledge and experiences are valued and validated. The validity of this framework emerged from my initial experience working as an assistant professor in the Assisi University Language and Literacy Department. As I worked with the undergraduate students in the early childhood program, I began to recognize the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that my students brought to AU. This recognition was the impetus for me to use an asset-

based framework to more closely examine the experiences of my students so that I might be better able to support their learning.

In this study, I draw on the tenets of CRT to counter the deficit view of "non-traditional" students frequently adopted by institutions of higher education. I employ an asset-based approach to "non-traditional" students, in which I highlight what they *bring* to higher education, rather than what they *lack*.

Chapter 4: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Contributions of a Narrative Approach

> The phrase experiencing the experience is a reminder for us that narrative inquiry is aimed at understanding and making meaning of experience. This is the baseline "why" for social science inquiry. Why use narrative inquiry? Because narrative inquiry is a way, the best way we believe, to think about experience. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80)

Life is composed of experiences, and each of these experiences shape individuals' understandings of who they are and how they function in the world. Experiences are the stories people live. In order to understand people, researchers must first listen to, and try to make sense of, their stories.

Narrative inquiry, a methodology that "gathers, analyzes, and interprets the stories people tell about their lives," is based on human stories and experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 1). Over the last two decades, narrative inquiry has gained momentum as a research methodology in the field of education, as well as other disciplines (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narratives, or stories, are used in a variety of qualitative approaches such as autobiography, autoethnography, biography, personal narratives, life histories, oral histories, and memoirs. According to Chase (2000), narrative inquiry can be characterized as "an amalgam of interdisciplinary and analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (p. 58). An interest in these "biographical particulars" (Chase, 2000) led to my choice to employ a narrative approach in this study. More specifically, I utilized life histories (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) to gain an understanding of "non-traditional" students and their journeys to obtain bachelor degrees.

Case Study

Because I came to this study with the intent to give voice to my participants and their stories, I present each participant's story as a case study. As Stake (2005) suggested, "case study is… a choice of what is to be studied" (p. 443). As a researcher, I have made choices about what I will study and how I will present each case. Case study is well suited to the current project because the focus is the lived experiences of three "non-traditional" students and it was important to honor each story by sharing a detailed account of each participant's educational biography and life experiences.

In the analytical section, I devote a chapter to each of the three participants and their unique stories. I present a case study as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), as a life history in which I "conducted extensive interviews with one person for the purpose of collecting a first-person narrative" (p. 63). Following the individual cases, I provide a cross-case analysis to explore how the cases converge and diverge. Finally, based on the findings, I outline how practitioners and policymakers can better support "non-traditional" students, and thus the project contributes to both the programmatic and institutional levels of the field of education.

Life History

Life history refers to an extensive autobiographical narrative, either written or oral, that covers all or most of a life (Chase, 2000; Cole and Knowles, 2001; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Linde, 1993). According to Atkinson (1998), life history, or the telling of an individual's own stories in her or her own words, is a movement toward "acknowledging the importance of personal truth from the subjective point of view" (p. 232). Cole and Knowles (2001) argued that life history is about

> …gaining insights into the broader human conditions by coming to know and understand the experience of humans. It is about understanding a situation, profession, condition or institution through coming to know how individuals walk, talk, and work within that particular context. It is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place. It is about comprehending the complexities of a person's day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out so that insights into the broader collective experience may be achieved. (p. 11)

Essentially, life historians examine "how individuals talk about and story their experiences and perceptions of the social contexts they inhabit" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 1).

Life history is about understanding people in their own contexts. One of the unique features of life history is the personal nature of the research process. Life history research is more personal than other types of qualitative methodologies and at times may be quite intrusive for the participant. Atkinson (1998) stated that the "dialogical, discursive" (p. 117) nature of life history distinguishes it from other forms of qualitative research. Another feature of life history is the practical orientation of the methodology. Because of the personal nature and connection to a person's story and experience, life history can often place theoretical understanding in a more practical light, and bridge gaps between micro-level perspectives and macro-level perspectives (Atkinson, 1998). Cole and Knowles (2001) asserted that life history is individually and contextually shaped within each discipline and through the epistemological orientation of the researcher and their professional membership within their field of study. Finally, life history examines individual stories while situating these experiences within a specific social, political, and cultural context, which produces a broader lens through which sense-making occurs.

To use life history as a methodology, it is necessary to first consider the impact of a recent philosophical shift, as well as the practical and personal elements inherent in the life history methodology. The work of qualitative researchers is frequently viewed as unscientific and subjective, and what constitutes valid research is often based on "traditional" views of research embedded in a modernist paradigm (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Webster and Mertova (2007) posited that "modernism is associated with the scientific understanding of truth and knowledge, claiming that there is one ultimate, objective truth; and post-modernism relates to the human-centered holistic perspective, maintaining that there are subjective, multiple truths" (p. 11).

Dhunpath (2000) argued that positivist approaches strip research of the "rich tapestry of human experience and emotion" (p. 548) and do not attempt to understand the narrative components in which they are rooted. Recent years have seen a philosophical shift toward a postmodern view that stresses interest in individuals and their experiences. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) asserted, the move from objectivities to subjectivities brings new prospects, as well as new dilemmas, for life history work.

Sikes (1995) noted that "life history methodology explicitly acknowledges the existence of multiple, and possibly conflicting, personal realities and perspectives while also recognizing the role of the researcher in selecting the field of study and interpreting the data" (p. 122). The defining characteristics of life history work include both practical and personal elements related to the research process, as well as an emphasis on subjectivity.

Subjectivity is a defining characteristic of various forms of narrative inquiry and has been addressed by scholars as it relates to life history research (Alvermann, 2000;

Atkinson, 1998; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Goodson and Sikes (2001) stated that all researchers are seeking to "interpret and re-present an aspect of the world, whether that be of the physical, objective world, or of a subjective, lived experience" (p.48). Rather than claiming to represent "truth" or "reality," life historians offer an *interpretation* of the teller's experience. The subjective element of this process is at odds with the objectivist perspective inherent in most quantitative research approaches.

The subjectivity involved in life history research raises questions about the nature of "truth" (Alvermann, 2000; Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Chase, 2000; Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Life history is often viewed as an artistic research approach, one that invites creativity on behalf of the story teller, allowing the teller to construct their lived experiences in a way that makes sense to them. Goodson and Sikes (2001) argued that the role of the life historian is not to determine "what is *truth* or make unrealistic claims for representing *reality*" (p.48), but rather to present an interpretation that explicitly explains "influences that may have colored both the teller's story and their interpretation of it" (p. 48). The postmodern era has changed the understanding of truth from an objective knowledge to a much more subjective notion that is controlled by the teller of the story.

Ultimately, I study this topic through a sociocultural lens, one that views student identity as socially and culturally constructed. Grounding my approach is a framework that "situates understandings of the undergraduate adult learner identity within a broader, postmodern framework of psychological, sociological and cultural orientations, framed

within both constructivist and situated learning perspectives" (Kasworm, 2007, p. 5). I believe that knowledge is constructed through interaction and experience, and that what is "true" for one person may not be true for another.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I am the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009), but I possess biases that could impact the study. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or "subjectivities," I will "write myself into" the research, on the assumption that providing personal background information will enhance the rigor of the work by making potential biases explicit (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

As an assistant professor at AU, I had an existing relationship with each of the three study participants (Roy, Thalia, and Leah) because I served as an instructor for at least one of their classes during their program. While I did not teach any of the participants during the data collection phase of the dissertation, the teacher/student dynamic had already been established and did not disappear once we left the classroom. The relationships I developed with each of these three students were characterized mutual respect. The students wanted to participate in this study for two reasons: first, they seemed eager to help a fellow student complete a project, and second, they wanted to share their stories. I often connected with my students by sharing my own stories of being both a full-time teacher *and* a full-time graduate student. This experience gave us a lot of common ground and helped us to develop strong relationships and respect for one another. Indeed, the researcher/participant relationship seemed to further strengthen the existing relationships, resulting in "a narrative that combined views from the participants'

lives with those of the researchers' life, culminating in a collaborative narrative" (Clandinin, 2006).

Life history research relies on researcher/subject relationships characterized by intimacy and authenticity, rather than the sterility. Throughout the relationship, the researcher maintains a commitment to the participant; the researcher is not there to judge, but rather to make connections (Atkinson, 1998). This intimacy and authenticity, coupled with the personal and humanistic qualities of the life history methodology, create a relationship that is dynamic, offering endless opportunities for the relationship and research to be mutually constructed.

My goal was to better understand the lived experiences of my participants. I was a new faculty member at AU and thus sought to understand both the program and the students' experiences so I could better support students and their learning. I also wanted to serve as an advocate for "non-traditional" students within a larger university context that all too often positioned these students as "other" and viewed them from a deficit perspective.

Along with these intentions, I came to the research with my own biases and assumptions. A guiding principle of life history research is reflexivity, or the notion that the background and biography of the researcher influences any analysis and interpretation in research (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In other words, although the story being told is that of the participant, the researcher's lived experiences are never separate from his/her participation in the research process. These experiences always shape the lens through which the researcher interprets the story being told. As a White middle-class researcher, I do not claim to be an insider or to truly and completely understand the experiences of

my participants as they navigated an undergraduate experience that was very different than my own. Indeed, I do not know what it is like to be the sole male in a predominately female work force, to be someone who emigrated from another country, or to be a single mother of two children. I do not pretend to have these experiences in common with my participants.

Instead, I approach my research from a perspective based on the following roles, experiences, and attitudes: my own experience teaching in the field of early childhood for 10 years in Lake City; my position as both a full-time graduate student and a full-time teacher; my role as an AU faculty member seeking to understand her students and their experiences in order to better support their learning; my concern about the deficit perspective often used to characterize "non-traditional" students at AU; my desire to make positive programmatic changes to the EC program at AU based on the experiences of current students; and finally, my desire to add to the existing literature and conversations regarding "non-traditional" students and their contributions to higher education. In the end, I did my best to "authentically depict the voices of the participants while remaining reflexive and politically aware" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2011, p. 38).

Study Context

This study examines the lives of three "non-traditional" undergraduate students enrolled in the early childhood (EC) program at Assisi University (AU). The EC program was created, in part, in response to a federal mandate requiring EC teachers to obtain a bachelor's degree by 2013. While this legislation was a significant motivation, the program was created primarily to provide an intensive professional development

program to prepare culturally and linguistically diverse educators who would reflect the current population of children within the Lake City community.

Assisi University is a small Roman Catholic university that was originally created to serve "traditional"[11] undergraduate students. The main campus is located in Oakview, a suburb of Lake City. Lake City is in the upper Midwest and has 600,000 residents. In addition to the main campus, AU holds classes at nine other locations in two states. In 2011, the university's enrollment was approximately 6,000, including both undergraduate and graduate students.

Unlike earlier undergraduate teacher education programs at AU, the early childhood program, created in 2008, was one of several programs firmly committed to urban education and serving the diverse population of students in Lake City. AU described the program on their website in the following way:

> The Early Childhood Education bachelor completion program is an innovative program created to support the development of highly trained, licensed early childcare providers. This 33-month program is designed for students who have completed an associate's degree in early childhood education or a related field and are seeking to earn a bachelor's degree in education that meets [State] Department of Public Instruction (DPI) standards for teacher certification in early childhood (birth–8).
>
> The program was created to increase the professional qualifications of early childhood education teachers, particularly in urban settings. The program was designed for students who work full time and prefer classes to be offered in the evenings. Student cohorts (15-20 students) meet two nights a week at Assisi University Central City Campus,[12] located in downtown Lake City. During the summer months, classes will meet Monday-Thursday evenings and will take place at Central City Campus and also at Assisi's Main Campus. In the cohort model, students develop

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[11] In this context, I define "traditional" students as those approximately age 17-24. Most "traditional" students enroll at the university immediately following their high school graduation. Many "traditional" students also live on campus in dorms or in nearby apartments.
[12] Central City Campus is a pseudonym.

> a learning community and benefit from the diverse experiences of its members while supporting one another in the completion of the program. During the fourth week, students meet on a third night with their mentors and instructor for the field experience course.
>
> Students will complete five field experiences throughout the program in their own classrooms (or an assigned one if you are not currently employed in education) and they will begin in the first semester of classes at Assisi University. Each student is guided by a mentor who has a minimum of a master's degree and professional experience in early childhood. Mentors assist students in their application of newly learned content and provide on-going support for the student's professional development throughout the program. As students are exposed to increasingly challenging content through their courses, the expectations for classroom application increases; thus, the students have multiple opportunities to improve teaching practices over a longer period of time than would be offered in more traditional teacher education programs.
>
> Students who are currently working in an early childhood setting, such as a daycare facility or educational system, are able to complete the program without interrupting their employment and can complete field experiences in their own workplace. The program strongly emphasizes language and literacy development and the use of developmentally appropriate research-based practices to address the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of young children. (Assisi University Website, 2011)

The EC program is situated within the context of the larger university, a community that has traditionally catered to the needs of more "traditional" students, primarily younger students living on campus or commuting from their parent's home. In 2009-10, AU reported a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3,070. About 28.6% of undergraduate students were students of color, including 22.4% African American, 3.9% Hispanic, 1.8%Asian and 0.5% Native American. In stark contrast, 85% of the undergraduate students enrolled in the EC program were students of color, and many reported coming from a low-socioeconomic background. Latina students composed 54% of all students in the EC program. As these statistics show, the

demographic make-up of the students in EC program differs dramatically from the demographic composition of the larger university.

The EC program at AU provides a context in which to examine the unique characteristics and needs of "non-traditional" undergraduate students. Data from the study will provide invaluable information from the university level, where adult students are often "invisible and silent" members of the undergraduate community or treated as "other" when compared to traditionally age students (Donaldson & Renfro, 2004).

Data Collection and Analysis

I used semi-structured interviews and field notes to collect data and "elicit stories of experiences, and the meanings, values, and emotions participants attach to these" (Gomez, 2009, p. 87). Initially, I planned to conduct individual semi-structured interviews[13] with each participant during January, March, May, and August of 2011. These dates were intentionally selected to fall at various points within a single academic year. I conducted an initial interview with each participant in January, but then realized that given their busy schedules, each participant would need to set his/her own timeline for interviews. Further, participants were so excited to share their stories that they did not want to wait three months between interviews. Two of the participants asked to participate in another interview within a week of their first interview.

Because it became evident that my research design required flexibility, I followed the lead of each participant by allowing him or her to select interview times that were convenient. Roy and Thalia each participated in a total of five interviews and Leah participated in three interviews. While the number of interviews differed, the total

[13] See Appendix A for a detailed description of interview protocols.

number of interview hours was between 10 and 12 for all participants. Ultimately, the initial data collection lasted approximately the same length of time as initially planned, from January through August 2011.

Each interview lasted approximately two to three hours and focused on the participant's entire life span. I developed an interview protocol adapted from protocols created by Atkinson (1998) and Johnson (2007) (see Appendix A). I used this protocol as a starting point, but also covered other topics determined by each participant and the stories they shared. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. As I analyzed the data, I sought patterns and common themes. I thought of data collection as a cyclical process, in which there was "continuous movement between data and ideas" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2011, p. 26).

Following each interview, I recorded detailed notes and made a list of ideas that I wanted to explore further. I then listened to the audio recording of the interview and noted some initial themes. Next, I transcribed each interview and read through the transcriptions. I then began coding my transcripts and field notes for salient themes. I moved "dialectically and iteratively between deduction and induction" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 30). I used deductive analyses, searching for themes that I expected to be present based on the literature about "non-traditional" students and their experiences (Gomez, 2008); these initial codes included barriers, supports, competing roles, and sacrifice. I also used inductive analysis to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories (Merriam, 2009). The initial concepts that emerged from the data included journey, empowerment, and success. After I transcribed, coded, and reviewed each interview and

my field notes, I created a list of themes and topics that I wished to explore in future interviews. I also reviewed my interview questions and brainstormed additional questions and themes to address.

This cyclical process continued throughout the data collection period. After reviewing the data, it was clear that despite the deficit view of "non-traditional" students at AU, each participant was finding success and reaching their goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree. Based on these initial results, I completed another round of coding in which I identified the types of capital (Yosso, 2006) "non-traditional" students were using to navigate their undergraduate experience. Multiple rounds of coding allowed me to pursue emerging themes and gather additional data when I felt it was necessary.

After collecting and analyzing the data, I created a life history for each participant, focusing on the forms of capital (Yosso, 2006) that participants utilized throughout their respective journeys. Specifically, I was interested in the educational biography of each participant and the journey he/she took to obtain a bachelor's degree in early childhood at Assisi University. In the analytical section of the dissertation, I present each life history as a separate case study. As is common in case study research, the analytic strategy was to provide "detailed descriptions of themes within each case (within-case analysis), followed by thematic analysis across cases (cross-case analysis)" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2011, p. 31).

Participant Selection

At the time of the study, 27 students in three cohorts were enrolled in the EC program. I focused on these cohorts because their members were "non-traditional" students enrolled in a bachelor's degree completion program that was designed to target

students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. All students had an associate degree in early childhood education. Based on their age, their status as full-time workers, and their enrollment in evening and summer courses, AU considered these students "non-traditional."

All 27 students in the EC program were invited to participate in the study. Because of my position as an instructor in the program, the institutional review board (IRB) required another person to recruit the participants to avoid a conflict of interest. I chose two instructors that the students knew and respected to explain the study and recruit participants. Initially, no students expressed interest. A few weeks later, students were again informed of the study and were provided with consent forms. At that time, five students expressed interest and completed consent forms. Of those five, one student never participated in any interviews because it was difficult for her to find time. Another student completed one brief interview but chose not to continue in the study because she did not have enough time. Ultimately, three students participated in this study.

Roy was a 36-year-old single White male who worked full-time as a lead teacher in a childcare center on the east side of Lake City. He was in the first cohort of AU's EC program and was the only male in the program. Thalia was a 46-year-old Mexican female who was proficient in LOTE. She worked full-time as a paraprofessional in a first grade classroom on the south side of the Lake City Public School District. She was married and had one daughter in high school and another in college. Thalia was in the second cohort of the EC program. Like Thalia, Leah was also in the second cohort. She was a 38-year-old African American female who worked full-time as a childcare teacher

in central Lake City. Leah was recently divorced and had a daughter in elementary school and a son in high school.

Representing Others

This study is based on the conviction that "the meanings of [participant] experiences are best given by the persons who experience them; thus, a preoccupation with method, validation, reliability, generalizability, and theoretical relevance of the biographical method must be set aside in favor of a concern for meaning and interpretation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 214). In other words, the goal of the study was not generalizability; rather, three alternative constructs proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985)—dependability, transferability, and credibility—guided the research.

Dependability refers to "whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg &Volpe, 2011, p. 113). In addition to the coding that I completed, I had another coder analyze several interviews, thus reducing the potential bias of a single researcher collecting and analyzing the data. My findings and themes were consistent with those found by the second coder.

I also was concerned with transferability or "how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in similar contexts" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2011, p. 213). I used thick, rich description as "a vehicle for communicating to the reader a holistic and realistic picture" (Denzin, 2001, p. 113) as well as a way to claim relevance in a broader context.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2011) credibility is defined as "whether the participants' perceptions match up with the researcher's portrayal of them. In other words, has the researcher accurately represented what the participants think, feel, and do?

Credibility parallels the criterion of validity in quantitative research" (p. 112). To ensure credibility, I utilized triangulation, the process of using multiple sources to identify patterns and themes of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). My triangulation process involved comparing data I had collected via semi-structured interviews, field notes, and document analysis. I also performed member checks by sharing my data and interpretations with the participants, and soliciting feedback on my emerging findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). According to Maxwell (2005), member checking is "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what's going on" (p. 217). Each participant read their interview transcripts and case study and then provided feedback about the way their story was presented. In some instances, I used the participants' feedback to make changes in the relevant chapter.

Roy indicated that his case study reflected the interviews and was accurate in regard to "times, dates, and events." In addition, he described the impact of seeing his life story as "important research." Roy explained:

> I was especially interested in the research that was being used through my story. The woven together works of my life and the research of Yosso throughout the story were great. It was very intriguing to see my life as important research. In conclusion, I was glad to be a part of this research. It was great to be able to tell my educational life story and the factors in my life that affected it with [Kristen]. I now see the importance of my work and the work of others who go into this field. Having this window on my education is an inspiration to me, and will be a beacon of lights through all of my future endeavors (Roy, personal correspondence, August 15, 2012).

Roy was content with how the story was written and did not request any changes. In contrast, Thalia had a much more emotional reaction to her story and several weeks passed before she responded. She wrote:

> I read the chapter and I wasn't expecting [it] to be done the way it is. When I was reading the chapter it makes me feel very emotional. This makes me to set it apart for a little while until I was ready to read it again and answer your questions. I think the chapter is not too long and not too short. The way you wrote it, for me, is well organized. Also, I think my story is sad but at the same time transmits the message of [being] prosperous. (It was hard, but I made it through and was successful.) (Thalia, personal correspondence, October 23, 2012).

Thalia requested some specific changes in her chapter. Minor changes included fixing spelling errors in the names of some of the Mexican cities and schools. Other revisions included changing the chapter title; she had originally chosen the title "The Amazing Story," but asked to change it to either "A Journey of Faith" or "From a Dreamer to an Accomplisher." Thalia also noted a specific passage in which she felt that the words should be changed to more accurately reflect her thoughts; she stated: "In pg. 44 in the sentence, Thalia considers herself a 'special,' student and I wonder if could change this word to 'unique'" (Thalia, personal correspondence, October 23, 2012).

Finally, Leah provided feedback in a number of e-mail exchanges as well as via comments and a detailed response she recorded on a copy of her chapter. Of all the participants, she provided the most feedback. She highlighted certain statements and added text to further explain some of the interview quotations. She also provided clarification on some details, dates, and events. I made changes to her chapter based on this feedback. The first paragraph of Leah's long reflection at the close of the chapter read as follows:

> I have so many views of my life's story because I either remember something I hadn't remembered before or make comparisons between how I felt or thought I felt at those times/during those times and my reflections as an adult taking into account my current knowledge of life and my experiences. I suppose my sentiment is the same as it recurs throughout my story "it is what it is." Thank you for your listening ear and your interest in including my story.

While I chose to include most of Leah's reflection in Chapter 6, this passage seemed to be a fitting ending to this section and perhaps a powerful initial glimpse into the lives of Leah, Roy, and Thalia.

The subsequent analytic chapters of this dissertation portray the life histories of these three "non-traditional" students based on their shared stories and their recounting of the educational experiences that led to the completion of their undergraduate degrees in early childhood education.

Chapter 5: ROY'S STORY

"The Long Unusual Route"

> What we were told, or like, what the *norm* was when we were in high school, was you do well in high school, you take the ACTs and SATs, and you apply to all these colleges, and then obviously the better you do, you know, the more colleges that are there for you and I think then you go to college from 18 to whatever it is. That's the route I *started* on, you know, I just don't think it's for everyone and I think now our society is starting to realize it, too. That it's not the route for everybody. I think for me, anybody that doesn't take that route, that's kind of a nontraditional route. (Roy, interview, 8/24/2011)

These are the words of Roy, a 36-year-old White student, as he described the "nontraditional route" he traveled as he completed a bachelor's degree in the field of early childhood education. Roy considers his route "nontraditional" because it deviated from what is perceived as the traditional path leading to an undergraduate degree. For the purpose of this research study, Assisi University (AU) considered Roy a "nontraditional student" based on his age and full-time work status. Roy's story represents a journey of perseverance: a combination of life, work, and educational experiences that encompass a span of 17 years between his high school and college graduation ceremonies.

My research focuses on Roy's educational and work experiences during this 17-year period, as well as what he brought to these educational experiences and ultimately what he gained upon completion of his undergraduate degree. Roy clearly defines his experience as "nontraditional," a label that often is characterized from a deficit perspective.

To tell Roy's story, it is necessary to consider what Schuetze and Slowey (2002) termed an "educational biography." I tell Roy's story by describing the biographical stages through which he traveled during his winding path to higher education. For Roy,

during his adult years, the role of student was always accompanied by the role of full-time childcare provider

This chapter describes Roy's educational biography including his K-12 and postsecondary studies. I underscore the strengths and forms of cultural wealth that Roy brought to his educational career through an asset-based framework. The community cultural wealth theory was developed to move away from a deficit view of communities of color (see Yosso, 2006). In line with this framework, I "focus [on] and learn from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (Yosso, 2006, p. 69). Although Roy is not a student of color, as both a "nontraditional" student and a male childcare provider in a predominantly female workforce, he is in many ways a member of groups that are marginalized.

Educational Biography

Roy is a graduate of the early childhood (EC) program at Assisi University and recently passed the state Praxis exams to become a certified teacher of children ages 0-8. I came to know Roy through the AU program when I served as an instructor for several of his courses. When I began my research, Roy was one of the first students to volunteer to participate. He explained his decision as follows:

> It sounded interesting to me, having been a nontraditional student for a long time, it was like, yeah, I needed to tell a story somewhere. I agreed, just because, yeah, like I said it sounded, um, obviously intriguing to me, but at the same time, it was like, that sounds like me. I have yet to tell, you know, people the story, even if it's a confidential study. I'm still getting it out there. So yeah, that's pretty much the reason why I did it.

Hearing Roy's words, I realized how important it was for him to share his story. As I set out to conduct my research, I had planned to focus on the experience of students while

attending AU. As Roy began to share his story with me, however, I realized that completing his bachelor degree began long before he enrolled at AU. Thus, in order to re-tell or "restory" his life, we started from the beginning.

The eldest of two sons, Roy was born in 1975 in a primarily middle-to-upper class suburb of 46,000 people located about 15 minutes west of AU. He described himself as having a "German, Irish background," associating his German ancestry with his German last name, and his Irish ancestry with the meals shared together with family. For Roy, these meals often occurred when family gathered around the table on Sundays and holidays. Roy described the significance of sharing meals around the family table as follows:

> I think the table, well, the thing that's symbolic to me about it is that, you know, it's more just the things I remember from it is, not so much the meal. I mean the meal is obviously a main portion of it, but it's the after… sometimes even the during part of it. But it's more the after where you're all sitting there and it's just everybody, you know, telling their stories. And it's, it's priceless, really.

The importance of sharing meals and stories is something that Roy referred to often during our interviews. Every Sunday, and on holidays the family would gather at his grandparents' home on the east side of Lake City. During each of these family get-togethers, they gathered around the dining room table, sharing food, stories, and laugher. It was evident that family was special to Roy and from an early age his parents instilled in him the importance of both family and education.

Roy's father, a Vietnam veteran, completed his master's degree in education and spent 27 years as a middle school teacher in Lake City Public School District. Roy's mother also worked outside the home, first as a secretary at a local university and then in the management division of a prominent brewery in Lake City. While working at the

brewery, she attended college on the weekends; she received a business degree when Roy was in middle school.

K-12 School Experiences

Throughout Roy's childhood, he experienced a number of what he termed "transition times." When he discussed these transitions, he did not say anything intentionally disparaging or negative. The first transition Roy described was his parent's divorce, which occurred when he was five years old. Describing how his parents handled the divorce, he stated, "I think in the earlier years my parents did a really good job of keeping the…bad part, or I don't want to call it the bad part, but you know, the not so *good* part of the divorce, I guess, out of our sight and out of our vision." The words he used to describe the divorce characterize the optimistic interpretation of events that typified Roy's narration of his stories. As he talked about his parents, he said, "I think another thing, too, family was huge for them, too. Even though we were, you know, a divorced family."

Roy's early years included memories of playing in the park behind his childhood home with his younger brother and neighborhood friends. Big Wheels and bikes were the main method of transportation for these young boys, and when not in school, the boys could often be found in the park. Roy's elementary years were spent at 63rd Street School, a kindergarten-eighth grade school in the Lake City Public School District. The school was located only 11 blocks from his home and as he grew older, he frequently walked to and from school. During his elementary years, Roy had a group of school and neighborhood buddies that he socialized with both at school and at other times. He participated in a variety of activities including summer school and recreation programs,

visits to the school and public libraries, science fairs, and birthday parties. Roy considered himself an average student, and while he enjoyed school, he preferred to play a somewhat passive role in the classroom. In his words, "I actually really did enjoy school. Even though it was the traditional, you know, you sit in rows, I still enjoyed it because it was… I just liked listening to the teacher talking." Roy was a keen observer and listened quietly to whatever content the teacher was presenting.

The move to middle school was another "transition time" for Roy. During this time, Roy's parents had a shared custody arrangement that meant Roy alternated between staying with his mother and staying with his father. His father also remarried during this period, which created a set of new circumstances that Roy was dealing with while simultaneously managing the usual transition children experience moving from elementary school to middle school. Roy's transition to middle school included moving to a new house in a new city, a decision that he didn't feel he had a say in:

> I was kind of thrown into it so I didn't deal with it in the greatest of fashions. I think I did a lot of acting out and things…we did it right at middle school so it was about seventh grade. So, I went to seventh grade with knowing nobody in middle school.

This transition time was a difficult one for Roy. He moved to a new house and began a whole new school experience without the comfort of familiar friends or schoolmates. Roy described how he navigated this transition:

> When I moved to Nektosha, that was a big change for me that I didn't really care for at that time. But one of the things that kept me kind of grounded was my social relationships in the church…Cause at the time, we had a big youth group at the new church…and so I formed a lot of friendships and that was really nice to have.

Roy becoming involved in the church as a means of fostering social relationships highlights the importance of the Lutheran values shared by both of his parents and their

families. Given his Lutheran upbringing, it seems natural that Roy used church as a resource during this time of transition. His involvement in the church group and the friendships that Roy developed there led to his involvement in swim club, basketball, and leadership camps. In this period, the cultural wealth he drew upon included a combination of social capital and familial capital. In this case, Roy's family connection to the church served as a resource within the community that he utilized in his time of need. Within the church, he joined clubs and formed a social network that led to friendships.

The forms of capital Roy drew from often were interrelated. His involvement in extracurricular activities also grew out of his parents' encouragement, with his father taking him to swimming lessons from a young age and his mother pushing him to sign up for leadership camp, something that Roy felt did not match his quiet and reserved character. Roy drew on the familial capital provided by his parents, their unyielding support, and the "push" to move him forward.

In addition to engaging in activities encouraged by his parents, Roy returned to the Montessori summer camp that he had attended in elementary school. Roy first attended the summer program as a camper and then worked his way up to serve as a "gopher." His role as a "gopher" was essentially that of teacher's helper and his duties included running errands and supporting the teacher and children as needed. This role was significant for Roy because he was paid a salary of $50.00 per week for his new position and even more importantly, he was working with teachers and younger children, something that really interested him.

These activities balanced the academic challenges that Roy experienced as he "drifted" through seventh and eighth grade. As a result of these challenges, Roy needed

to repeat eighth grade, making his middle school years even longer. Despite his reluctance to repeat eighth grade, it seemed to be a turning point for Roy:

> Ending eighth grade was really great. It was kind of an end of a chapter, in a sense. The second time I was going through eighth grade I felt more relieved and more emotionally attached to what, to going to school and everything and being able to do it. So, I think I felt a little more mature about it in going through and finally getting that graduation, it was just a huge thing. And I know it was a big thing for my grandpa and my whole family, basically just knowing that I accomplished that, so I got a lot of praise for that, which felt good.

Following middle school, Roy began high school in one of the two public high schools in the Nektosha School District (the same district in which his middle school was located). He described his entrance into high school as a "good transition time" and his high school years proved to be a positive time in his life. Unlike the start of middle school, Roy now had a new core of friends that he met during his final eighth grade year and these friends entered high school together and remained friends through high school and beyond.

During high school, Roy developed an interest in literature and writing. This interest was fostered through assignments that presented Roy with open-ended questions, allowing him to go deeper and share his thoughts and ideas. Being a somewhat quiet student, open-ended questions were a comfortable format for him to share his work and he seemed to excel in his writing. Despite his formerly reserved student identity, high school was a time for Roy to break out a bit and he seemed to develop more confidence, both academically and socially. During his freshman and sophomore years he was a member of the high school swimming team, but later he became more interested in socializing with friends than swimming. As a result, in lieu of being on the swim team he

opted to participate in intramural sports, hang out at friends' houses and attend school games and events with friends.

During the summers between his high school years, Roy continued his work at the Montessori summer camp. He ascended through the camp ranks, moving from "gopher" to counselor-in-training, to assistant counselor, and finally to counselor. As counselor, he became more independent, taking on even more responsibilities and serving as the sole leader for his own group of children.

These experiences had a significant impact on Roy and motivated him to take childcare classes when he returned to Nektosha High School each fall. The cultural wealth discourse that he drew upon includes a combination of aspirational capital and navigational capital. Although he hadn't outwardly identified it yet, his work at the Montessori camp would prove to be his initial step into the field of education. He began to navigate through the ranks of summer camp and the experience triggered his ambition to pursue a career in the field of early childhood education. The journey through the ranks was not an easy one, he had found something that he was interested in and he wanted to see where it led.

Although we never discussed the topic during our interviews, I often wondered if Roy encountered any barriers during high school in regards to his interest in childcare, a workforce that was predominantly female. I wondered how both his family and his male peers viewed his interest in working with young children and if it ever presented barriers. Whenever Roy shared his story, his interest in working with young children seemed to be a passion, and he never really discussed gendered assumptions or feelings his friends had (if any) about his work with young children.

As high school continued, Roy became more social, revealing a different side of his formerly reserved student persona. Roy explained that his manner depended on the particular class and students: “If I had my core of friends with me in my class, then I was more chatty with them, a little more daring, I guess, in class.” The result was a more confident and jovial side to Roy, attributes that his teachers remembered and shared when his younger brother started high school. For one year, Roy and his younger brother attended Nektosha High School together, Roy as a senior and Mike as a freshman. Roy remembered their year together as a fun one, and described sharing friends and attending school events together.

Roy remembered his high school graduation as being hot and dark due to a power outage midway through the ceremony. Despite the conditions, the day was filled with emotion. In Roy’s words, “It was a good time and it was that *transitional* time where we all kind of knew where we were going.” Unlike the other transitions Roy had experienced, graduation seemed to signify a different transition, one that was more planned and in his control. For Roy, the question became: Where was this path going to lead him?

Prior to high school graduation, Roy was already preparing for the next stage in his educational journey. Preparations began with him taking the ACT test, which he took four times in an attempt to increase his scores. He worked with an academic advisor and his parents to find out information about colleges and programs throughout the state. Accompanied by his parents, he visited several state colleges and was eventually accepted into two schools. He eventually decided to attend North Central University because it was located next to a big city and that was important to Roy; however, it was

six hours from his home. Roy explained, “North Central University also had a very good early childhood program at the time, which was the field I was kind of pushing myself into.”

At this point in his life, Roy seemed confident about his decision to enter the field of early childhood education. He talked about the direction he was “pushing himself into” and throughout our interviews, he seldom mentioned how friends and family had reacted to the career path he had chosen.

North Central University

The decision to enroll in the early childhood program at North Central University (NCU) was not something that happened by accident; rather it grew out of Roy’s experiences working with children since fifth grade. Throughout our interviews, Roy continually talked about the field of early childhood education, and it became evident that his movement toward the field of early childhood education began many years before he completed high school and enrolled in college.

To Roy, the decision to enroll in college seemed like the natural next step he was *supposed* to take once he completed high school. Both of his parents had attended college, and with the support of his parents and his academic advisor, he began making preparations for college during his junior year of high school. He did not mention considering any alternatives to college such as working or attending a technical school. For Roy, the next step in his life was somewhat predetermined because that was simply what the expectation was. Unlike Roy, many of his high school friends stayed in Lake City and while some attended the local state university, others attended the local technical college or began working immediately after high school.

As Roy transitioned from high school to college, he seemed worried about losing the social network he had worked so hard to establish. He said, "I didn't want [high school] to be done. I was going to be losing some friends, but I had a good core of friends that I knew I was gonna be able to stay with, at least for a little while." He also felt a lack of connection to school and explained, "I think I was emotionally unattached to school once again but I met friends in the dorms and everything. I had a good time."

Despite his lack of connection to school, Roy thought he would be okay at NCU because he was making friends, something that had proven to be a sort of bridge between school and his personal life. During one interview Roy reflected on his lack of readiness for his first college experience:

> So I went up to North Central University to get a degree in [early childhood education] and that's what I did right away. I had my degree and everything planned out and went up there and started taking classes and I think I was a little ahead of myself at that time. The classes were good classes and everything, but I think maturity-wise and just emotionally, I don't think I was ready for that.

Roy initially drew on navigational capital as he moved forward with his plan to attend North Central University. While Roy's comments indicate his realization that he wasn't ready for college at that point in his life, he attended NCU for a full year. After the first year, however, poor grades and lack of interest in his studies contributed to his desire to be closer to home and his former high school friends. Due to a knee injury that required surgery, Roy returned to NCU for his second semester with a car, which enabled him to take frequent trips home to be with family and friends. At the end of the semester, Roy decided to move back home. He transferred to the University of Lake City (ULC), a large urban university located within minutes of his hometown.

University of Lake City

Upon returning to Lake City, Roy moved in with some friends who lived in a trendy university neighborhood within walking distance of the ULC. Roy enrolled in liberal arts classes and was "just kind of floating" as he took classes that didn't really engage him or his interest in early childhood education. As at NCU, class sizes were large, and some classes were held in lecture halls filled with hundreds of students, a scenario that did not match his learning style or needs. After only one semester, Roy reinjured his knee and withdrew from ULC because he needed another surgery.

Following his recovery, decided to return to work at the Montessori school full-time. He got a job as a lead teacher in the school-age program of the childcare center; he worked daily from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and really enjoyed the school and the work he was doing. As Roy talked about his job and his work with children, he described a passion that was not present when he discussed his experiences at NCU or ULC. He explained, "I always had a connection with the [Montessori] school, so I always felt really comfortable there, and because I felt really comfortable there, the job thing just kind of came naturally to me." For the first time since he completed high school, Roy was sure of himself and the work he was doing with young children.

Despite the confidence he felt in his role as a teacher, he continually questioned his decision to enter the early childhood field, a profession that is typically female oriented and low paying. Roy's career choice also caused some conflict between him and his mother:

> My mom was always kinda like, "You should just see what else is out there," which is like a mom thing to do (laughter). I was like, "I'm kinda comfortable [working at Montessori]" so I always kinda butted heads [with my mom].

These conversations, both the external and the internal ones, caused Roy to wonder if he should stay in childcare or consider a different field.

> I was always like, should I…? I was always like in disarray, should I do that? Should I for a couple years… I was like, I gotta try this so I would leave [Montessori] for a while and then I was like, “Oh, no!” So I would come back and they [Montessori School] would always welcome me back with open arms.

For the first time in our conversations, Roy described expressing doubt regarding his chosen career path. His mom, although always supportive, encouraged him to consider other options. I wondered if his mother’s ambivalence was related to gender (Roy being a male entering a predominantly female EC workforce), or to the low salaries in the field, or if other reasons caused her to question his career choice. He also questioned his career choice at times throughout his journey. Despite Roy’s reluctance, he never fully explained any doubts he or his mom had, nor did I press him about this during our interviews.

Eventually, Roy decided to stay on his chosen path and work in childcare. While working at the Montessori school, he developed a close relationship with the director. Based on his outstanding work performance and his interest in early childhood education, the director mentored him and encouraged him to enroll in early childhood classes at Lakeview Technical College (LTC). Unlike Roy’s previous college experiences, when he had enrolled because it seemed like the natural next step and the route he *should* be taking, he enrolled at LTC because he truly wanted to attend classes at the college. He drew on a combination of aspirational capital, social capital, and navigational capital. First, he demonstrated aspirational capital in his ambition to stay on his chosen path in the early childhood field. Next, he obtained social capital via his relationship with the

director of the Montessori school. At the same time, he also drew on navigational capital as he built on his previous experiences and determined how to proceed. Ultimately, Roy sought a degree in early childhood education because he knew this was the career he wanted to pursue and even more importantly, that he was finally ready for this journey.

Lakeview Technical College

Enrolling at LTC was a turning point for Roy. He accepted that he was working at the right place and that he was ready for the next phase of his educational journey:

> So, I always kind of knew this was the place, and then finally, at that time, when [my director] prompted me to go to the class, I was in a place, emotionally and everything where I was like, yeah, that sounds like a great idea, so, I'll try it.

Roy's willingness to take a risk demonstrates the aspirational capital that he continued to utilize throughout his educational experiences. Once Roy began taking classes at the technical college, he was hooked. He was engaged in the classes and he was finally acquiring the content knowledge that he had sought for so long. In addition, the combination of working at the Montessori school and attending LTC seemed to give him confidence and confirm to Roy that he was in the right field. He explained:

> I think once I got to LTC and found out that this *is* the field that I wanted to go into, everything just kind of went hand-in-hand and I just took off from there. So that kind of pretty much just pushed me into the door and then from then on, it was pretty much, here I am!

He took one or two classes at a time and spoke of the importance of balancing work and school, "I think with working and going to school, budgeting the time was a *huge* thing. But also not overworking yourself, I think was huge, which I did that one semester when I took four classes. By the end I was like, 'I'll never do that again!'" During this time, Roy attended classes two or three nights per week; on class days he

worked at the childcare center from 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and then went directly to classes, which lasted until 9:00 p.m. Eventually, he took a break for a year for financial reasons.

His year off from LTC was a transitional time for Roy, and when he returned to LTC he was required to retake several classes because the program had changed. He viewed the repetition as somewhat of an inconvenience but also as a refresher course as he eased his way back into his early childhood studies. Roy enjoyed the classes and was happy that the content of his courses was at the "forefront of childcare." During this time, Roy also changed jobs and left the Montessori school to teach at Landmarks Childcare Center. One of the perks of working at Landmarks was that they provided funding to support his studies through the LEARN program, which offered higher education scholarships to professionals working in early childhood settings. This cost-sharing model lowered the cost of Roy's tuition, with the scholarship paying 55% of tuition, Roy paying 20%, and his place of employment (Landmarks) paying 25%. This financial assistance allowed Roy to take and more classes each semester, and as a result, he was able to complete his associate degree more quickly.

As Roy described the program at LTC, he spoke of the diversity of his fellow students, an aspect of the program that he really enjoyed. First, he spoke about the students' ages:

> That was also mixed. For the most part, a lot of people were a little bit older than I was, but then there were also a handful of us, my age, in their twenties, and then later on as we got into the program, there was more of the younger age, and they were coming in and really going through full speed.

Roy further described the diversity of LTC students, speaking about the ethnic backgrounds of the students and then describing their diversity of work experiences in various early childhood settings:

> Very mixed. Yeah…every background you can imagine coming in and so it was very cool. It was nice to have that for discussion-wise in the classroom, too. Not only was it mixed in that sense, but it was mixed as far as different backgrounds for the field, as well. So you had people that were coming in from the Head Start program, people coming in from my setting, which was like a traditional child care setting, others that had their own family child care centers so it was a lot of different backgrounds. I always loved that aspect and kinda got into all the different backgrounds and so that's kinda neat.

In some ways, Roy's talk about diversity is fairly implicit. He did not use the term *diversity*, but repeatedly used the words *mixed* and *background* to describe the various types of diversity based on age, ethnicity, and work experience that were present in the program. Although he did not explicitly use the word *diversity* to describe his fellow students or experiences, it was evident that Roy truly valued the diverse demographic backgrounds of his peers. Using the cultural wealth discourse, Roy described a form of social capital that he embodied. The students in his classes were now a part of his social network, and for Roy, that translated into an opportunity to consider other perspectives, something he continued well beyond the completion of this degree.

In the summer of 2006, Roy received his associate degree and graduated from LTC. He described the day of graduation as just like any typical day. He said, "I was actually working that day, the day we had the [graduation] program. I was like, 'Hey, I gotta leave a little bit early because I gotta go graduate.'" Instead of this being the highlight of his day, Roy's words made it seem like a quick errand he needed to run after work.

As Roy described graduation day, it became evident that this it had been the first college ceremony he ever attended and it was a new experience:

> So I had my tennis shoes on. I didn't know what to wear to these things. I had a nice sweater on with my blue jeans and tennis shoes and we had the gown and everything and I saw these people walking around…I wasn't trying to be uppity, but I saw these people walking around with these cords and I'm like, "How did they get those cords?" They're like, "Graduating with honors" and I'm thinking, well, how do you graduate with honors, 'cause I had like a 3…I don't know what it was, it was up there, like a 3.8 or something…what do you need to know, 'cause there were like a handful, there were quite a few! So, I'm like, "What is going on here?"

Roy's words document the inner conversation he had as he began to wonder whether maybe he, too, should have graduated with honors. This was something that he had not really thought about until he began to notice the unfamiliar cords that many of the other graduates were wearing. He described what happened next:

> So, we went through the whole ceremony and everybody got their diplomas and everything like that and we all sat down. And then a few weeks later after the ceremony, I got a paper package in the mail from LTC. I opened it and it was basically a sorry letter. It was like, "We're sorry we didn't give you, we didn't understand, or we didn't know," or I don't know how they explained it, but it was basically, here's your honors certificate and everything.

Indeed, Roy did graduate with honors, but he did not learn of his accomplishment until *after* the ceremony. Upon learning of his achievement, Roy called his family to share the news and his mother was both surprised and jovial in her response. Roy described her reaction: "'What? You graduated with honors?' She couldn't believe it at first. She's like, 'That's a joke right?' And I'm like, 'NO!' I'm like 'No, I actually did!'"

From start to finish, it took Roy eight years to obtain his associate degree, but he not only graduated, he did so with honors. Using the cultural wealth discourse, this accomplishment can be understood as a result of both aspirational capital and

navigational capital. Despite the challenges of balancing work and school, he successfully navigated through the program by taking as many classes as he could manage, both academically and financially. When needed, he took a break to gain more financial capital, and he also found a job that would provide scholarship money to help with the expense of tuition. Ultimately, he persevered and left LTC with content knowledge that he could apply to the work he was doing in his own classroom.

Upon completing his associate degree, Roy planned to take a break from school so he could begin to implement what he had learned at LTC in his classroom at Landmarks Childcare Center. The Landmarks director noticed a considerable difference in his teaching and based on his exemplary performance, she encouraged him to return to college to get his bachelor's degree. In addition, during the final courses in his associate degree program at LTC, one of Roy's instructors urged him to consider getting his bachelor's degree, and gave him contact information for Riverview College.

Roy described his future plans and his desire to get a bachelor's degree at the time:

> My goal was to get the bachelor's degree. So I thought, I got my associate's [degree], I want to go on and get my bachelor's [degree]. I just made that decision in my head. I was back and forth and I was like, I could probably just go into this field with just having my associate's [degree]. A lot of the people that I work with did the same thing, they had their associate's [degree] and everything. The other thing that pushed me was at Landmarks, you get bumped up into a bigger pay rate, a higher pay, if you get your bachelor's [degree]. So, I'm thinking, well I could go on and just get my bachelor's. Rather than just having my associate's and every year get a little raise and eventually get up. And I thought, NO! Let's just do it. So I kind of pushed myself to do that. So, my *main* goal was to get the bachelor's.

Roy viewed getting a bachelor's degree as an opportunity to gain both more knowledge and more income. At the same time, he also felt the "push" to continue and get both his bachelor's degree *and* a teaching certification:

> I was more into wanting to go the route where I was gonna get the [teaching] certificate as opposed to not getting it. I just didn't wanna leave the place I work at. So, I guess my goal was always to get the [teaching] certificate.

In this comment, Roy described the aspirational capital that led him to pursue both his bachelor's degree and his teaching certification. This capital would prove to be integral to the next phase of his educational journey.

Riverview College

Roy took an eighteen-month break between completing his associate degree and registering at Riverview College, an "affordable, non-profit, fully-accredited, private [Midwest state] college that's been recognized as a leader in higher education for over 150 years" (Riverview College Website, 2012). Riverview College (RC) also advertised itself as the state's leader in evening, weekend, and online education. Roy described his reasons for choosing Riverview:

> The reason I started at Riverview, and that [the instructor at LTC] was pushing us that way is because Riverview had a great program. It was a traditional early childhood program where at the end you do the student teaching and get placed in a school or whatever. The other reason I went there is because a coworker that went there said that you can also go through the program where you just get an education bachelor's degree but then you don't have the teacher certificate license. I didn't want to leave Landmarks to do the student teaching. I mean, if I *had* to I would've.

The thoughts Roy described reflect the struggle that many working students face as they need to continue to work full-time to support themselves while they attend school. Roy was looking for a college with a strong early childhood program, but one that also offered

flexibility. At Riverview, students could complete a student teaching experience that would result in earning a teacher certification, or could complete the coursework without this practicum experience to earn a bachelor's degree. For Roy, this option was critical. He wanted to obtain a bachelor's degree, but also worried about having to leave his current classroom at Landmarks to earn the degree. In other words, he was unable to leave his job for a semester to complete the student teaching requirement. Not only did Roy not want to leave work because he loved his job and his employer adored him, but he also needed the paycheck, especially if he planned to continue his education. During this time Roy continued to draw on aspirational capital in his attempts to fulfill his dream of completing his bachelor's degree while facing the logistical obstacles involved in student teaching.

In additional to aspirational capital, Roy also drew upon navigational capital as he traversed through the program. Roy attended Riverview College for three semesters, taking both face-to-face evening classes and online courses. During this time, he remained unsure about the path he would ultimately take, but because he did not need to decide whether to student teach right away, he could complete his coursework and worry about that later.

Eventually, an unexpected event prompted Roy to make an immediate decision that significantly altered his educational path. One day, during his daily check of his work mailbox, he found the most recent issue of the Midwest State Early Childhood Newsletter, which included information regarding an early childhood bachelor's degree completion program at Assisi University. Roy described the ensuing conversation with his director (who put the newsletter in his mailbox):

> She asked, "Does this sound more like the track that you wanna take?" And reading over it, and the thing that prompted me and I just immediately went to was the student teaching and [that] you can stay in your own classroom to do it. I said, "Well, yeah! That's *exactly* what I am looking for so let's go do it." And so she was like, "All right! Let's do it." After that, I finished up at Riverview College.

This pivotal moment involved a combination of aspirational capital and social capital. Through this conversation with a respected colleague and mentor, Roy finally discovered a way to eliminate the barriers he had faced with regard to student teaching. Upon this realization, he and the director were ready to embark on this journey together. Roy finished his studies at Riverview College and enrolled in the final phase of his educational journey at Assisi University (AU).

Assisi University

And so the next chapter in Roy's educational journey began. He enrolled in the early childhood education program at AU, a 33-month program that ultimately resulted in the completion of his bachelor's degree. In addition to the degree, Roy also had the option to complete his student teaching in his current work setting, thus gaining his teaching certification, which was his ultimate goal beyond the bachelor's degree.

Unlike the college and technical college programs Roy attended previously, the courses at AU were offered in a cohort model, meaning that Roy took all of his classes with the same classmates. The classes also differed from the large lecture hall format that Roy had experienced at other universities. Instead of lecture halls filled with hundreds of students, Roy's cohort consisted of only eight students, a size that he found quite comfortable.

Roy's cohort was quite diverse. Consistent with the demographic composition of the field of early childhood education, the cohort was primarily female, with Roy being

the sole male in the group. He was also the only White member of the group. The other members of the cohort were women of color including four students who defined themselves as Latina, and three students who defined themselves as African American.

Similar to the students at LTC, the students in Roy's AU cohort were culturally and linguistically diverse and had a variety of early childhood work experiences. During classes, conversations occurred both in English and Spanish and students continually supported each other and their learning. The intimate size of the group helped the cohort to bond, and as they became more comfortable with one another they began to view themselves as a family. Roy described the small cohort size as beneficial:

> I think that being a small cohort, it really helps us. At least for me, it helps me open up more and just be able to talk more and really feel more comfortable as a cohort. I mean, just being in that small group, it feels more like a family. It's kinda like an extension of family. I think that was the biggest thing for me…the biggest benefit.

The social capital and sense of family that was created through the small atmosphere contributed to Roy's success in his courses—he seemed to thrive in this setting. Roy navigated through the rigorous program and courses with ease, earning primarily A grades. While he navigated through the coursework easily, he proceeded with caution as he tried to honor the learning of *all* students in the cohort:

> So, I think the challenge is…to be respectful of the whole *group*. I don't want to say that's a challenge, but it's knowing that we all move at a different pace. I think that's kinda the ongoing challenge with the cohort. We all move at a different pace and just finding that niche where we're all respectful of each other.

Using the cultural wealth discourse, Roy used navigational capital as he determined how to move through the program himself while also trying to recognize and honor the strengths that each person brought to the cohort. Because he was a strong student, he

seemed to be the go-to person when students needed academic help. This was a role that concerned Roy, not because he was unwilling to doing it, but because put so much pressure on himself to make sure that both he and his fellows students were understanding the content. This meant that he often put his own work on hold to support the learning of others:

> I think that would be a challenge, too…just kinda slowing myself down [to help classmates] even though I know the path I'm gonna take. I'm still gonna get there, but I wanna make sure the cohort that's with me is gonna do the same thing.

As Roy reflected on his supportive role within the cohort, he described the simultaneous processes he experienced:

> It's tricky at times, but I think it's something that's helping me out in the long run. Trying to figure out how to help and be even more of a team player or more team oriented. Even though I feel strongly about an idea, [being] able to sit back and listen *first* and then be able to express an idea which has been the tricky part.

Here, as in many instances, Roy put a positive spin on a situation he first considered more of a challenge. Once again he drew on a combination of capital, this time utilizing navigational capital and social capital. Ultimately, he viewed the chance to help others as an opportunity for him to learn and become even more collaborative. This is one example of Roy working to achieve a balance between the roles of supporter and collaborator.

Roy also drew on navigational capital as he proceeded through the program trying to balance work and school. For many students who work full time, balancing work and school can be a challenge, and students are often overwhelmed by the heavy demands of school and work. Roy not only found a routine that worked for him, but also managed to

find some balance in his life by setting aside time for relaxation. He talked in detail about completing course assignments and projects:

> I did a lot of mine on the weekends just having a lot of time. I found that to be the best time to do it. Usually, depending on how much was needed, usually like a Saturday or I'd try to do one day where it was all homework and then I'd have another day to just kinda relax.

He continued, describing his schedule and setting aside time to complete coursework:

> If I felt energetic at the end of the day after working, I would try to get some things done during the week just so I didn't have *so* much on the weekend to get done. Most of the time it was done like on a Saturday or Sunday, depending on the day or the weekend. That's probably when I got most of my stuff done, work done and everything. For me, it was easier to do it that way 'cause I had nothing going on. So, it's like I can set aside time to do it.

Roy also emphasized the importance of time management:

> You really do need all that time when you're in school to just be at school. I think making sure that you set aside time *outside* of class, a good chunk, where you can work on everything that you need to get [done] for each of the classes. I think that was a huge thing for me, was just being able to have it. You know, where I didn't feel overwhelmed. I think it was easy for me, not having a family to worry about things like that. I know it's a little bit harder with children and home and that.

Roy achieved balance through "flexible" time management and by allotting time to complete his course assignments on the weekends or evenings when he was not in class. Unlike many of the women in his cohort, he still found time to relax. Roy explained that he was able to find time to relax in part because he was single and had no dependent children or family members, which left him sufficient time to complete his studies and still have some time to himself.

After two and a half years of both studying and working full time, the day finally came for Roy to graduate. Having been through a graduation ceremony once before, this time Roy knew what to expect. He, along with his fellow cohort members, represented

the first graduating cohort of the early childhood program at AU as they marched in the graduation ceremony. There was much to celebrate. Roy not only graduated, but he graduated with honors. Unlike his experience at LTC, this time the honor was something he had anticipated and was ready to celebrate.

Prior to the ceremony, Roy's cohort and several faculty members gathered to share smiles, hugs, tears of joy, and a sense of accomplishment. Graduation was a day of celebration for both the faculty and Roy. For faculty, it marked the first cohort of students successfully completing the program. For Roy, it was the successful completion of a long journey toward getting his bachelor's degree. Using the cultural wealth discourse, Roy's graduation was the ultimate example of "aspirational capital." After 17 years, Roy had finally accomplished his ultimate goal of obtaining both a bachelor's degree *and* a teaching certification, all while working full time. Roy's own words best described this aspirational capital: "It's obviously a success story because I graduated!"

Overall, Roy was satisfied with the route he traveled to obtain his bachelor's degree. Rather than choosing to view his path from a deficit perspective, he seemed content. He explained, "I wouldn't change anything, I don't think because I wouldn't have had the experiences. My uncle has this saying, 'If it was easy, everyone would do it' and that makes sense." The words of Roy's uncle represent yet another form of "familial capital" that was present throughout Roy's journey, even if in seemingly miniscule ways. Paired with the "aspirational capital" that Roy used to reach his goals, the words and actions of his family were omnipresent, fueling Roy's drive to achieve his goals in both his educational journey and his life.

Barriers

Despite Roy's success in the program, he faced a variety of barriers. Roy's story and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two show that Roy experienced some situational barriers (Cross, 1981) that are common among nontraditional students. The first situational barrier Roy experienced had to do with time. Roy's journey from high school graduation to completion of his bachelor's degree was 17 years, something that was very much on Roy's mind when he reflected on his story:

> I think the unusual part, or, I don't know how unusual it is now, but at that time, and for me, it felt unusual to just kind of gradually take courses as I worked in the field and just kind of went that route and then eventually just decided to finish it up [at AU] and just kinda go for it. So, it was just kind of long. It should be the long, unusual journey (laughter).

Like other "nontraditional" students, Roy simultaneously worked and studied full time which contributed to the length of his journey.

The second situational barrier Roy experienced concerned employment and what Roy termed "growing pains." As Roy navigated through the program, he learned new ways of thinking about teaching, which he blended with his current teaching practices at Landmarks:

> I think when I was in this program that was one of the biggest challenges… kind of "growing pains." Especially with like the lesson plans and stuff like that, because being so new to these lessons, I'm still trying to figure out the best way to do it and just trying to figure out how to fit it in.

Blending school and work presented a challenge not only in terms of content such as lesson plans, but also in terms of thinking about his role as the only male in both settings. This is something Roy seldom discussed during our interviews, although he did mention it when I asked about challenges. In this excerpt, he described how at times he was torn

between his role of helping his cohort members and also feeling wiped out after long day at work:

> I can definitely sense when the ladies in my cohort are nervous about something, so it's just kind of helping them calm down. But, there's days, where I come in, too, and I'm really tired, and I'm just like, I don't feel like answering this right now.

Roy continued, describing the similarities between working with all females and coming to classes and being the only male in the cohort, "For me, its kinda the same as work. It's like I leave my work ladies and I come here! (laughter). There's just days where I'm just like, I'm tired!"

Ultimately, Roy seemed to balance being the sole male in both his work and school settings with having [male] friends outside of school. He stated, "It doesn't affect me too much, being the only man, in the program. I've got a good core of friends around me." As always, Roy put a positive spin on whatever barriers he encountered.

In addition to the situational barriers present in Roy's "long, unusual journey," one institutional barrier that frustrated Roy was financial aid:

> I think everything, for me, as a student, has been for the most part, has been great. I mean financial aid is always bad, but that's financial aid. It's not so much just [at AU], it's at every school, but I think that has been the *only* thing I think that has just been, like a real *drag*.

Roy accumulated student loans from Lakeview Technical College, Riverview College, and AU. At both LTC and AU he qualified for LEARN scholarships, which provide higher education funding to professionals working in early childhood and school age programs.

According to the LEARN website:

- LEARN provides a major share of tuition, book expenses and credential fees, a travel stipend, a bonus when your contract is completed,

reimbursement to your employer for release time so that you may attend class or complete coursework, and counseling/administrative support.

- EMPLOYER provides a portion of the cost of tuition, 15 hours of paid release each semester, a bonus or raise to you when your contract is completed.

- THE SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT provides a portion of the cost of tuition, book expenses and credential fees, a commitment to attend classes and successfully complete coursework, a commitment to remain with your employer or in a regulated child care program as specified in your contract. (LEARN website, 2014)

The LEARN scholarship significantly reduced Roy's educational expenses and provided resources from his employer. To qualify for LEARN monies, each semester Roy had to apply for funding and complete paperwork to document his studies and expenses. While this was extra work in addition to his coursework, the process was not difficult for Roy and his only frustration with LEARN was that reimbursement checks did not arrive at predictable or consistent intervals.

Although the LEARN money reduced his educational expenses, Roy still needed financial aid during most of his higher education experiences. Although he dealt with financial aid offices at several higher education institutions, in the interviews he discussed his frustration with the financial aid department at AU in detail. His frustrations began as soon as he entered the program at AU and tried to contact the financial aid department:

> Specifically, in the beginning I could never get a hold of anybody there. The faculty [in the early childhood program] like Ann would come in and say try to call this person, and so we'd try to call [the people in financial aid department] and then nothing came in. I never got a call back so I left messages and I would *never* get a call back. And so then, I'd call back and they were never in the office, and then I was down there for classes, I was always early so I'd go and try to stop by. Never there…

He then described the frustration he experienced when he was finally able to meet with someone in the financial aid office face-to-face:

> The few times I went in there to try to get an answer, it literally took somebody eavesdropping on my conversation with one of the people [from the financial aid office], for her to say, come on over to my office, I know what you're talking about and I can figure that out. And I was like, *really*? It was like a miracle kinda thing, and I don't want that every time I'm in the financial aid office. That's not what you want.

He recounted another frustrating encounter with someone from the financial aid department in which his questions went unanswered yet again:

> I was working with Ann [the EC program advisor at AU] on it and then the lady [from financial aid] was really short with both Ann and me. She said she worked it out with me, and I said, well, yeah…I left it making her feel that she had worked it out with me, but nothing was resolved and my questions were not answered.

Ultimately, Roy succumbed to his frustrations and made a conscious decision to focus on his classes and give the financial aid situation some time to resolve itself:

> It's a mess. Yeah, it's a *huge* frustration. After that last phone call, I'm like, I just can't do that anymore, I can't worry about financial aid. I just gotta do the class, and let financial aid run its course, which is easier said than done.

Financial aid was an area that was difficult for even Roy, a student with great amounts of navigational capital, to navigate. He attempted to call repeatedly, made trips to the financial aid office at the main campus and had faculty members from the EC department accompany him when meeting with members of the financial aid department. All of these attempts to navigate the system were unsuccessful, so he eventually decided to simply wait. He was not optimistic that his financial aid problems would resolve themselves with time, but he decided that he needed to focus his time and energy on his studies, something he felt he could control.

Supports

Throughout his time in the AU program, Roy utilized a variety of supports including family, friends, instructors, mentors, and colleagues. He used his friends and family to provide balance and optimism throughout his educational and work endeavors. Despite his busy schedule, he always seemed to find time for a family dinner or to go to a ballgame or fishing with his buddies. In addition to the support of family and friends, Roy embraced the support of his mentors: the director at Landmarks Childcare Center and the EC faculty mentor who met with him weekly throughout the 33-month program. Although he was already quite confident in his teaching abilities, he utilized the mentorship provided to him by AU. Roy described how his relationship with Barb evolved throughout the course of his studies:

> Once in a while I would talk with Barb when she would come to visit my classroom and have her look over something. That was early, later on, when it got into the later semesters, I would kinda show Barb what I had done and talk through it with her and sorta reflect.

In addition to his mentors, Roy relied on other faculty in the EC program, especially his instructors. Because of the small size of the cohorts, students and faculty came to know one another quite well. Roy was very comfortable around his instructors and did not hesitate to ask questions during class and when meeting individually with instructors. He explained:

> I would ask, depending on the type of question, if it was something I could ask the instructor, I'd always ask the instructor. Like in the class when things were getting explained, I would ask, just to make sure, I knew what was expected to be in each of the assignments. But if there was anything that was unclear, I would ask the instructor.

Outside the college campus, Roy also utilized the knowledge of his teaching partner from the early childhood classroom in which he worked. He used this "outside" set of eyes to

provide feedback on the lesson plans that he completed for his college classes and implemented in their joint classroom:

> I found, through the lesson plans and stuff when I needed to do them in my classroom, just even asking my co-teacher, who was not even part of the program, obviously. I just asked what she thought of my lessons and she helped me out that way, too.

Roy used these supports throughout the program and each support network served a different purpose. He utilized these supporters at various times during his journey and each person helped him to reach his ultimate goal of graduating with a bachelor's degree and getting his teaching certificate.

Reflection

During the final two interviews, Roy began to reflect more deeply on work and school and I became increasingly aware of the impact that the completion of a bachelor's degree would have on Roy's life. As he shared, I was reminded of the amount of aspirational capital that Roy drew on as he fulfilled his dream of earning his bachelor's degree and becoming a certified teacher. He described his current work status at the time of our final interview:

> I'm a lead teacher and there [are] two of us that are lead teachers and we have an assistant. When I started there, I was an assistant and then I moved up to lead. I work 40 hours per week. I don't work 7-3 everyday. We kind of rotate hours around. Right now, salary wise I'm around the $27,000-28,000 range. Hopefully with [the] degree, it will increase.

Despite the financial hardships of having a low-paying job, Roy worked his way through the ranks and even looked to the future for financial advancement. As he reflected further, he described the internal turmoil he felt as he considered the reality of the cost of

an undergraduate education compared to the minimal salary he received as a childcare provider:

> It's kinda like, I found this [job] that I really enjoy doing, but I know that if I go to school, this is gonna cost me a lot of money. Obviously I knew going into it that I'm not going to make a lot of money, but for me, it wasn't about the money. I think what kinda pushed me was getting the knowledge…just getting the education, basically, that I needed or that I was looking for. So I think that was the big thing for me.

In this passage, Roy revealed that he was fully aware of the financial implications of his career choice; however, his quest for knowledge rather than a desire for a large income had fueled his desire to complete his undergraduate degree. As he continued to discuss the impact of obtaining a degree, he moved between talking about the financial impact and discussing the "empowerment" that his education provided:

> I'm gonna be starting to see the financial impact of [getting a degree]. I feel, this is gonna sound weird, but I have the *power* now, to negotiate [salary]. I think that was a big thing for a lot of people who were in the program both at LTC and even here [at AU]. You don't wanna take out all these loans, because eventually you have to pay them back. But at the end, I'm glad I did it that way. Yeah, I'll be paying it probably for the rest of my life, but at the same time, I'll have a degree for the *rest* of my life.

Roy's description reflects the sentiments of a lifelong learner—his degree was something he had earned and no one could take from him. For Roy, the degree meant better financial options, but gaining knowledge was in many ways more valuable than the money. In contrast to the reserved student who lacked confidence at the start of his studies, Roy was now armed with confidence and feelings of "empowerment."

Throughout the final interview, Roy continually used the word "empowerment" to describe how the program and courses had changed him. First he described the early childhood program at AU:

> So, it's empowering. I guess I would call this program a very empowering program….Being a nontraditional [program], it empowers you. It's tough, but it empowers you, I guess would be the fair way to put it, or the best way.

Interestingly, he specifically attributed the "empowerment" he felt to the fact that the program was nontraditional. As we continued to talk, I realized that Roy had frequently used the term "empowerment" in our conversations and interviews. The following conversation occurred when I shared this observation with Roy.

> Kristen: That's really interesting because looking back at some of your transcripts, you do use the word empower a lot. Throughout different interviews, you use that word a lot, so to hear you describe that, like it's, it's just *cool* to hear you say that and like I can see how it's impacted you and how you feel that "empowerment."
> Roy: Yeah. I think that's a big word for people. I would just say this empowers [you], somehow, because I think it does. I think this nontraditional program really does empower somebody that's in the program. It takes a teacher in a rut and it gives… it empowers them with tools to use.

Once again, Roy described "empowerment" as a result of the "non-traditional" aspects of the EC program. Although I did not ask at the time, I later wondered how Roy would have responded if I had asked why he believed that the AU program empowered him in ways that other, more traditional, programs would not have. As our conversation continued, he explained how his classes empowered him as a student and ultimately as a teacher by expanding his work options:

> That was just kind of empowering to me to know that if things don't work out at Landmarks, I could go teach somewhere else. I think that was the good thing about the classes, is that they really empowered me as a student.

This chapter opened with Roy's description of the "long unusual route" or "nontraditional route" taken by those who complete a college degree via a path other than

the assumed "norm" among members of society. Roy considered himself a "non-traditional" student because of his age and work status. He also considered the program in which he was enrolled to be a "non-traditional" program compared to other programs that he had experienced, and for him this "non-traditional" status was positive. In the end, each of these forms of Yosso's (2006) capital combined to create the sense of "empowerment" Roy felt at the completion of his undergraduate studies.

In the following chapter, I consider additional forms of capital as I use the cultural wealth framework to analyze the experience of another nontraditional student. Specifically, in Chapter Six I share the story of Thalia, a 46-year-old Mexican student. In my analysis of Thalia's story, I focus most closely on familial, navigational, aspirational, social, and linguistic capital.

Chapter 6: THALIA'S STORY

"A Journey of Faith"

> I am a person that likes to work *hard*. I like to challenge myself to try to not stay [in] the same place at all. I always try to walk ahead a little bit. Maybe take a longer time, but, I like to do that. I like to try and find the ways to get better. Like, in this case, I think my English, it wasn't so good. So I say, I try…ok, let me try [college]. We'll see how hard it is and if I can do it, I can continue, if not, then I [am] gonna stop. At least I can say I tried. (Thalia, interview, 1/13/11)

These words depict the experience of Thalia, a 46-year-old "nontraditional" undergraduate student as well as her determination to succeed in college, despite what she perceived as a lack of English proficiency. AU considered Thalia a "nontraditional" student based on her age, full-time work status, and emerging English skills. The important aspects of Thalia's experience for this research are her educational and work experiences throughout the years, and her quest to obtain a bachelor's degree while simultaneously learning English, her third language. Thalia described herself as a "unique" student compared to "regular," more traditional students.

As in the previous chapter featuring Roy's story, it is important to consider Thalia's complete educational biography (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) and the biographical stages through which she moved. Throughout her undergraduate studies, the role of full-time student was always accompanied by several additional roles including wife, mother, and full-time teacher's assistant in a bilingual elementary school. For Thalia, the journey to earning a bachelor's degree included learning a new language and navigating through institutions that were unfamiliar to her.

As a self-identified Mexican student Thalia considered the program at Assisi University (AU) an opportunity for "other persons." Thalia was a student of color

enrolled in a "nontraditional" undergraduate program. In the analysis of Thalia's story, I focus most closely on the familial, navigational, aspirational, social, and linguistic capital that she utilized throughout her journey.

Thalia is a graduate of the early childhood program at AU and is currently in the process of taking the state Praxis exams to become a certified teacher of children ages 0-8. She is 46 years old and has worked for the past 16 years as a teaching assistant in a bilingual elementary school in Lake City Public School District. Thalia is married and has two children. I came to know Thalia when I served as her instructor for several courses, including three in the first year of her program.

When it came time for me to begin my research, Thalia willingly volunteered; she had two specific reasons for wanting to participate in the study: to improve her English and to share her story. When I asked about her decision to participate in the research project, she explained as follows:

> Kristen: When you found out I was doing this study you volunteered [to participate]. What made you want to volunteer?
> Thalia: First, I would like to, a little bit, improve my language, my conversation. And the other one, I would like to share my opinion, my experience. So that's why.
> Kristen: Why do you feel people should hear your story?
> Thalia: First, I think is to learn. It's not only the person that comes here with the second language, but maybe like the third language or [a] different background. So I think for all the persons to learn how many persons come with different stories, with different backgrounds, with different needs, maybe? So that's why.

As I did with Roy's story in Chapter Five, I now use narrative inquiry to analyze data—gathered in the form of stories—and retell or "restory" Thalia's journey to complete her bachelor's degree. Thalia's journey spanned two countries and combined life, work, and educational experiences beginning at the age of six.

School Experiences in Mexico

One of seven children, Thalia was born in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1965. Her father was a farmer who cultivated beans, wheat, peas, and alfalfa and her mother cared for the children and the "big house." The "big house" from Thalia's childhood was actually one large room in which the whole family slept, and a separate kitchen area in which meals were prepared and the family gathered to eat. Her family ate meals together, and her grandfather set specific rules for this family time:

> One of the rules, I remember, is when you sit down at the table, you gonna eat, not gonna talk. So, we have like a certain time to eat, like 10 minutes, so my grandpa, he say, when you gonna sit down, you gonna eat. That's the time to eat. And, you need to learn eat fast, don't take too long, don't start talking, because sometimes the time is very valid. So sit down, eat quietly; try to not make a lot of noise, so you're not going to bother other people, so try to chew quietly. After we done, then we can start talking, but before, we eat.

Thalia's "normal duties" on the farm included feeding the chickens and cows, helping her mother clean the house, washing dishes, and assisting with the harvest. While she spent a lot of time on these chores, Thalia also recalled playing with her siblings near the river and creating their own games such as climbing trees, writing letters in the sand, or having frog races.

Primaria

Thalia began school in Mexico at the age of six. The school was quite a distance from Thalia's home and she made the long journey to and from school daily by foot. The trip took about two hours each way because Thalia and her siblings stopped to play with friends along the way. She attended El Sol Primaria Escuela and was in first grade in a class of approximately 12 children. Children sat two to a table and they copied

information that the teacher wrote on the board. The teacher often reprimanded the children by hitting their hands with the eraser, and Thalia tried hard to pay attention and do the right thing so she would not be the recipient of her teacher's physical reprimands.

Growing up, Thalia spoke Mixteco, a dialect of Spanish spoken in both her family and the surrounding community. When Thalia started school she learned Spanish, because instruction was solely in Spanish. As she talked about these early school experiences, it was evident that learning a new language did not come easily; she explained "It was hard because the class only was in Spanish, so, [that was] the hardest part for me. Change to a different language [and] sometimes you [don't] get it right away."

For Thalia, learning Spanish as a second language was the beginning of her accumulation of *linguistic capital*, or "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2006, p. 78). In other words, from an early age, Thalia was gaining linguistic capital, which has continued to play a critical role throughout Thalia's life. At the time, learning a second language was difficult. She was not only learning a new language, but she was doing it while simultaneously learning to read. She described her experience as follows:

> I think it was hard for me to start to learn how to read in Spanish. Sometimes, I switched books. I tried to memorize, what to say, when the other children, they start reading and they know how to read better and so I had to listen carefully, and try to memorize the book so when it was my turn, I had to read, I tried to repeat the same thing, what the other students say. But I think it take[s] me a little bit longer to learn how to read.

At the time, Thalia did not consider the acquisition of linguistic capital an asset, but rather an arduous a task.

Thalia's favorite subject in school was math and counting because it did not require knowing letters. She described herself as a good student, always quiet and never talking so that she did not get into trouble. Due to her developing Spanish skills, Thalia did not enjoy school because she was always worried about what would happen if she did not know the answer. She explained, "It's the way the teacher treat[ed] us, to hit us. That's the only part, that's why I don't like it. 'Cause [if] you don't know anything, they gonna hit you." For Thalia, the early years of school involved being forced to learn a new language *and* living in fear of what would happen if she did not know the right answer. This negative experience led to Thalia's decision that she would become a teacher when she grew up:

> When I was in elementary school, my dream was always to be a teacher. I was thinking, I'm gonna be a teacher, but [I'm] never going to spank the students or hit them with anything because I think that's not the way they can learn. I don't know how long it's gonna take, but my dream was always to be a teacher. I don't know when. I don't know where. But my dream was that.

After Thalia completed fourth grade, her family moved to Mexico City so Thalia and her siblings could attend a better school with more advanced classes. Thalia was both excited and nervous about the move because she had never been to a big city and Mexico City was gigantic compared to the small city and life to which she was accustomed.

Instead of moving up to fifth grade, Thalia repeated fourth grade in Mexico City because of her emerging Spanish skills in reading and writing. In addition, Thalia endured a whole new school schedule and experience. Because there were so many students in Mexico City, they attended two different sessions: a morning session and an afternoon session. Thalia's siblings attended the morning session (8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.)

and Thalia attended the afternoon session (1:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.). Unlike her small class in Oaxaca, Thalia's class in Mexico city included 30-40 students. Because of the different schedules, she no longer attended school at the same time as her siblings. The only students she knew in the afternoon session were a few of her cousins, but none were in her class.

The large school overwhelmed Thalia. Students pushed, called each other names, and often targeted those who did not speak Spanish very well. Thalia's peers did not view her linguistic capital as an asset. Rather than viewing Thalia as bilingual, her peers viewed her as someone who could not understand or speak Spanish well. Because of her emergent Spanish skills, she was often a target of ridicule and she was very aware that children made fun of her due to her language skills. As she told the following story, tears filled Thalia's eyes as she relived the memory of being picked on for her emerging Spanish skills:

> When I was in fifth grade, one of the teacher[s] was *so* nice to me because I still have the process to learn in Spanish and some kids started making fun [of me] and he stopped them. "Come here!" He called them, and he put them in front of the classroom and he asked them to speak the same language [Mixtexco] and they could not speak. And they speak Spanish. And he asked, do you speak two language[s]? Do you like to learn two language[s]? And, I remember that boy, he didn't answer anything and the teacher [said], "She speak[s] two language[s], and you speak only one." He told him, so, after, he had like a, more valid[14] than you, so don't make fun any of those person who speak more than one language, because no anyone can learn, I think some people they can learn, or they know how to speak two language, but not everybody," he say.

For the first time in her life, Thalia was positioned as someone who knew *two* languages, rather than someone who *did not know* Spanish. Rather than embracing a deficit view of

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[14] It seems that Thalia used the word valid to describe the "value" her teacher assigned to the ability to speak two languages.

her language skills, the teacher focused on the *assets* she brought, in this case, the knowledge of two languages, an asset that few of her peers shared. Until that point, others had always viewed language skills as something Thalia lacked.

Hearing her teacher's comment was a pivotal point for Thalia: she felt both free from the torment of her peers and empowered to strengthen her emerging Spanish skills. As Thalia described what happened next, she became very emotional and tears welled up in her eyes as she described the transformation of her peers:

> After, the teacher talk[ed] with them and let them understand a little bit more. Then [the children] teach us, they start helping a little bit more to read, or when I didn't say the right way the words, they help me to say them the right way. Oh, no, it's this way. So, they start helping a little bit more.

While this was a turning point for acceptance among her peers, it did not change the strong pressure to assimilate that Thalia felt. At the age of 10, she felt pressured to stop using her native language of Mixteco and use only Spanish, which seemed like it would take forever. As she explained this to me, tears welled up in her eyes once again. I realized that she was not upset about an isolated situation, but that her tears were evidence of a shift of identity that had happened within her. As a privileged White female, I had never experienced such a shift or even considered what it would be like for someone to experience it. Thalia recounted the inner struggle she felt as she tried to learn Spanish but at the same time not abandon her native language:

> When I start to learn something, I feel like, like two person[s] in one. It's not easy to learn, but when you know how [much] you learn or how much you know of that language, I think [that has] more value for me. I think I have this privilege to learn…. Like as a person you have to get it together. Not to separate. Bring it together.

Thalia used the word *value* to describe her language learning. Our conversations suggested that she had worked hard to embrace learning Spanish, something that she viewed as an asset, while also seeking a way to not abandon her first language. Rather than allowing herself to continually be picked on for her lack of language proficiency, she used the experiences to fuel her desire to improve her language skills. She described the start of her transformation as follows:

> Little by little, I start thinking, I can learn how to speak or read. I think it's gonna be better if I start learning more Spanish and read a little bit more, I think they can help me to integrate in the group, to be a big part of the group, or start making a little bit more friends. And I try to start talking a little bit more, because I [was] always a quiet person.

Thus, Thalia not only embraced the opportunity to learn Spanish, but she also viewed speaking Spanish as a way to integrate into a group from which she was previously excluded. In the terms of the community cultural wealth framework, Thalia utilized two additional forms of capital. First, she used social capital when she made a conscious effort to integrate into a network of people and community resources. Second, she used navigational capital or individual agency as she moved through social institutions, in this case her early school experiences. Throughout her school experiences, Thalia worked continuously to learn Spanish, which she believed would help her succeed in both her studies and her social life.

Secundaria

The transition to Secundaria (grades seven through nine) marked the first time that Thalia was excited about school. She was excited to begin middle school because she had heard it was fun and that there would be new opportunities for her such as learning about science in a laboratory. In middle school, students began focusing on one of two career

paths: designer or secretary. Although Thalia would have preferred to take the secretarial path, she was chosen to be in the designer track. Ultimately, she came to view this track as more beneficial and embraced the opportunity to learn everything she could about design.

In addition to clothing design courses, Thalia's studies included classes in core subjects such as math, science, social studies, English, Spanish, and art. While she enjoyed learning how to design clothes, the classes were not easy for her because she had to work while a she attended school:

> None of them [were easy]. None. I said none of them because I start working at the same time, so I [was] working and attending middle school, and I have to help my grandma with her duties in the morning. I had to go buy food or meat or whatever she needed to cook for dinner or something, we had to do that before going to school or do[ing] the dishes.

In addition to the struggle of working and going to school simultaneously, Thalia faced the financial burden of buying books for each subject:

> My uncle helped me with the books because we had to buy books in middle school. I don't know how much we had to pay, but we had to buy those books. [In every class] they asked you to bring one book, they gave you the name of the book and you have to buy this book. My father was the only one working so he don't [sic] have enough money to buy for everybody and so I had to do that stuff and my uncle helped me with those books.

Thalia drew on familial capital as a means of getting the materials she needed for school. She helped her family with chores, and in turn, her uncle helped her pay for the books she needed for school. In addition to buying books, Thalia and her cousins also shared books occasionally, often swapping books throughout the day so that one book could be used by multiple family members for the same class.

Design school and the textile factory

Following Secundaria, Thalia had the opportunity to attend high school but declined because students had to be selected for entry and were required to pass a test. Instead, she switched to a different school where she continued to focus on her design studies. At this school, she learned more about designing clothes and also learned general math skills. Thalia continued to study and three years later graduated with what she termed a "short career." This was celebrated with a special ceremony in which Thalia wore a blue silk gown that she designed for the occasion; she received flowers, a diploma, and a ring.

Following design school, Thalia took a job in a textile factory; she received a "professional salary" (rather than the customary minimum starting salary) because of the training that she received during the three years of design school. Thalia felt she was both a talented designer and good at her job. She was very humble in her explanation of how she obtained a job with higher starting pay:

> I want to say I was lucky, because I always believe in God and I was praying for God to provide an open door to get a job, and so, for me, I'm a very lucky person because I was asking and I think that I get those [sic] job.

As a designer, part of the job required Thalia to thread needles and sewing machines by hand; she described it as a job that could not be rushed and required attention to detail. The hours were long. Thalia worked 12-hour days during the week and 10 hour days on the weekend. She did not complain about the long hours, instead, she talked about this phase of her life as a time that she challenged herself. She described the precautions that she took as she traveled to and from work each day:

> I challenge [d] myself to take care of myself. When I have to go to school, or when I have to go to work, every single day, I have to cross the street. I have to be very careful because some people do not respect the traffic light. It is hard to take care of yourself and you learn how to take care of your purse. The way you're gonna carry your purse, where you gonna walk, some people they come, and you can identify them as strange, or they know what they want to do, so, it doesn't look like a nice person, so walk this way or walk this way or try to find different way to get on the bus.

Thalia was now a young woman navigating a big city and she was acutely aware of the crimes that occurred frequently, especially on the bus lines that she rode to and from work daily. During one interview, Thalia described in detail two horrifying armed robberies that happened while she was on the bus, "one with a gun, and another with a "long, long knife." Thankfully, neither she nor the other passengers were physically harmed. She credited her faith in God for keeping her safe:

> I always pray, God take care of me. So nothing happen. That's why I pray every single morning. And I still do. My grandfather encouraged us, every single day you have to pray so God, he can take care of you all the time. And I think this work[ed].

This is one of many examples in which Thalia credited her safety or success in a situation to her faith in God. Her faith in God was directly connected to familial capital as she remembered her grandfather teaching her lessons that she used throughout her life.

Despite Thalia's success in her role as designer at the factory, her early aspirations to become a teacher persisted:

> I still kept thinking, I'm *gonna* be a teacher. Maybe teach the same thing, so to design clothes, but I still have that in my, just, I tried to find the way to get to school, the right school at the right time. In Mexico [it] is hard to find a school in the evenings to go, almost all the school is during the day, so work and studies, and it's not easy. It's hard to find [a] school to attend.

This statement is evidence of aspirational capital or “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2006, p. 77). In this excerpt, Thalia described continually aspiring to be a teacher, despite the challenges that came with attending college while working and living in Mexico. Ultimately, her dreams were put on hold as the next phase in Thalia’s life revolved around getting married and making a move that would change her life.

Getting Married and Crossing the Water

While working at the factory, Thalia married a man whom she had known since her childhood. Over the years, their paths had crossed from time to time and he often called and wrote her letters. Eventually he asked Thalia to marry him and after declining his initial proposal, she later agreed to be his wife. She had a “normal” ceremony at an Assembly of God church that included music, games, cake, and 200 guests. It was important for Thalia to be married “with the law, and church, and family, and friends.”

Following the wedding, Thalia wanted to stay close to family but her new husband had a visa and had lived and worked in the United States for six years prior to their wedding. In order to be with her new husband, she had to move to the United States without citizenship or a green card, which meant she had to cross the border without documents. Moving was a difficult decision for Thalia. Ultimately, her tio (uncle), whom she felt was very wise, pushed her to experience something different. He told Thalia “I know you gonna live over there [in the U.S.]. After you go over there and try, one or two years, you don't want to come back here anymore, because the way they live is total[ly] different.” Her uncle went on to encourage Thalia to use her move to the United States as an opportunity to learn another new language. For Thalia, this would be

her third language; the thought of learning English made her very apprehensive given her struggles to learn Spanish when she first entered school in Mexico:

> He tell me…"Just one thing I can tell you, wherever you go, never feel too old to start learn[ing] new language." (Laughter) He's a lawyer and he would say "Never stop, just never feel like that. Just start learn[ing] new language, discover the language you use to survive."

So facing the prospect of spending her life with her husband in a new place *and* a speaking new language, she made an important decision. She explained, "That's why I decided to come with my husband. I had to cross the water like the other people. I told him if Immigration catch me, I go back and I never try to come back to this place." Ultimately, her faith in God once again provided her with courage to make the difficult journey. Her aunt assured her that everything would be all right. Thalia recalled her aunt saying "Don't worry about it, we gonna start praying, so everything's gonna be okay, nothing is gonna happen. God's gonna take care of you so don't worry about it."

As Thalia prepared for her journey, she packed only items that she deemed absolutely essential. Most importantly, she chose to bring her Bible:

> I think it's hard to decide what you gonna bring [to the United States]. First, because it's like a wall and the other side and you don't know what's on the back of the wall. And so the first thing I decide to bring was my Bible. That's the first thing I put in. And like four outfits. That's it. And when I was on the border they tell me you need to leave your suitcase over here, you can't take it with you. And, I tell the person; I can't leave the suitcase here. I need it. So I didn't leave it, I carry it with me. So he said, that's fine, you can take it with you. But the first thing I put in was my Bible so I can read my Bible. So, it was hard.

She described the process of immigrating in a very matter of fact way, just as she had shared other stories during our interviews.

> My experience was easy, they never caught me, I was in a group of 10 people. When you walk over there, in the water, in the middle of the hill, there's a hill over there, more people they get to there and you never know

> who's coming. That time get a little bit scary. I remember the little boy, like eight year[s] old. He guide [d] us into Sunecito, California. We get over there and he say "BYE!"

Although it seemed to me to be a major life event, Thalia spoke only briefly about the actual journey of immigrating to the United States without documents. This was surprising to me, as the event seemed so scary and significant to me. As I continued to reflect on this, I recognized this as yet another form of the aspirational capital that Thalia possessed, sometimes unknowingly. In this situation, Thalia faced a real danger of getting caught, and despite the risks she made the journey. As she talked, I was in awe of the strength that was in her voice during a time when I thought there should be fear. As a researcher, I was acutely aware of my own biases and interpretations and this was a significant lesson for me.

Starting Life in Lake City, U.S.A

From that point on, Thalia and her husband lived in Lake City, a large urban city in a Midwestern state. Over the years, her husband worked a variety of blue-collar jobs to provide for his wife. Thalia and her husband eventually had two daughters. Thalia stayed home and cared for the children until her youngest daughter turned four. At that point, Thalia began to help out in her daughter's classroom—it was the start of a job that lasted the next 16 years:

> I was stay[ing] home caring for [the children] until my youngest daughter started K4. I start[ed] to help with her teacher, because her assistant wasn't here or she didn't have any assistant and she have a lot to do, so she asked me to help her, and I say, "Yes, I can help you." So, I arrive at 7:30 a.m. with my daughter to help her to set up the stuff and she tell me, because she was speaking Spanish so she was a bilingual teacher, and so I help her, then she talk with the principal I think to get my job, something, so, I don't know where she get the applications, so they come out and they give me a job until now.

Thalia enjoyed working at the same elementary school that her daughters attended; she also liked the school because it was bilingual and allowed her to use Spanish, which she now considered her primary language after struggling to learn it so long ago. The job was convenient and was something that Thalia really enjoyed. The more she worked with young children, the more she wondered if a job in this field was her true calling and a career worth pursuing. Once again, she turned to her faith in God; she prayed for confirmation that she was on the right career path:

> I really want to be a teacher. I always want to be a teacher. I really want this. And, so, one day I start asking [for] confirmation, is that what I really want or not because I am on time to go back and find something else. I was pray[ing], and I say, God, give me patience for this kid, or how I can I know that this is my real passion to work with children.
>
> And I think, help me Lord, and I said to him, so, all those children, for the whole year I was concerned with those students and they, it make me *so* happy to help those children to feel more comfortable in the classroom.

In Thalia's eyes, God answered her prayers. During that year, Thalia saw improvement in even the most challenging of students. She felt that she contributed to the students' success and she was more confident in both her teaching and her aspirations to become a teacher. Thalia saw these developments as signs that this was indeed the career God intended her to pursue.

At the same time Thalia was having these internal conversations, her husband was encouraging her to apply for U.S. citizenship. She had lived in the United States for several years; she had a green card through marriage; and she had two young daughters. For the second time in her life, Thalia experienced barriers based on her language skills. She did not have confidence in her English proficiency, something that she deemed essential for passing the citizenship test.

Despite her lack of confidence, her husband continually encouraged her to take the test. She explained:

> My husband told me apply for the citizenship and [said] it's gonna be easy for you and I say I don't speak any English and you want me to apply for the citizenship? He tell me, just try and, so, and I tell him, I don't want to because they gonna ask you a lot of question and I don't know how to answer them and my English is just like three words. He say, "You can do it." He [started] the process and they send me the date for the exams I have to take and all that kind of stuff. I tell him I don't want to go and then he tell me, "Just try, study a little bit."

Despite her lack of confidence, Thalia studied and planned on taking the citizenship test a few weeks later. She described her feelings the day she was scheduled to take the test, just a week following the miscarriage of her third child:

> It was [a] very sad day because like a week before the test I lost one of my babies. I'm not sure if I[would] go or not. Maybe I decide to stay home, I not feel confident to go because I don't know [what] I'm gonna answer over there. But that day, I took that day off of work and I was in bed until 10:00! And I was thinking, I'm gonna try. Why not! Why I gonna let this opportunity go. So, I decide to get out of bed and take a shower and I take my car and I drove there just in time.

Characteristically, she possessed aspirational capital as she rose above her fears of not knowing the language to view the test as an opportunity that she was not going to let pass her by. She described the exam and her interactions with the proctor:

> And so, I do that and she took all those papers and I answered multiple choice and the ones she asked me to write. She took like two minutes and then she tell me, "Congratulations! You passed the test!" I said, "Oh, really!!!" At first, I didn't believe myself that I passed the test and then I said, "I passed it!" Like a minute later. So, I thought I [was] not gonna pass the test, but I pass[ed] the test. So, that day was happy. That all changed everything!

After Thalia discussed the experience of taking and passing her citizenship exam, she offered a humble explanation:

> Probably the only thing, before I go, I say, "Ok, God, in my own words, God, if you have grace and you let me pass this test. Give me your grace in front of this person. She can ask me, the person, she can ask me a simple question." And that's what it was, [a] simple thing. So, I think God was with me that day, or every single day. But I think it's nice to pass those tests. Especially when you [do] not speak very well English, or other language, it's hard.

Once again, Thalia's belief in God was evident as she described how God was always with her. Despite the challenge of learning a third language, Thalia believed she was successful because God answered her prayers.

Earning an Associate Degree

After successfully obtaining her U.S. citizenship, Thalia was ready for her next challenge. She wanted to begin taking classes to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. She described her plans:

> I decide[d] to find some course[s] and I think if I can find one of those course in Spanish, I'm gonna try to take it or I will try to finish all the credits they ask me to. I will do it. And, I was thinking [for] like, six months, where can I find this class, where, there must be classes in Spanish, at least one, so, I can get a little bit more knowledge.

So while she wanted to attend classes, her language skills prompted her to seek classes in Spanish rather than English. Six months into her search, a co-worker told her about a new program offered at Lakeview Technical College. The program resulted in an associate degree in early childhood education, and some of the first courses in the program were offered in Spanish, which sparked Thalia's interest. She immediately acted on her desire to enroll in the program:

> So I ask her, "Give me the phone, I can call. Just give me the phone and I call." Then I start to take the course to help me to improve, I don't care…in Spanish, I can do it. I can do it better in Spanish than English, I told her, so I start to take those classes. I was, at the beginning, even though it was in Spanish, it was a little hard for me, because my brain was so lazy.

> After that, I decide to continue, but before that I decide to take a little bit more reading, basic communication skill[s], so I took like two semesters of reading and I start reading a little bit more books to help me understand.

As she prepared to begin studying for an associate degree, Thalia drew on several forms of capital. First, she drew on aspirational capital as she identified her dream of taking courses. Not only did she pursue her dream of taking courses, but she also found a program that would help her overcome the language barrier. Next, she utilized social capital as she networked with a co-worker to locate a program and to enroll together. Finally, Thalia used navigational capital by successfully navigating through the initial stages of enrolling in both a program and an institution that was unfamiliar to her.

For the next several years, Thalia worked toward completing her associate degree in early childhood education. She continued to work full-time as a teacher's aide at the bilingual elementary school, as well as care for her husband and young daughters. Thalia worked hard to strengthen her English skills and developed a network of friends in the program. She was a dedicated student and received primarily A's throughout her associate degree courses. After three years of hard work, Thalia graduated with an associate degree in early childhood education, the first step toward meeting her lifelong goal of becoming a certified teacher.

Earning a Bachelor's Degree

The next step for Thalia was to find a program that was the right fit for her to complete her bachelor's degree. She enrolled at the University of Lake City (ULC); she described the initial process as follows:

> I tried to continue my education because I know I need to learn a lot of stuff, and especially in English, talking. I went, I do all the [admission] process over there. So, I have all the ID and everything, but when I started

> asking more about how many students are in each group and they told me sometimes you gonna be in like an auditorium with 200 students or maybe more, it depends on the class you gonna take.
>
> And so, when they told me it was gonna be 200, oh my! I'm gonna get lost, I'm not gonna like to be here. So, that's why when I see that's a big group over there. I decided NO….I don't want to be in the BIG group of students because I 'm gonna get lost and maybe I'm gonna frustrate myself more.

Thalia realized that the program was not a good fit due to the large class sizes. Instead of enrolling in a program that she knew was not right for her, she decided to explore other options and ultimately found the program at Assisi University (AU). In the following excerpt she described the appeal of AU's model, which included a cohort design and a set 33-month program:

> I wait[ed] one year more, and to find what schools gonna be, they have a small group to attend, so I don't have to go in different class[es]. They have all those, you know, you have to take this one, so I don't have to waste my time to look at what class I gonna take or who can help me to guide me, take this class, or next time take this one.
>
> For me, it's hard for me to do to that, because it's not my country and so I don't have that much idea how this works, so, it's nice. It's so very complicated in that place [ULC], so I, when I hear about this program [at AU], I decide to attend this one because they have the program set up for those three years or four years.

Although the program at AU seemed like the right fit and she was drawn to the cohort model, Thalia still questioned whether her language skills were sufficient for an undergraduate program. As she grappled with the decision of whether to enroll, Thalia recruited a trusted friend and fellow student from her associate degree program. They discussed enrolling in the program together:

> I was thinking a lot, and a lot of questions come in my mind and so I find Ana and say "Let's go take this course with me. Let's go, we can help each other." And, I think, I still need like one more year of try[ing] to get those basic communication skill[s], writing, I need a lot of help with that,

> and I feel like I am not ready to go but I would like to go, but I need more time. And she's like, “Let's try it. We'll see how it’s done and I will help you. We gonna try to find out who can help us, but just try so you not gonna feel frustrated with yourself.”
>
> That’s why I decide, ok, maybe this is the time to take this course, so we'll see. So I talk with my husband and he tell me, “Are you sure you want to go?” I said “I would like to try at least one semester, we'll see how it's gonna work. If it is hard, I gonna try, but I can see how to make it, or I can do it, then I can go.” So, that's why I decided to go.

From the cultural wealth perspective, two forms of capital were present as Thalia made the decision to enroll in AU. First, she continued to draw on the aspirational capital that was present in so many other stages of her life. She continued to view her English skills as a barrier to her success and yet was motivated to challenge herself and try this new program. She also drew on social capital by using the network of peers she met in her associate degree program, this time recruiting a fellow student to enroll with her. Thalia selected Ana, a Latina woman who was also still developing her English proficiency. Neither woman knew what to expect of the new program, but they knew they would feel more confident navigating through the program together.

Navigating through an unfamiliar institution was a skill Thalia demonstrated throughout the 33-month program. Her navigational capital, or “the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2006, p. 80) was evident as she applied for financial aid at AU:

> Financial aid was very hard for me because I think my English wasn't very good and the term[s] they use for financial aid, they're all different, I didn't know any of the words they use. When they say, “accept,” what is that? Or FAFSA or all those words I did not know. And, I have in my head all this information, because it's different for me, like in my country they don’t have that much process or scholarship for the students, so when I see they ask you to bring this, and you can't have this or maybe we'll see you

> can have some help, economic support, for me, everything was no win. All the process, you missing the paper, read this, and wow, and everything they gonna ask me for a lot of information, for a lot of paper.

Despite the challenges of navigating through the larger institution, including processes such as applying for financial aid, Thalia was “proud” to be enrolled in the early childhood (EC) program, a program she considered “not for regular students,” but more like an “adult special program.” In her eyes, the program at AU was much different than the college experience her daughter had at ULC as a traditional student:

> I tell my daughter my [program] is gonna be different than hers because she's like a *regular* student and I tell her that way "regular student" because you start with K4 through now and you didn’t' stop, you didn't take any breaks and your brain is active and the class you take is as a full-time student. And, my case is different because we're adults who work full-time and we try to go back to school, we try to continue and not all the people have the same levels or different kind of levels. Like in my case, in my country, I didn't go [to] college over there, but I come here and I try to continue and it's gonna be a little bit hard for me. Maybe because my brain wasn't active in reading or writing and so like it's a little bit lazy.

Thalia began the program in the fall of 2009 as a member of the second cohort in the EC program at AU. Her cohort consisted of 10 students, a size that was quite comfortable for Thalia. Like the first cohort, Thalia’s cohort was quite diverse: four students identified as Latina, three students identified as African American, two students identified as White, and one student identified as Native American. All the students in Thalia’s cohort worked full-time in early childhood settings including childcare centers, Head Start programs, and schools. Similar to her fellow students at Lakeview Technical College (LTC), the students in this cohort had diverse work experiences and cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

At the start of the program, it was difficult for Thalia to feel comfortable with her new peers:

> I didn't know nobody [sic]. Here, the only person I know was Ana, the other ones I didn't know, so we met here. For me, I always quiet, so, it was a little bit hard to get into the group.

Yet Thalia's quiet personality was not the biggest barrier to feeling comfortable within the group. She stated that, as part of a diverse group, she contributed to difficulties in knowing how to work together:

> In the beginning it was a little bit hard to know each other or how to work together a little bit because of different ethnicities, maybe. We have Hispanic people, Latino people, but it's not the same country. Like Juanita is from Mexico and Ana is from [a] different country and Leah and the other one is from [the] USA or they was [sic] born here, so I think three different cultures.

As she continued to tell the story of her first semester, it became evident that the difficulties in the cohort were much more significant than simply not knowing how to work together. Underlying these more superficial problems was Thalia's perception that her peers viewed her from a deficit perspective; tears flooded her eyes as she described this initial experience:

> At the beginning, it was a little bit hard. I don't know, how to say, but they look at us, like what are you doing here? You not speak, very well English and you don't know how to write or whatever, and that, they make us feel like that. So, that kinda stuff, they make you feel like…it's a little bit hard.

As Thalia described her early experiences, I recalled all the challenges her cohort faced in their first semester; during that time I was one of the instructors for her class. During that conversation, I shifted roles from researcher to Thalia's instructor, because in that moment that I recalled all too well the student she was describing and the impact that she had on Thalia and the other members of her cohort. Despite my awareness of the marginalizing acts of Tanisha, one of the African American students in the cohort, I

always felt that my attempts to change the situation had not been sufficient. In my field notes following an interview with Thalia, I recorded my thoughts:

> Thalia talked generally in first, but then talked about how one person made "us" feel… basically describing how Tanisha had made her and the other Latina students feel marginalized based on their cultural and linguistic differences from that student. I tried to go into the issues of race a bit more deeply, but I was trying to do it in a sensitive way. Thalia began to cry as she was talking about how the one person made her feel…and I began to feel pangs of guilt that I couldn't change that experience for her now, or that I didn't change it for her in the moment. I was one of her instructors during the first year of the program and I, too, struggled with the student she was describing. It seemed to stir up so many feelings for both of us. It was very difficult to hear her describe that first year from her perspective—from somebody who was marginalized constantly and made to feel like she didn't belong. That was exactly the opposite of what the program was designed to do and I felt awful that she went through that. Awful that I had the power to silence the other student, but that I didn't do enough…. (Field notes, 8/26/11).

Thalia felt that Tanisha was missing something that Thalia deemed essential for a cohort to succeed. As she explained the situation, Thalia repeatedly used the word "respect" to make an important point:

> We have different opinions, but the way I see is to respect each other. It doesn't matter if they have different opinion, different ethnicities, I think they need to respect, and I need to respect them and I would like them to respect me. So, I think that the most important thing is to respect each other.

Again, my field notes provide further reflection on Thalia's comments:

> I was curious about how she would describe the other members and the dynamics of the cohort. Her cohort had a rocky start and it was interesting to hear her talk about respect and how that is what she talked about when I asked [about] her role—rather than talking about herself, she talked about what she thought was important for everyone—respect. I sensed that a part of why she was talking about that [respect] was because that was something that wasn't part of her cohort experience for the first year (Field notes, 8/26/11).

After the cohort's "rocky start," things changed drastically at the beginning of the second year when several students did not return to the program. Thalia explained:

> I would say that just one person [not coming back], that helped a lot. They [made] the environment be a little more comfortable for everybody. Not for me only, just for everybody. 'Cause they helped. We tried to not value [evaluate?] the person and try to be nice to each other, but sometimes that person does not think the same thing. But, we try.

In Thalia's view, during the first year of the program she and many other students in the cohort had attempted to be respectful toward a person who did not reciprocate the same values. Tanisha did not return to the program the second year, which allowed cohort members to get to know one another and become closer:

> It's totally different now. Different because at the beginning, we didn't know each other that much and so, we can't trust that much in the other person, so we started to know each other. But now I think we know more about each other, a little bit more, so we can talk more, laugh, and not [be] afraid, we have more confidence to talk with each other I think.

Starting in the third semester of the program, Thalia and her cohort began to connect and form a support system for one another. Despite the feelings of marginalization she experienced during the first year of the program, Thalia always seemed to rise above whatever barriers she faced and find strength in those challenges:

> It was hard, but the one thing was in the beginning, that make me motivate to continue to learn new stuff and I said to myself, I can do it. If other people can do it, I can do it. So, I think that push[ed] me hard. Yeah. So. I think I feel comfortable. I still know I have a lot of thing[s] to learn, but little by little, I learn all the time.

At one point, I asked Thalia if she ever became upset or sad when she faced these kinds of barriers or challenges:

> Oh, sometimes, I get angry. But, sometimes I not show off, I try to control myself because otherwise I'm gonna give the power to the other person and I don't want to give the power. That is one thing I learn from my grandfather. I learn a lot of things from him ‘cause he lost his parents when he was very young, but when he grew up, he was more, the richest man in the town, so, he say, if you want to do something, you can make a lot if you want. Oh, ok, and I never understood that before. But if you want to do something, you always can do it, but you have to work hard.

Thalia’s anger represents her use of resistant capital: she seemed very aware of power and procuring power rather than giving it to others. She once again drew on her familial capital, this time in the form of advice from her grandfather. She was empowered by the words of her grandfather, his experience, and his successes. His words later proved to be true and his encouragement armed Thalia with the aspirational capital she needed to be successful.

After almost three years of both studying and working full-time, Thalia graduated with a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education. She had experienced a graduation ceremony at the technical college she attended prior to enrolling at AU, but this was different. This time she was leaving the program a different person than she was when she started. She was more confident in both her English skills and her knowledge of early childhood education. Thus, her determination to become a certified teacher persisted.

Prior to the graduation ceremony, I searched anxiously for Thalia’s cohort as they lined up with all of the other undergraduate students. I saw several of her classmates and their family members and we exchanged hugs, smiles, and tears of joy on this momentous day. Although many of the cohort members were there, I could not find Thalia and I began to wonder if she had decided not to march in the graduation ceremony. Although I had not been in touch with Thalia during the last few weeks of the program, I had heard

that the final weeks of the semester were quite difficult for her and some of her classmates, so when I did not see her with her peers, I began to worry. Finally, just a few minutes before the ceremony began, I saw Thalia and we exchanged hugs and tears. She gave me a hesitant smile and on a day when I thought she would be jumping with joy, she seemed very reserved and almost sad.

I watched as each of these students, *my* students, walked across the stage and received their diplomas. Tears began to fall down my cheeks as I realized that they had each reached their goal of completing a bachelor's degree. My thoughts turned to Thalia and I recalled the long journey that began many years ago in Oaxaca as she started school at the age of six. I thought about all the barriers she had faced over the last three years, and I thought about her determination to succeed. I left the ceremony feeling proud—proud of Thalia for accomplishing her dream and proud that I was able to be part of her story.

Barriers

Although she ultimately found success and met her goal of earning a bachelor's degree, Thalia's undergraduate journey entailed a variety of challenges. Like many "nontraditional" students, Thalia struggled to balance the responsibilities of both working full-time and studying as full-time student. Like most of the women in her cohort, Thalia was also a wife and a mother. Her day consisted of caring for herself and her family, working, attending classes, and studying. She described a typical day as follows:

> My schedule is 20 [minutes] after 5:00 in the morning, that's [when] my schedule start[s]…normal, typical day working. I have to drop off my daughter at 6:20 a.m. in the bus stop. During that time I jump to the gym for [a] half hour or so. So about 6:55 a.m. I take a shower and get ready until 7:25 a.m. and [at] that time I go to the classroom and get ready [for work]. Sometimes after work ends at 3:30 p.m. I have to come to school

> and after class and after I arrive my house, I have to sit down and take some snack or whatever I have to take, and then I have to sit down and read or try to work, whatever homework I have until midnight. Sometimes it's too much and it's like I have to do extra work until 1:00 in the morning. Or weekends, I have to wake up early, 6:00 and read or whatever I have to do until 10:00 at night. Because, in some [areas], like I say, in writing, I have longer time to think and write, so, so I don't have any life during that...(laughter). Like, you know, I had to do that instead, to be [a] success in school.

As Thalia described her schedule, I did not get the sense that she was complaining. Instead, Thalia viewed the rigor of her schedule as simply what she had to do to succeed in school. Classes met two to three nights per week in the fall and summer, and unlike some traditional programs in which students have a break during the summer, Thalia's class schedule was even more rigorous in the summer. Her summer schedule consisted of two classes that met from 5-9 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Thalia did not work during the summer, so she was able to spend more time on her studies. She described her study sessions with a peer, specifically how she reviewed for a biology class she was taking:

> I tell her [to meet] very early in the morning, otherwise we don't have any time. Or sometimes, as soon as I get back home, I start to answer some questions because I know it takes longer to go back and think and read again and find the answer. So, sometimes it takes me like five hours to do those [review] exams for like 10-20 questions. It's a lot of things to go back and think of why this answer and what, sometimes based on the experiment we had done. Sometimes, so why did this happen? Or why, I start to think over about what happen or why that process. So that help[s] me a little bit.

In addition to having a grueling schedule, Thalia was also in the process of acquiring basic English language skills in speaking, reading, and writing. Being a student (FLOTE) presented additional challenges on top of Thalia's rigorous schedule and coursework:

> At the beginning at AU, because all those new vocabulary [words], they're all different. It's a very high level for me to get into, so that's why sometimes I catch some words and maybe sometimes get lost on some part. I try to catch up and I read the books or chapters ahead, to get a little bit idea of what the class is gonna be about. I took hours to read and tried to translate and understand what the chapters talk about. My husband said, "Just learn the stuff" and "Why do you frustrate yourself sitting down and translating all the words?" Let me try this I said, if I can do this, I [am] gonna continue and if not, I [am] gonna give up. So, it was hard the first semester. I did it. Thank you for all you[r] help.

In this excerpt, Thalia described navigating both a program and content that were unfamiliar to her. She drew on linguistic capital as she increased her knowledge of the English language. At first, she completed assignments by translating and moving between English and Spanish. When her husband questioned her, Thalia responded that was determined to try this method and if it was unsuccessful, she planned to give up. She described the process of code switching between her second and third languages:

> Sometimes I have to think in Spanish first, or translate the rubric to see, to make sure I understand what she's expecting me to do, and sometimes I still have to write it in Spanish a little bit. But, I have to stop and go back, oh let me start over again, because [it] make me to feel a little bit more confused. When I try to translate it, if it's not the same words, or whenever in Spanish it's not gonna be the same in English and it's hard a little bit.

Thalia used this process from the start of the program and continued throughout her studies. At times, the process proved confusing because much of the content-specific vocabulary did not translate directly. As a result, the course readings and assignments were quite challenging for Thalia.

When asked about the specific challenges she faced during the program, Thalia described her struggle to complete written assignments in English, a skill that was required and assessed in each class and writing assignment:

> The biggest one, I think [is writing]. Trying just to write and use words and I still have fear to express myself writing. Maybe I still [make] a lot of

> mistakes and sometimes I write and say this isn't right and I have to go back and rewrite it. Or when I type and then the sentences, I have to go back and what am I missing? I go back and think I have to use it and go back 'cause I have to read over it two or three times and find out what I am missing or what I need to put to make it a complete sentence and I still struggle with that.

Learning English

Although Thalia viewed her limited English skills as a barrier, she was very motivated to learn English. She was also very conscious about seeking opportunities to help her improve her spoken and written skills in English. She described her decision to start attending a church that held services in English:

> We attend Spring River Assembly of God. For almost three years [prior] we were attending a Spanish church, the same one but it was in Spanish, everything, and we decide[d] to attend in English so we can learn a little bit more about how they use the word of God in [a] different language. In Spanish, maybe I know everything, but in English I don't know how they use it all.

Thalia was determined to learn English and she viewed participation in the mass as a means of improving both her comprehension and reading skills in English. She explained that attending church was an opportunity for her to learn how to read:

> I follow along the words of, when they sing, or sometimes when they preaching or they have the words or the verse of the Bible, they put all those up here on the screen so we can follow them. So I follow everything and I learn how to read, too.

As a result of these efforts, Thalia gradually began to feel more confident in her reading and comprehension skills:

> I started reading more and I start[ed] understand more, too. When I read and I [do] not stop [at] every single word, I just keep on reading so I can, and it help[s] me, what's this one, still some words I didn't know, so I start to go back and keep going,

Thalia also used a work colleague as a resource to help her to learn English. This colleague often gave her books and offered the encouragement she needed to complete a certain task:

> The teacher who I work with sometimes she provide[d] me her books and she [would] say, read this book, it has vocabulary, and she gave me one, *Ten Steps to Becoming a Better Teacher*, so I read twice that book, some of the words I didn't get, but at the same time, it was easy for me to read because the vocabulary wasn't so hard.
>
> Then she gave me another book, his name, I think you know him, McCourt, Frank McCourt, and she gave me [a] book, read this book, and I get the book and last summer and I tried to read it, and for me, it was *so* hard, to get those vocabulary words and so I leave the book alone. I start to read this book, it's gonna take me too long and get so boring because I'm not gonna understand what this book is about and so I left the book alone and like, last weekend, I saw the book and I try to put my books away and put it separate and I thought, Oh, I have to read this book. So after I'm done to do the kind of stuff I have to do, I get the book and I start reading, and like in an hour, I read like 25 pages and yeah!

As Thalia shared this accomplishment, she beamed and her eyes filled with excitement. She was thrilled that she had read a book written in English, and for the first time, she read in English for pleasure. Even though it took more than one try, she persisted and succeeded. In this instance, Thalia continued to draw on aspirational capital. She was unable to get through the book the first time, but she was determined to make it through on her second attempt, and eventually she did.

As Thalia learned English and conquered the challenges she faced throughout the program, there was one group of people who did not support her on her journey to obtain a bachelor's degree. Thalia had a group of coworkers who were also teacher's aides and she felt like they were her friends. Once Thalia began taking courses to extend her

education, she felt that these former allies began to turn against her because she might move beyond the position of teacher's assistant and become a certified [lead] teacher:

> All the stuff they gonna change little by little when they see you graduate or at least they gonna see me different…They see me like a future teacher and they feel like, behind, even though, I [do] not speak very [good] English, but I try to continue on. You almost in that way on that side and they try to push me on the other side. You gonna be on the other side, on the other team. I think they see me like a future teacher so that makes it a little bit hard.

As Thalia described this experience, I sensed that it had been difficult for her. When I questioned her about whether or not her friends' behavior bothered her, she explained that the experience had fueled her motivation to complete the program and become a teacher. She said "No…it doesn't bother me. It's *them*, it's not me. When I see the attitude they have, they push me a little bit more. You can do it." Thus, the negative reaction of her friends became the ultimate push to complete the program. Thalia was determined to succeed, but another major barrier stood in the way of her becoming a certified teacher.

Praxis exams

During the last year of the program, one thing that still stood between Thalia and her dream of becoming a *certified* teacher was passing the state Praxis exams. Passing the exams, which would allow her the opportunity to move from the position of teacher's aide to the position of certified teacher, would require a considerable amount of determination and patience on Thalia's part:

> But I would like to continue to learn, I think learn[ing] is something that never stop[s] because I would like to take, um, those Praxis tests. Because in order to change my position, I have to pass all those tests so maybe they can give me a classroom, like a lead teacher. You have to have [a] license in order to be the lead teacher, so that's why I really want to pass those tests.

The first step toward passing the Praxis exam was navigating through the online registration information and process. Thalia registered for the test, only to find out when she arrived on the testing day that she had made some errors while registering, so she had to re-register and wait several more months to take the test. Thus began the frustrating process of trying to pass the exams to get "to the other side." During her final semester in the program and the summer following the program, Thalia and I met frequently so I could provide assistance with registering for the exam, including making conference calls to the testing center, faxing information, helping Thalia access her test results, and even interpreting the results for Thalia and being the one to tell her that she did not pass on the first attempt. Navigating this testing information was overwhelming for most students and was even more difficult for Thalia because she was attempting to navigate this unfamiliar process in her third language.

Despite being unsuccessful in her first attempt to register, Thalia used the time to prepare for the tests; in addition to her coursework, she spent many hours taking practice exams in both math and reading. Thalia decided to register and take the math exam first because she felt more comfortable with her math skills. After she took the exam and did not pass, she sought support from her previous math instructor. The instructor met with her on the weekend to review additional math tests and suggest test-taking strategies. Thalia found the strategies especially helpful because during the first test she took too much time to read the directions:

> We met like four days before the test and I ask[ed] for some help to explain how to do graph stuff and she tell me, you don't have to use any, you know, calculator, you have to do it in your mind, and that kind of stuff. So, she went over with me, almost everything. So, the only thing

> was I took too long to read the instructions because this was the first time so maybe that is why I took too long.

Her test preparation also focused on reading, including reading materials in Spanish to improve her reading comprehension. She described the practice tests and her preparation:

> I try to read some steps to follow, how to do this and some questions to make myself try to get the answer. So, when I went down to Mexico, I see my sister['s] shelf, they have some books and I found one of those books, how to understand better the way you read. Or more comprehension—how to comprehension [sic] the reading or what you read…something like that. And it was in Spanish and I bring it back (laughter). I think this can help.

Despite her determination, at the time of graduation, Thalia has taken the tests several times and had not passed any of the exams required for her to become a certified teacher. She continued to take practice tests and retest every few months. While she did not pass with the necessary scores to satisfy the state requirements for licensure, testing accommodations such as extended time helped her to improve her score each time.

I concluded that it is not Thalia's failure to progress that has kept her from becoming a certified teacher, but rather the Praxis exams' focus on outcomes rather than progress. As a student (FLOTE), Thalia has faced a variety of obstacles inherent to standardized tests such as the Praxis exam. According to Menkin (2008),

> The linguistic complexity of standardized tests and the lack of sufficient accommodations explain why English language learners typically do not perform as well as native English speakers on such tests. For this reason, the validity of their scores is questionable. As a result, standardized tests administered to English language learners are not a valid basis for high-stakes decision making (p. 92).

In other words, the Praxis exams, like most standardized tests, are first and foremost tests of English proficiency, and are not necessarily accurate measures of content knowledge (Garcia & Menkin, 2006). As a result, students fluent in LOTE are most always labeled

as “failing.” In this case, despite graduating with a bachelor’s degree and having many years of experience successfully teaching young children, Thalia failed to become a certified teacher because she did not pass the Praxis exams.

For Thalia and other bilingual students, it is problematic that high-stakes tests such as the Praxis exam “ultimately reflect a ‘language-as-problem’ or ‘deficit model’ orientation in recent US language policy, where language has become a liability for ELLs” (Menkin, 2008, p. 152). Within this “language as liability” framework, Thalia is viewed through the lens of the deficit model yet again. Despite all her accomplishments, Thalia is still labeled as “failing” in an educational system that utilizes standardized testing as a gatekeeping function that perpetuates the power of dominant groups (Menkin, 2008).

Supports

As she faced the multiple challenges of the EC program, Thalia was surrounded by a strong support network. One form of support she used was familial capital, which included the support of her husband, daughters, siblings, and parents.

From the time she began the program, Thalia’s husband and daughters encouraged her to fulfill her dream of getting a bachelor’s degree. Her husband was a cook and had completed school through middle school; Thalia had encouraged him to extend his own education. While he was not interested in pursuing an education for himself, he was supportive of Thalia’s return to school and he facilitated her efforts by making meals for the family and helping to care for their two daughters.

As Thalia moved through the program, her sister continually provided encouragement, especially regarding Thalia’s reading skills:

> Because my sister is, um [a] preacher, so she's a pastor, so she like[s] to read a lot. [She said] Just go ahead, don't think too much. Just go, read, do it. Try to concentrate. Don't think too much, just ask God to help you to, sometimes she tell me, but you can do it, go ahead. I know you can do it. So that part, that help[ed] me.

This encouragement was invaluable to Thalia and she talked about it often. In addition to her sister's encouragement, Thalia's brother offered support in other ways:

> And my brother, say, "Well I not call you very often because I don't want to bother you," but on the weekend he always call me to say, how are you? How are you doing? Or whatever. Or sometimes, "If you need help in math, I can send my son, he knows how to explain a little bit," so that part, I feel the support. So, I think they feel proud about me.

In this passage, Thalia confirmed that her siblings' pride had a positive impact on her. Throughout the program she relied on the familial capital that was present in these exchanges in the form of encouragement, support, and assistance with school and other duties.

In addition to familial capital, Thalia also utilized social capital in a variety of forms. First, she drew from her classmates. Although the cohort had a difficult start, they eventually united and found strength as a group. Thalia described the reciprocal support that existed within the cohort:

> Little bit by little we get to know a little bit more about each other and we start working together to support each other. If I have any questions, the other one, they can help me. Or if I have something that doesn't have it, or they need, and I have it, then I provide them. We [are] like a family to support each other.

In some ways, this support could be defined as familial capital because the peers she knew at the start of the program now supported and cared for each other just as if they were family. The extended family that developed among cohort members was a support that carried Thalia through the program.

Along with her family and peers, her EC program mentor also supported Thalia. The mentors in the program met weekly with students and provided support and feedback in their work settings. The support mentors provided often extended to other areas and Thalia saw her mentor as someone who could help her navigate through the program and provide her with a plan for how to complete her assignments:

> She help[ed] me to answer some questions when I didn't get it how to do my homework, I can ask her and she can explain to me. She always say you have any questions, just call me and I can help, and I think that's [a] very BIG support.

Thalia also used the relationship with her mentor as another opportunity to further develop her English skills:

> [My mentor] didn't speak any Spanish, so [it] forced me to express myself in English. I had to find words to explain myself or what part I didn't understood. I had to *find* the way to communicate with her. So, that's helped me too.

Other institutional supports that Thalia utilized throughout the program were the instructors, the department chairperson, and the support faculty. Thalia worked very hard on each assignment and if she did not understand something or needed to revise a paper, she felt very comfortable asking her instructors for support:

> I feel free to approach my professors and ask them again, to explain or if I need to go step by step, I gonna ask them and they [were] always willing to help us. I think it's an amazing school. And all the professors is [sic] very nice. Whatever question you have, they gonna answer your question. If they not gonna have the answer right away, they gonna try to find the answer.

The faculty at AU was an important support that Thalia utilized throughout her educational journey. During our interviews, I recalled firsthand the many evening and weekend hours Thalia and I had spent together during the first year of the program discussing course assignments, working on revisions, and reviewing course content. In

addition to my support, Thalia spent countless hours meeting with other faculty and received support with course assignments and writing.

The students in the EC program utilized the writing support services provided by one of the instructors in the writing center. Lara, an assistant professor, taught an English course in the student's first semester. The writing center was located in Lara's office on central campus and was designed to support students, especially students (FLOTE), with the writing process.

Not only was Lara familiar to the EC students, she was also trilingual, which allowed students to talk to her in either English or Spanish. Beginning in her first semester, Thalia received writing help from Lara for both her English class and the other classes she was taking. Throughout the program, Thalia met with Lara regularly to organize and revise papers, which often required several drafts and an extraordinary amount of work on Thalia's part. Lara was available to students during weekly office hours, as well as on the evenings and weekends. Lara was more than a writing support to students, she was often a lifeline because Spanish speaking students could converse with her in their native language about concepts or topics that were often difficult to articulate in English. During classes and meetings with Lara, conversations occurred in both English and Spanish, and in that context, being bilingual was valued.

Finally, one support that was a constant presence throughout Thalia's life, including during her undergraduate studies, was her faith in God. God was a force that was omnipresent in her life from keeping her safe during armed robberies in Mexico, to a Bible in her suitcase as she crossed the water, to sending her signs that teaching was the path that she should follow. Religion was important to Thalia and she used it not only to

strengthen her faith, but also to strengthen her English. God was something that Thalia believed in and she called upon her faith in God throughout her life and educational journey.

Reflection

During our final interview, I asked Thalia to discuss what it was like to complete the program at AU; as she shared her story I found myself completely awestruck. I had always been inspired by her story, but the way that she put her journey into words was very powerful. I documented my feelings in my field notes as I reflected following our final interview:

> As always, I found myself moved by her words and her story. When I asked her what a book about her would be called, she said she didn't know, but that she had thought about writing a book to tell her story…. a narrative. This had me shouting on the inside because the whole program is rooted in narrative and I couldn't help think that somehow, through her coursework and reflection, she embodied the concepts of what we were trying to share with students…the power of narratives (Field notes, 8/26/11)

When I pressed her to create a title for a book about her life she responded immediately:

> I would like to write at the beginning, how I start[ed], where I was born and step-by-step, like a narrative story. I don't know how to title it. Amazing journey, maybe? I don't know. Three different journey[s]?
>
> Journey, because at the beginning, the place I was born and my language, and then I move to Mexico City and I started learning to speak Spanish and my third language, I moved to the states and started to learn another language. I don't know.

As always, I was truly in awe of Thalia and her story. She chose to describe her life through the three languages she had learned and all of the experiences that surrounded both the challenges and achievements that came with it. In Thalia's journey, I saw the ultimate form of linguistic capital and a person who had transformed from feeling

confident in only one language, to taking on two other languages, institutions, and all of the life experiences that helped to create the strong, quiet woman she is today.

In order to achieve this transformation, Thalia used the resolve that had been part of her personality since she dreamed of becoming a teacher as a young girl. Using the terms of the cultural wealth framework, this translated to aspirational capital and eventually to Thalia's ability to find success in her undergraduate studies despite all the challenges and barriers she encountered. In the following passage, Thalia described her decision, or what I interpreted as her *determination* to succeed:

> Well, I think the first thing to have is decision, if she really want[s] to do it, she can do it. But if she don't [sic] want to do it, it's gonna be hard for that person. But, I think that for me, is working for decision. To get into the program and [be] done with the program. To learn new stuff. So I think that if the other person, if they can do it, I can do it, too. So I think that all person[s], that each person, they can do it when they have decision and they really want to do it. I think they can do it.

Determination was evident in Thalia's journey and was characteristic of many "nontraditional" students as they embarked on a path to achieve their educational dreams. Her description of determination led us to a conversation about "nontraditional" students. In our previous interviews, she described conversations with her daughter in which she used "regular" to describe traditional undergraduate students and "special" to describe "nontraditional" students. I asked what term she would use to describe the program and students like her; she responded:

> I don't know exactly what the word I would like to use, I think this is [an] amazing program to give the opportunity for Latino or different ethnicities to continue their education. I think it's a very good program.

Thalia described the "special program" and contrasted the work that a "regular" student does with the process that she went through as a "special" student:

> Like a special program for people who really want to go back to school but still have, maybe it's not gonna do the work the regular student is doing, because, I tell her, the professor is going to ask you [to] write the paper and no you [are] not going to take two week[s] like me. You gonna do maybe four hours for the work you have to do, but I gonna take more time. First, it's not my language. Second, I have to think about it twice and start [to] write it down maybe, and I spell wrong or maybe it's not the appropriate word to use to express myself the way I want to. So, [it's] a little bit hard. I could say, not like special program, but [an] opportunity for *other* [15] person. But I like the program, [it] give[s] opportunities to other person.

Thalia's repeated use of "other person" in this excerpt is significant because the phrase highlights her feelings of being marginalized within the program and society. The feeling of "otherness" had followed her since she was very young. Now, as a bilingual student, she worked tirelessly to simultaneously learn English *and* use it to complete her readings and course assignments. Despite all her efforts, she continued to view herself as "other," a descriptor that usually translates into someone who is lacking, rather than someone who has much to give.

As we concluded our interviews, I thanked Thalia for sharing her story and helping me learn from her so I could continue to support students in the EC program. I asked her to describe her participation in the study. She responded by recounting how she had explained the interview process and the purpose of my research to her husband:

> My husband ask[ed] me, why [do] you have to met [sic] with her so long? Because she is doing something with the students who learn like, um, like me, special. Like [a] different language, and getting into college and it's hard for them and what process they have to pass or do whatever they do to get into college and how hard for them.

The only thing I would add to this description is that I also found that each of the students achieved success and accomplished their goals. Thalia was one of those students, and I

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[15] Thalia often used the term *other* to describe English language learners or minority students.

have no doubt she will continue to meet any goal she sets for herself, including passing the Praxis exams and becoming a certified teacher.

Chapter 7: LEAH'S STORY

"It Is What It Is"

> If I'd done this when I was like 18 and I was on campus [laughter] and I could just sit and have all this time to do it…[Now] it's like, you say, "Ok, well, the weekends I'm gonna get this done" and you can get *some* things done, but the weekend is a break from what's been going on in the week. And I don't have a class on Tuesday, but I work until 6 [p.m.] and then I have to pick up my daughter and then I have to cook so it's still not that I have all of this extra time because I'm not in school. Still, if I don't get to bed by 11 [p.m.] then I'm sleep deprived and I can't remember anything anyway. So, it's still that struggle of yes, I *can* stay up and do the assignments, but it's hurting and I can't push it like that. (Leah, interview, 4/2/2011).

These words depict the struggle Leah experienced during her undergraduate studies as she balanced work, school, and family. Leah is a graduate of the early childhood (EC) program at Assisi University (AU). She is 38 years old and self-identifies as an African American female. At the time of the study, she was both a full-time student and a full-time childcare provider, and even more importantly to Leah, she was a single mother of two children. Like Roy and Thalia, I came to know Leah during the first semester of her undergraduate studies at AU when I served as the instructor for three of her courses.

Leah was one of five students who initially volunteered to be part of this study. She described herself as "a person very dedicated to children and to [her] family and learning." Her path to earning a bachelor's degree began many years ago deep in the South and extended more than 20 years beyond her high school graduation.

Growing Up

The youngest of 16 children, Leah was born in 1974 in a small town in the northwest corner of Louisiana. She grew up in a modest white house with black trim that

included a front room, back room, three bedrooms, and one bathroom. Leah described how the house accommodated her large family:

> Growing up, for most of my childhood there were four or five of us [children] in the house, so, I mean obviously the other ones were adults and had their own kids and had moved away and so all 16 of us did not grow up in the same house.

She went on to explain the division this created in the family:

> It created a weird dynamic in our family because we are divided into two groups. There were the older ones and the younger bunch and the older group kinda looked at us like we're their children because they have children the same age. I'm like, you don't have the right to tell me this, you're not my mother!

From a young age, Leah viewed herself as outspoken within her family, not letting her siblings tell her what to do; however, the same did not hold true with her parents. Her father was a farmer who worked long days, was gone a lot, and led "an impoverished life." Leah recounted a story from his childhood and described the sense of community he experienced during that time:

> When food was short, [my dad] would have to try to stretch out 25 cents to get rice and beans for dinner and he kinda had to step up to be the man of the house at a young age. All the people in town would pool all their food together and have a picnic to make it stretch so that it was a meal for everyone. If people caught fish, they would bring that, and if people had extra whatever, they would kind of cook it all together and have a picnic.

For years leading up to Leah's birth, her mom worked both in and outside the home. When Leah was born, her mom was a "stay-at-home mother" who fed the family with foods from the garden including butter beans, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, bell peppers, and watermelon. In addition to the garden, her mother also harvested fruit from peach and plum trees. As a general rule, Leah took her mom quite seriously and was very obedient:

> We did not fool around with my mom. My mom was pretty strict and she meant what she said and she said what she meant. So, I did not play

> around with her. She said "Do it" and I pretty much did what I was supposed to do.

Leah obeyed both of her parents and did her share of chores around the house, but also had time to explore and play with her brothers. Leah considered herself a "tomboy" growing up and she played football and other sports with her brothers. Her family lived in the country and did not have many "store bought toys," so Leah and her brothers became creative and used rolled tires as cars or the kitchen table as a ping-pong table. Although the family never ate at McDonalds, Leah and her brothers even built a McDonalds based on what they had seen in commercials, using scraps of wood to build the structure and mud for the hamburgers and fries.

On one occasion, the children used their knowledge of church to build their own place of worship:

> We had these trees that were kind of close together and we took these boards and kind of made walls and connected them to trees. We went and got my mother's Bible and it had pictures in it and I guess, scenes from certain scriptures. So, we'd take it in there and we'd have our little church. We'd have church and we'd be yelling at the devil and the picture and take turns hitting the picture saying, "I hate you devil." (laughter). And we'd have our little service and after it was done we'd tell each other we loved each other and give each other hugs and then after service we'd continue on our service and that was that.

Leah's mom was a firm believer in God and attended Baptist services every third Sunday of the month. The children did not share her passion for church and they attended only on holidays such as Easter and Christmas. These holidays usually consisted of dressing up, going to church, and Leah's mother cooking and playing music. Presents were not the focus of the day. The highlights for Leah were the fruit bowl and candy dish, both of which were reserved for special occasions. She explained her memory of these special times:

> What stood out from my memories (as a young child and from a child's point of view) was that at Christmas and Easter I enjoyed the designated bowls of fruit and candy. We did have fruits and some candy. Candy wasn't something we were allowed to eat much at home. However, we could purchase it at school throughout the year, but something seemed really special about the candy to me during these times of the year maybe 'cause they were in addition to the Christmas lights on the house, Christmas tree, programming on television, and what was "supposed to be this special time of year." My memories are made up of bits and pieces of what took place and how they made me feel.

"Just African American"

When asked about ethnicity and culture, Leah described herself as "just African American." According to Leah, race wasn't something her parents talked about very much. When Leah examined the family's history and questioned her parents, she discovered that "during the 1930s and 1940s some people were more comfortable with looking biracial, though they felt it wasn't good to be biracial and so it was something they tried to hide." In addition to her "African" roots, Leah's father's family had some Italian ancestry and her mother's side had some Native American ancestry. Leah described her mother's background:

> My mother would tell us that my daddy would always call her the "yellow haired girl," 'cause he knew her since she was eight years old and my grandmother used to rinse her hair with coffee grounds to darken it 'cause it wasn't cool to look light skinned or anywhere close to white, and she wouldn't go into it.

Leah indicated that race was not something that either her mother or father discussed openly in any depth, although she was curious about the family's racial history and experiences. She explained:

> I think with slavery not being too far off in their history that the stigma of being offspring of slave owners and the consequences of that or stigma of that may have still lingered. Also, it wasn't just race that they were uncomfortable talking about but maybe family history because it was complicated to someone like me who wasn't familiar with the people they

> would be referring to. I do remember my mom saying that after telling me my family history "I would find out that I was my own grandmother." Which meant (as I eventually found out) that the same family married onto both my dad's family and my mother's family which created situations like my mom's step-grandmother was also my dad's step-aunt, etc.

As Leah began her education in the Deep South, racism was a topic that was not outwardly discussed very often. As she reflected, she suggested that this omission may have been based on her memory and interpretation of events or due to the fact that it just was not important to her as a child. She recalled times when her father discussed how some folks were "prejudiced" and while these conversations were not explicitly directed at young children, it "did bring about an awareness" for Leah.

K-12 School Experiences

Leah was the first of her siblings to attend kindergarten, and the bus ride was one of the first things she mentioned when she discussed her early schooling experiences. The bus ride was notable because it was a 40-minute ride down long, windy roads. More importantly, Leah remembered the bus because:

> Our bus driver was White. He always had little signs in his yard and stuff. My dad always said, "Mr. Jones, he's a Klansman." It was in the South, and I guess, people tend to think everything is very harsh when it comes to racism, but it's *understood*. His job was to drive us and he was nice to us, but he wasn't overly nice. But, if my dad hadn't said that to us, I would have never thought it. The bus driver did his job. We rode the bus and that was what it was. Only during election season that year when the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan was running for office did he have signs supporting him posted in his yard.

Leah's use of the term "understood" described her view of racism: It was present and real, but often went unrecognized because it was so common. She felt this was "only unrecognized to [her] as a child.". Her kindergarten experience was also not very

memorable because it was "normal." On the contrary, she vividly remembered first grade:

> I remember more about first grade. My teacher was *White!* And in our town, I mean to this day, it's still more or less segregated. There's a lake that runs through the town. And on one side of the lake, it is predominately Black and on the other side, it's predominately White. And so some of the [White] farmers that live out in the country, we see them, but for the most part though, your daily life does not include mingling with a lot of people of the other race. So, it's kind of an understood thing. It's not anything that [is] disturbing to people. And so, to have a White teacher, I was just kind of like, "Wow! Where's she coming from?"

Again, Leah used the word "understood" to describe the racism present in her community. She did not view this racism as disturbing, yet she had a strong reaction when she saw her White teacher for the first time.

Leah recalled most of her elementary school years beyond first grade were "normal" and the expectation was always that she would be a good student. She remembered her dad providing additional educational experiences for her at home:

> With my dad, I remember watching *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company* and he would kind of test me (laughter) on what I would see. I remember watching and I wasn't aware I was going to be tested on this. He would do things like that 'cause those things were important to him I guess. For me, I watched it, but then I knew I had to be more aware because he may test me on it. Spelling, mostly spelling was his thing. He was into math, too, but for me, he did not really test me on math, it was mostly spelling.

Leah studied every night, especially for spelling tests. She always completed her homework because she feared the corporal punishment that was allowed in schools at the time. She made sure to get her homework done because she did not want to get a spanking at school for not having it completed. As a result of her hard work, she received straight A's in every subject except gym. Because Leah was expected to earn straight A's, her grades were not celebrated at home.

"It Wasn't Quite Middle School"

Overall, Leah enjoyed her elementary school experiences in Louisiana. Sixth grade marked the last year she attended school in Louisiana. As she entered her middle school years, Leah began a new adventure: she went to live with her sister in a state in the upper Midwest. Thus, the following school experiences occurred in a context that "wasn't quite middle school."

The first change Leah noted was that in her new school, "all the teachers were White and the students were Black." In contrast, in elementary school all her teachers except one had been African American. Compared to her public school in Louisiana in which each grade level occupied a different classroom, the new middle school context was very different. Faith Lutheran was a K-8 school that had all its classrooms in one building, which was connected to a Lutheran church. Grades seven and eight, which contained only 12 students combined, were in a single classroom. Leah did not like this arrangement when she entered eighth grade.

Although she would eventually become the valedictorian of her eighth grade class, Leah remembered the initial transition to middle school as a challenging one. In many ways, she played "catch up," especially in subject areas such as math and science where the emphasis, scope, and sequence were very different than they had been in her Louisiana elementary school.

Although the academic content of her education was challenging, it was not what Leah recalled most about this phase of her educational journey. More memorable was the punishment inflicted on the students by their teachers. The punishment endured by students was frequently excessive and embarrassing. One common punishment was

making students copy dictionary pages verbatim, another was requiring students to stand with both arms out, on one foot until they nearly fell down. The threat punishment continued into the lunchroom, were students were not allowed to talk and were forced to eat every bite of food on their tray. If students were caught talking, they were forced to stand with their nose against the wall until all the other children were dismissed. Leah spent each lunch hour hunched over with her head on the table in attempt to sleep through this dreaded time of day.

When it came to making friends, Leah viewed most people as "acquaintances" and did not form many significant friendships. Looking back, Leah viewed this lack of attachment as an adjustment between home and school. She recalled, "Moving away from my home and parents at an early age and transitioning into new settings as frequently as I did affected my ability to establish and maintain relationships and friendships." She did participate in some of the "typical" activities of girls in middle school such as talk on the phone and hang out, but she did not really have what she perceived to be "good" friends, just "a little closer acquaintances."

McKinley High School

The students from Faith Lutheran Middle School typically went on to attend Lake City Lutheran High School, but Leah opted to enroll in the public high school that her nephews attended. After her first day at the school, however, she deemed the public high school "too wild" and made the decision not to return. Another sister and niece attended McKinley High School, a private high school in a suburb of Lake City. According to the school website, "McKinley High School maintains a proud tradition of academic excellence. Academic success for every student is a result of high standards, support,

positive relationships with students, and strong partnerships with parents." (McKinley High School Website, 2013).

Leah described her new school in the following way:

> Well, going to McKinley was definitely a culture shock in every way. I came from rural Louisiana, and mingling with White people was just not…they weren't in my school or anything and so going to McKinley and being the minority was very weird. And then, just economically, they were all rich or well-to-do, and so it was very interesting.

Leah continued, describing her views on making friends and her experiences in various school contexts:

> I did make friends, but it was also a little strange because in the classrooms, I was like, maybe, one of two African Americans in the class, but then at lunchtime I would see all these African Americans grouped together, and I'm like, "Where are all you guys, why aren't you in my classes?" So, it was, it was odd. And so I did not really hang with, I did not really get to do the whole hang with people like me, so, I just hung with the people who were of the same, like personality.

At McKinley, Leah did not see many students of color in her classes, but did see groups of African American students in other contexts such as the lunchroom. She sought out people with whom she had something in common, such as certain personality traits. Personality seemed to trump race with regard to finding people with whom she felt comfortable. Leah liked to learn things and have conversations about "real life issues." As a result, she was drawn to people who were somewhat quiet and interested in family, and school. Although she found people who shared her interests, she did not spend time with many of these students outside school. At the time, her family was close-knit and tended to be "each other's best friends." Thus, outside school and work, Leah generally spent time at the homes of other family members who also lived in Lake City. Family gatherings generally consisted of spending time on the front porch talking, eating, and

drinking, as well as playing games such as Pictionary, volleyball, kickball, and badminton. Analyzing Leah's experiences using Yosso's (2006) notion of capital, I concluded that her relationships with her family provided a sense of community and familial capital.

In addition to spending time with family, Leah followed in her sister's footsteps and began studying as a Jehovah's Witness. At the start of high school, she began to spend a lot of time with peers who were also Jehovah's Witnesses. She hung out with other members of Kingdom Hall; the teens often gathered to worship and then went into the field for field service.

Although her sister's family valued the Jehovah's Witness religion, it created discord among other family members, especially concerning the topic of college attendance. Leah recalled:

> I remember one of my brothers, he got really upset because then it became a question of was I going to go college because I was a Jehovah's Witness, because Jehovah's Witnesses don't really believe in sending their kids to college. It wasn't really explained or told *why*, exactly. I don't know if it was too worldly, or you were just investing too much in this world and it would come to pass, but [my brother] was really, really upset that I wasn't going and I was like, "OK". I did not put up much of a protest. It was just kind of okay.

McKinley, a private school focused on college preparedness, groomed its students, including Leah, for college. She met with a guidance counselor and planned to take the SATs. All the while, however, she thought the preparation was unnecessary stating, "I don't really need to do all that because I'm not going to *go* [to college]." Her words seemed matter of fact—the idea of not going to college did not seem to disappoint or upset her, it seemed as if she believed that was simply the way things were.

About the time of Leah's junior year in high school, things began to shift at home; there was what Leah called some "weirdness" between her sister's family (with whom she was living). She began to feel isolated from her sister and her family and so began to spend more time in her room, listening to music and doing her own thing.

At the same time, another sister and two brothers moved upstairs in the duplex where Leah was currently living, and they invited her to come and live with them. Leah was also less involved in her religion because she had become disillusioned by the actions of some of her McKinley classmates who were Jehovah's Witnesses. She observed several classmates leading a "double life" as they broke the rules outlined by her religion; she described these people as "fake." As a result of her observations, Leah became increasingly unhappy with the Jehovah's Witness religion, and she eventually stopped practicing.

Although she did graduate from high school, Leah never explicitly talked about graduating from McKinley during our interviews. Only during a member check of her story did she offer the following explanation:

> This is because learning and earning good grades has always come easy for me and so it is not a chore or task. It's what I expect and what others expect from me because I've always received good grades.

Rather than focusing on grades or graduation, our conversations revolved around her moving around in the years leading up to and following her high school graduation. Eventually, discord among family members caused Leah and her siblings to move out of the upstairs duplex. In one of our conversations she described life after high school graduation:

> It was still before my 18th birthday. And so, after that, the whole college thing did not mean a whole lot anyway 'cause now I'm homeless

> (laughter). And so, my brother, he moved in with his girlfriend and so we all went over there and crashed for a little bit. Then my niece, she was in college at St. Mary's and she had an efficiency [apartment]; she's like, you can come stay with me for a while. I got a job at Walgreens. My other sister, you know I have a lot of brothers and sisters, she got a place on the east side and she said I could move in with her and I did. And I stayed there and worked at Walgreens and then I got pregnant.

In utilizing her network of acquaintances and family to find housing, Leah used both social and familial capital. As in so many of our conversations during the interviews, she discussed all this in a very matter-of-fact way, as if that was just the way things were and there was no need to go into much more detail. Of course, I pressed her for more information, especially about becoming pregnant and how she felt about that. In the following excerpt, Leah described how she felt as she contemplated her choices with regard to the pregnancy. As she did in other important situations, she used familial capital to guide her decision about how to proceed with her pregnancy. She explained:

> I wanted to have an abortion and I was kinda scared. I was just scared. But then, I talked to one of my brothers and he was like, that would just be wrong and that year my grandmother passed away and so, I don't know, I just, I procrastinated 'til it was just too late. And I was like, oh well, I guess I have to have the baby.

So the decision was made: Leah was going to have a baby. She had also discussed her situation with one of her sisters, who had told her she could come and stay with her family in Texas. Leah moved to Texas and stayed with her sister's until she had the baby, but she returned to the Midwest when the baby was eight months old because she was "homesick" for Lake City.

Earning an Associate Degree

As she had before, Leah connected with family and moved in with a sister who was living on the east side of Lake City. The living arrangement was beneficial for both Leah and her sister. At the time, her sister worked during the day, so Leah cared for both her own infant son and her sister's two children. At the same time, Leah decided she needed to earn some income and she heard about the associate degree program at Lakeview Technical College (LTC). Her friends and her sister, all of whom had taken classes at the technical college, encouraged her to get her associate degree by telling her she would be able to make money doing what she was already doing, caring for children. Once again, Leah was influenced by her social networks of friends and family, using familial and social capital as she decided what to do with her life.

Leah attended an LTC orientation and decided to enroll. She chose to take early childhood classes thinking she would learn more about children, and would be able to apply the techniques to her own child, and thus become a better parent. She described the excitement of applying what she learned to her son's behavior and seeing positive results:

> In the program, I started *learning* stuff, so it was like, *cool*! And then I applied what I learned at home with him, and I'm like, oh, it's a little bit easier if I give him choices instead of making him do what I want him to do.

Leah enjoyed her classes because she believed her new knowledge was improving her parenting skills. She became a full-time student and took classes most days of the week. In our interview, she described the timeline she had for earning her degree:

> It was during the time W-2 was coming into play. I was in school and I could get the childcare and the benefits. And I had to be done [with my associate degree], you know, within the two years, it was actually two-and-a-half years. I had to actually take 14 credits a semester and then 12 [credits] in the summer in order to finish in that exact time period.

During this time, Leah balanced being both a new mom and a full-time student. She went to school full-time during the week, with the exception of Thursdays, when she did not have any classes and her son was at childcare. She still lived with her sister, and cared for her sister's children. Leah and her sister had a system that benefited both of them:

> We were like a married couple, kinda. I had like the male's, the typical male's set of responsibilities in the house and she may cook, but I like, fixed things and put things together and so, it was kind of strange, but our schedules did kind of complement each other in terms of if she needed to work then I was there in the evenings so that I could watch her kids, while she worked second shift or third shift.

Leah had a living and school situation that worked, but she questioned whether the content she was learning would actually work with young children. Despite her initial reluctance, when she tried the techniques with her son, she found they worked. Her own success as a parent helped her to "buy into" the program more and more over time. While this was satisfying, her family members were not "buying into" the techniques she was using, even though the techniques were working. Leah met resistance from family members about her parenting style, but she continued because she knew her approach was working. In terms of Yosso's framework, Leah was drawing on her resistant capital as she faced opposition from family members regarding the parenting of her son.

Ultimately, Leah graduated from LTC, and as with her high school graduation, she did not discuss this graduation in much detail during our interviews. She graduated with honors and was in the honor society, but because this was typical for Leah, she did

not feel the need to describe it in depth. Instead, she began to describe one of her mentors, a person who had a positive impact on her life during her studies at LTC and for years beyond. Leah described the start of this relationship:

> While I was doing my student teaching, the director [Mary] noticed me (laughter) and gave me pointers. I had a cooperating teacher there, but Mary also was there a lot and she saw what was going on and would call me into her office and tell me how well I did this and give me pointers on things I could do and so we kind of developed a relationship. And then, when I graduated, I applied and she called me. I learned a lot. She became a mentor for me actually. I went on to work for her quite a few times, at different places.

Over the next few years, Leah followed Mary to various childcare centers. Leah had an immense respect for Mary, her knowledge of ECE, and her mentorship; likewise, Mary thought highly of Leah and her work with young children. At one point, Mary became the director of a childcare center and hired Leah to work with infants and toddlers at the center. Mary labeled Leah the "Infant/Toddler Queen," which caused Leah to laugh aloud when she described it during our interviews.

> No matter what I did, it had to be in infant and toddlers (laughter). So, I'm like ok, well I guess, that's where I am. And, I was a teacher in the toddler room for a little bit and then I became the infant/toddler curriculum something or another. Mary was my mentor, and she was previously a licensing specialist for the state, and so, through her I learned every part of the licensing book, and so I was very alert to standards and stuff.

During her time at the center working for Mary, Leah had the opportunity to not only work with young children, but also learn all the rules and regulations concerning childcare centers. From 1999-2001 Leah continued to work at the center; Mary eventually took a new position as the executive director for the Midwest Child Association (MCA). Leah remained at the center and worked under a new director. The

new director admired Mary and so automatically thought highly of Leah. Leah described her role under the leadership of the new director:

> I became like her assistant consultant person…She picked my brain for things and she asked me how things were going in other classrooms. So, I was like this person in no real position, but I'm just here doing all of these things. What does licensing say? I was her licensing guide. It was fine for a while, but then I thought, well heck, couldn't I just do your job if you're gonna ask *me* for everything?

Around the time Leah began to feel frustrated with her work situation, Mary called and recruited both Leah and her colleague Carissa for a new project. With the help of grant money, the new project was funding positions for assessors to be trained in and administer environment-rating scales designed to "assess Early Childhood and ChildCare Quality" (Environment Rating Scales Website, 2013). Leah immediately resigned from her childcare position and trained to become a project coordinator for the new project. As a project coordinator, Leah visited childcare facilities, assessed the sites, and produced reports to share with the centers. The purpose of these assessments was to provide information and support for centers, although at times Leah and other assessors met with resistance from workers at various childcare centers.

Part of Leah's job was to assess the quality of early childhood centers and she began to realize that "quality" was defined quite subjectively from center to center. Being an assessor was a reflective experience for Leah; she described what she took away from her experiences:

> It was an eye opener for me. I learned a lot from those different centers and what I could take, I took with me. There were opportunities to see different ways to learn. Different ways to deal with different children and that whole thing, too. And how to be firm, but yet, not, like overly aggressive with children and like, different ways to phrase things.

In addition to learning through exposure to so many different centers, she also enjoyed the job because it provided flexibility, something that was important to her as a mother. She described the flexibility of her schedule in the following excerpt:

> It was very flexible, because at that time in 2002 I also had my daughter. I was able to assess [childcare centers] in the mornings and I had one of my sisters watch her from 7:30-12 or 1:00. I was able to pick [my daughter] up and go home and I could still type the report or bring my daughter to the office to type the report.

Leah worked as an assessor from 2001-2005. In 2005, the grant money "dried up" and the project ended. Leah was disappointed because during the last year of the project, Mary had taken a job in the Lakeview Public School District and the assessors did not have the same level of support under the new director. Money was being cut, and the assessors had increased responsibilities but the same pay rate. Not knowing where to go next, Leah looked to Mary for guidance. Leah's reliance on Mary—this time as a contact to find other job opportunities—was a form of social capital. Mary told Leah about KidCare, which seemed like an ideal place for Leah to work. According to the KidCare website:

> KidCare is a state-of-the-art program with a focus on developing early skills and promoting and enhancing parent-child relationships that create a foundation for successful learning. KidCare is a national model of early education and care built on Early Head Start and Head Start Standards. The program enrolls children as early as six weeks old, and children have the opportunity to remain in KidCare until they are ready to transition to kindergarten. KidCare programs seek to raise awareness of the importance of high quality education and family services. (KidCare Website, 2014)

The website describes the key features of this "nurturing" and "specially designed" program as follows:

> KidCare is a research-based program that prepares young, at-risk children for school; a specially designed place that nurtures early learning and sends a bold message about the value of investing in the first five years; an

> innovative partnership between the public and private sectors to create a more efficient, more effective early learning program; and a compelling platform to drive change among policymakers, business leaders and early childhood providers by showing what quality early learning looks like. (KidCare Website, 2014)

KidCare

While in theory KidCare seemed like an amazing early childhood center and educational model, Leah found many problems with the center. First, the management system seemed to be ineffective:

> It’s too much…there are too many levels of management and all, it's just too much for like a childcare site, because, right now the difficult part is figuring out who does what, and why. ‘Cause there's so many different people, so it's like you have a lead teacher and then you have a master teacher, and then you have family support, and then you have the manager of family support and then you have the site director.

In addition to the issues with the existing management model, Leah also identified underlying but unmentioned (and seemingly taboo) issues of race at KidCare:

> I understand that you gotta have a bachelor’s degree to be a lead teacher…but the majority of the lead teachers do not look like the children. And not only do they not look like the children, they don't live anywhere close to the communities where the children come from. So, we *don’t* talk culture. We *don’t* talk about diversity. We *don’t* talk about any of that.

Being both an advocate for young children and a deep thinker, Leah was trying to find solutions to address the issues of race that would benefit the children—solutions that ran deeper than just “loving children.” She stated:

> I'm thinking, it has to be a little bit more than just, I love children…. if you can't… if you have no experiences of your own to connect to where that child might be coming from, then having discussions and hearing about it and you know, having an understanding through the community of parents, or, you know, that would help. That's better than nothing. That's how you connect. And we don't do that.

As a person of color, Leah related to the experiences of the students of color. However, she was "stuck" in a power struggle because as an assistant teacher, her input was not valued and it was not her part of her role to tell the lead teacher (often a White teacher) how to teach the children. Leah described one scenario that typified KidCare's racial issues:

> And so you have teachers who are being abused [by children who are acting out behaviorally] because [the lead teachers] have no idea of how to deal with, because they've never seen this and then you have other teachers who may be aides who are diverse who have seen it more than the lead, but you have this whole, you are the lead so you can't tell me what to do, so you have that. That chaos day in and day out and the child is not getting anything out of that.

Ultimately, Leah was unable to address the center's racial issues to her own satisfaction. She had knowledge of young children as well as the perspective of a person of color, but neither of these understandings was valued because of the hierarchy of a model in which predominantly White female administrators and teachers were making decisions for a population that was predominately students of color from a low socioeconomic background. At KidCare, Leah constantly used her resistant capital as she argued against current systems that created inequality while continually advocating for children of color.

Although Leah had a passion for working with young children, the experience of working at KidCare and seeing these problems play out daily was wearing her down. She realized she was stuck in a place where she could not even be herself. She explained:

> I live in a certain *fear,* though, because there's a line there somewhere and I have to be very careful not to step on it or step over it. So, I can't even be *me* while I'm there because you never know when someone's not happy

> with your position, if it's too strong or whatever. So, it's just.... it's draining!

Despite her frustrations with KidCare, Leah felt stuck in her job for financial reasons:

> It's the *money*! The money. My whole issue is pay. I just cannot afford to make any less. And so, I know that there's a flyer for Landmarks ChildCare Center, but they're not going to pay me as much a lead teacher. I think their requirement is a bachelor's [degree] also. So…I'm not very hopeful in this field because of the pay and I know that KidCare is paying *way* more than childcare centers are on the whole so I just can't go down.

Thus, Leah was "stuck" working at a center that used an educational model with which she philosophically disagreed: she could not be herself because of the hierarchy of the model, and she could not leave. At this point, her qualifications in the field of early childhood education provided limited job opportunities, most of which paid less than her current employer, and it was not financially feasible for her to earn any less than she already was.

Searching for a Way Out

As Leah and I discussed her current work situation, we addressed the topic of earning a bachelor's degree. When I asked how she made the decision to go back to school and earn her degree, she replied that there were not many options in the field of early childhood without a degree. She stated:

> It was something that I *should* have done a long time ago and *life* happened and you know, you kinda lose focus for awhile and you know, you say, ok, I'll do it next year and it turns into two years and it was just kind of one of those things where I'm older and I realized that I don't really have a place in this field without a degree because my experiences are beyond my education level, so I couldn't advance without the degree. And so, I just was feeling as if I did not really have a place anymore so I definitely needed to go back to school.

Leah's explanation suggested that she made the decision to get her bachelor's degree as a means of expanding her job opportunities. She also viewed the degree

as a way "out" of a current work setting that was neither fulfilling nor healthy for her mind, body, or spirit. Although she faced many barriers, she still dreamed of the future. In Yosso's terms, Leah had aspirational capital that helped her to maintain her dream for the future, which was to obtain a bachelor's degree. The first step was to find a program that was a good fit for her. She began by researching programs; she recalled:

> I spent a lot of time just looking at the websites of [several universities]. I thought online would be more flexible, but I'm the type of person…I have to be in a class. I can't be that far removed from learning, because I can't ask questions like I want.

During this process, Leah learned about the program at Assisi University (AU). Colleen, an associate professor and the chairperson of the EC program at AU, was working with a center associated with KidCare, and she stopped at Leah's classroom and provided information about the program. After considering many different programs, Leah decided to enroll at AU. She described that decision in the following passage:

> So, I had signed up for AU for the first cohort, but then I kind of backed out because, just the way it was, it seemed like bad timing, because with my daughter and her bus every year and it's a different bus time…and so I was afraid of starting something and not being able to finish it.

She postponed returning to school, but enrolled in AU the next year due to a change in her life circumstances:

> What really pushed me was, well getting divorced just made it, more, I don't know, more necessary because I knew I needed more income as well as just my job…I have, I *need* flexibility to be able to leave [KidCare]. I don't like it there; so, it's either get a degree and find something better or stay there and rot (laughter).

Once again, Leah drew on aspirational capital because she *had* to do something to change her current work situation. For Leah, staying at KidCare was no longer an option either

financially or emotionally. Her experience working at KidCare was so negative that she considered leaving the field altogether. In the following excerpt she described the negativity she experienced while working at KidCare and how close she came to switching to a degree in the field of computer science:

> It's killing my spirit being [at KidCare]. Being there, it's pushing me out of the field [of early childhood education]. I was really close to attending Technology Academy (TA). I had signed up and everything (laughter). I was *that* desperate to get into something different. I was just wanting to be out of early childhood altogether, and I was like, I can do computers… but when they were showing me the cost, the tuition and everything, I'm like, this is just for two years, are you kidding me?

In the end, Leah's decision to stay in the field of early childhood education was based on finances and the realization that the computer sciences program was not an option because of the high tuition. She described how she came full circle back to her original plan, "And so, I eventually came back around, I *have* to do it now, I have no excuses (laughter). I'm *gonna* have to make it work 'cause what else am I gonna do? I'm gonna be homeless." In her mind, there was no choice and her aspirational capital would have to be enough to keep her going because she had no other options.

Earning a Bachelor's Degree

Once Leah made the decision to enroll at AU, things happened very quickly. Leah described the process of enrolling and getting started at AU: "I [applied] online and I got the letter a couple of days before the cohort orientation and I was a little shocked! I was like, OH! I have to go next week!" She also faced the obstacle of paying for the AU program. She discussed the process of "navigating" the financial aid system in detail:

> I did not get a lot of numbers for financial aid and all of that, so everyone that I talked to was very helpful, on the phone, with helping me with anything I had questions [about]. At first it was kind of hard to navigate 'cause you called the financial aid number and you get the business office

> and then it was kind of like transferring you to all of these people, but once I actually started getting names, I was able to contact people directly and not use the main line. Carissa [a previous coworker who was also enrolling in the EC program], I think she probably was more into it, so I think I kind of leaned on her more and took her lead.

As Leah began her undergraduate journey, she employed both navigational and social capital as she maneuvered through the financial aid process. While she experienced difficulty at first, she became more confident as she was able to make direct connections and also follow in the footsteps of her classmate Carissa. All of this was occurring in the midst of a major transition for Leah. Not only was she starting her college career, she had just become a single mother of two children because of a recent separation with her husband. She explained:

> We separated like a month before I started school. I moved into my apartment in July and started school in August. And so, that whole thing, that was just us separating, we hadn't really, I was pretty much sure I wanted a divorce, but we were still in that not quite sure what was going on phase. And so, with school, he was even more supportive 'cause I think he thought we had a chance still.

Even though the couple was separated, Leah's husband provided encouragement for her new educational endeavor. His support was especially important at the start of the program when the reality of parenting, working, and studying full-time simultaneously began to set in:

> In the beginning, after I signed up and had the orientation and had time to really look through the schedule and the calendar, I started crying. Oh, I did not know all of this was in here! I was like, I have to do this for two years, oh my gosh! So, he's like, you can do it. I'm like, ok, ok, suck it up, suck it up! So, he was supportive about the school and he would you know, give me encouragement and all that.

Thus, Leah commenced on a 33-month educational journey just as she separated from her husband and moved into a new apartment with her two children.

First Impressions of the Cohort

Leah was a member of the second cohort of the EC program. She and Thalia were classmates. When I asked Leah about her initial feelings about starting the program, she responded:

> I was excited. I did like the size of the group and I was kinda listening to people to kind of see where they were coming from, and I was really excited about knowing that we're gonna move together [as a cohort] the whole time. I figured that I'd learn more about people and where they work and just kind of decide if I wanted to go into the school system. I was thinking about all that…just kinda picking people's brains about what's it like over in your school and that whole thing.

Like the other cohorts in the EC program at AU, the second cohort was a culturally and linguistically diverse group of students. The cohort included 11 students: five identified as Latina, three identified as African American, two identified as White, and one identified as Native American. Several of the students knew each other from either their current work settings or classes together at LTC.

Leah knew only Carissa prior to the start of the program, but she wanted to get to know the others as well; this became difficult, however, because one student began to dominate class discussions. Leah described how she felt during the start of the first semester:

> I thought everything was going fine with the exception of Tanisha, because I couldn't get a feel for everyone else the way I kinda wanted to because she dominated the conversation. You couldn't really hear everyone's experiences.

It wasn't just that Tanisha, an African American woman, dominated the conversations, it was that her comments caused other students, especially the Latina students, to feel

marginalized and even fearful. This was the same person who caused so much hurt for Thalia and this was upsetting for Leah:

> Just when I did start to connect with Ana and Thalia, they were like afraid of Tanisha. They were really, really, really uncomfortable and I just, I have this like anti-bully thing in me, I don't like for people to make other people feel bad, just for the sake of making people feel bad just because you *can*.

Once again, Leah drew on her resistant capital—she was the sole person in her cohort to oppose Tanisha's marginalization of the other students. She described this process:

> In the classes, I would be the one to kinda challenge Tanisha, and [the Latina students] would be like, "Good for you, Leah!" I'm like…but I'm not doing it for *me*, I'm doing it for everyone else because she's not going to silence me. It really made me feel bad, because [the Latina students] had something to contribute and they wanted to and they couldn't. You just, you couldn't ignore it, so it was, it just made everything, like just intense, for no reason. It felt like an us versus them [situation], but it was really just Tanisha.

As Leah started her undergraduate career, the cohort she had been so excited to learn with and from was filled with racial tension. It seemed to Leah that Tanisha was intentionally silencing the Latina students, especially women fluent in LOTE with her disparaging remarks. This development was upsetting for Leah because she saw the Latina students become more and more silenced based on fear. She explained:

> I think Ana and Thalia are very afraid to speak up, because I don't know, some of it's just their nature or [lack of confidence in] English and just wanting to keep everything as non-confrontational as possible. So, people like them in particular and even anyone else, I wouldn't want to be in a position where I feel like I *can't* have a say.

Leah continued to be an advocate and a voice for the women fluent in a LOTE. She took this role, in part, because of her strong resistant capital, her feeling that she should never be in a position where she could not have a voice. Leah and the other students were quite relieved when Tanisha dropped out after one year in the program. In her absence, women

who were previously silenced felt safe participating, and the cohort became a more intimate group. In many ways, the cohort became a family that stayed together until graduation.

"Seeing How the Other Half Lives"

Throughout our interviews, Leah described her classes and how things were going at home, work, and school. At one point, when I asked about supports, Leah described a campus tour that students took near the end of the program as part of a class. The instructor, Colleen, who also served as the EC program chairperson, held class on the main campus rather than the central campus so that students could access the library and become familiar with the resources available to cohort members:

> I thought it was very helpful that last semester, Colleen when we went to select books for our text set, she took us, we met at the main campus library and she took some of that time to actually give us a tour of the whole campus and to show us the things that our tuition was paying for that was [sic] available to us. She was like, there's the gym and workout room, and all these things and the different offices that were there to help, and just kind of alerting us to all of the resources that were available at the main campus and all of this is what your tuition is paying for. It helped for me, connect me to the *whole* campus, 'cause I thought central campus was it. I did not really consider myself a *real* AU student. I was *just* a student at the central campus.

When I asked Leah to describe her experience in the EC program, she talked about what it was like to take classes at the central city campus:

> I guess, to only be here [at central city campus] felt more like an online student, where you're not really associated with the real, you know… all the buildings, you know…college stuff. It's just, I'm doing this work and I will have my degree at the end and there you go. It's not a *real* experience with college life.

Interested in her definition of a *real* college student or experience, I asked her what it meant to be a *real* AU student and she answered, "To feel more like a college student

(laughter). You know…" Thus, Leah felt that her experience was not a *real* college experience, that students who took classes at the central city campus were different than the *real* college students on the main campus. This feeling was stronger during summer sessions when Leah had classes at both the central city campus and the main campus. She described the experience of taking classes on both campuses during the summer:

> I did not mind the split, because it did give us the chance to see the main campus and visit and walk through and see how the other half lives, but then it was the inconvenience of having to drive all the way there.

Leah's phrase, "how the other half lives," made me think that she perceived her college experience and student "persona" as being very different than those of a traditional student. She then offered a specific example of a more "traditional" student:

> And so going [to the main campus] in the summer, I actually saw my nephew's half brother, but he's a lot younger. He's more of a traditional student, and he was in the cafeteria, working with his group, and I'm like, hey how are you doing, you know, that whole thing and just seeing someone that I knew and just, you know, it felt more like *school*…so it was kind of neat.

These words painted a more nuanced picture of how Leah viewed her undergraduate experience, especially in comparison to what she considered "more of a traditional" student. Her descriptions also made me curious about her children's impressions of their mother as a student. The following conversation ensued:

> Kristen: What do you think [your children] think of you as a student?
> Leah: I don't know, when it comes to my son, because he's not very focused right now and so I have *no* real idea. Because he has no idea of what he wants to do with himself and he's almost 18 and so I don't get much feedback from him when I talk about the future and education and school and so I don't know what he thinks. If he thinks I 'm just wasting my time, or if I'm just weird 'cause I like school, or whatever.
> Kristen: What about your daughter? What does she think?
> Leah: My daughter, she, she wants to go to college when she gets older. She wants to be a zoologist or veterinarian. She thinks it cool that I can be

> a teacher, like, that I can be her teacher, like, you know third grade teacher.

Following that conversation, Leah explained the ongoing negotiations that occurred as she spent time away from family to attend classes and complete her degree. Leah described the "deal" she and her daughter negotiated:

> School right now is, is part of the deal that we have going. I tell her, you know, we can't get a house until I make more money, and I can't make more money until I get a degree from school and then once we get the house then you can have your dog. It's all for a dog. So, she puts up with this so that she can have a dog. And now we're up to *two* dogs! I'm like, hey, we did not shake on two dogs (laughter).

It seemed that Leah's children, especially her daughter, tolerated their mom's busy schedule and time away from family because it would someday benefit them. For the time being, these future benefits were enough to see them through.

Barriers and "Pushing Through"

Like other "nontraditional" students, Leah encountered barriers throughout her undergraduate journey and she worked through these difficulties using whatever resources she could. For Leah, the demands of simultaneously working and studying full-time created a variety of situational barriers (Cross, 1981) such as trying to balance family, work, and financial responsibilities. In Leah's case, being a full-time college student frequently resulted in sacrificing time with her loved ones, something that was very difficult for her to accept. When she had a year and half remaining in the program, we discussed her journey and how she and the six remaining members of her cohort were coping. She explained:

> We are definitely holding onto each other. Personal issues are tugging away at people and we're like, you're not leaving, you're not going anywhere. Ana was having a similar struggle with her daughter and her family saying you don't spend enough time with us and that just pulling at

> you and eating away at you and is it really worth it? You're losing so much but so we just try to keep each other lifted and we're gonna do this together. We're all finishing together.

Leah described the struggles and sacrifices that students were making and how much they were “losing” all in an attempt to reach their final goal of earning a bachelor’s degree. As she described these struggles, I kept thinking about the forms of aspirational and social capital these women drew on to encourage one another. Despite feeling that they were losing a great deal at the moment, especially in terms of family time, they were holding each other up. Despite their cohort’s rocky start, the students were now a close-knit family, a network of peers who trusted one another and relied on each other for support and comfort.

Leah explained how she was able to make it through the program by looking ahead and staying positive:

> I’m in countdown mode, and so for every semester that I complete, I just look at it as one less semester that I have to complete. So, I'm getting closer to being done. I don't look at how much is left. I look at what I've already accomplished. I try to keep it as positive as possible. I told Ana, if I think about it too hard, I'll probably quit. So… I'm their cheerleader, I'm like we're gonna do it, we're *all* going through this, we're gonna do it! So, that's, that's all I have! (laughter)

Leah felt that she had to stay positive and keep everyone motivated because if she took the time to think about all the barriers, all that she was sacrificing, it would get to be too much and she would quit.

> I'm like, No one else is dropping! So, we’re *gonna* do this, because I can't lose anybody else in this group and we're *gonna* do this. And they're like, “Oh, you're always so positive”...and I'm like, I *have* to be, because if I allow myself to think I can't do this, then it will be over. So, I'm like, I 'm doing this… I'm just pushing through. Push, push, push.

Another situational barrier that Leah experienced throughout her journey was limited time. As a full-time childcare worker and a full-time student, as well as the primary caregiver for two children, she had more to do than her time or energy allowed. Her hectic schedule impacted how she organized her time. Leah described how she completed assignments at the last minute, which is what worked for her in that moment; it was her way of making it through without quitting.

> I'm just kind of realizing I'm towards the end of my rope… I'm doing what I have to do to keep it together. Right now, this procrastinating, last-minute thing is what's working for me, because if I try to fit everything into a 24 [hour] day, something's gonna give and I'm just gonna quit something. It will be my job or it will be school, or it will be something. So, I'm just doing what I can to keep myself from losing it and it's probably not the *best* plan…but I'm just afraid of the stress of that, trying to keep that organized.

Procrastination seemed to accompany the barrier of lack of time as she balanced being a mom, a teacher, and a student all at the same time.

During the fall and spring semesters, students attended class two to three nights a week from 5:00-8:40 p.m. The summer schedule was even more overwhelming. Students took two classes at a time and had class from 5-9 p.m. four nights a week. Leah described the *sacrifice* of being gone from home even more often during the summer session:

> It was just really hard because it's a *sacrifice* to your family and then it's summer so your kids aren't in school during the day. It's one thing if they're busy during the day and then at night, they're at wherever, whoever, doing whatever. But it's like they have the whole day of that and then at night, too. Last year I signed my daughter up for summer school so that was just to kind of take care of the mornings. It wasn't that she needed to go, but I needed somewhere *for* her to go. And after that, my sister would pick her up and it alternated between my sister and her dad.

When Leah talked about the sacrifice of being away from her kids, especially her daughter both day and night during the summer, I could see in her eyes how difficult it was. Leah was an incredible mom and a strong student who received A's in most of her courses. She thought deeply about the course content and tried to make the content meaningful to her, specifically by thinking about how to apply it to the young children with whom she worked. But after a grueling first summer session, Leah came up with a plan to make it through the second summer session with less stress by reducing the amount of course material she retained. She explained:

> I have a plan for this summer. I'm not going to stress this summer. Ana and I are talking about how we're going to make it through the summer. Last summer I stressed…I was trying to absorb too much and it was an impossible situation and I just totally stressed myself out. Last summer, I was killing myself trying to squeeze it all into my brain; I literally had headaches leaving class. So this summer, I'm like…I have to be okay with not holding onto every ounce of information being thrown at me. [I] just have to pass. Sorry, but that's the sacrifice I have to make to make it through the summer.

Leah's plan was to complete her work, but not push herself to go as deeply with the content as she had in previous semesters, and to do only what she needed to do to pass.

In addition to managing her time, Leah also had to manage her finances, which was difficult because she was now divorced. Leah described managing her expenses as a single mother:

> I had to put my children on my insurance and so that's a big cost difference, out of my check. And so, now, I'm like, I definitely have to go back to looking at the sales paper for deals on [groceries] and I'm back to clipping coupons and stuff. I have to make it work, because now I'm on a serious budget.

Leah described a situational barrier commonly experienced by "nontraditional" students: financial concerns. These financial concerns had a variety of implications. Because of

her current educational background, she was trapped in a job that she despised but had to endure because she could not afford to take a cut in pay to pursue opportunities at other childcare centers.

The expenses related to her coursework and materials created another financial burden. In the following passage, she described the cost of books and how she found creative ways to reduce expenses:

> It's different every semester because after the first couple of semesters of going to the bookstore and spending like $300.00 on books, just *books*, then I thought, well I could really use that money and we have to pay it back [in loans] anyway. I started going online, shopping at Half Price Books and borrowing from Julissa in the first cohort. I was saving a lot of money that way.

Leah was able to pay her tuition through financial aid loans she obtained through AU. However, knowing she had to pay it all back, she was very cautious and did not spend all the money that was allotted. Although she was eligible for the same LEARN scholarship money that both Roy and Thalia used to fund their college expenses, she chose not to utilize this resource because doing so would have required making a commitment to remain at her current place of employment. Leah did not want to be obligated to work at KidCare for an extended period of time. She explained, "I did *not* sign that [LEARN contract], in case something better did come along I wanted to be able to just go and not be stuck in a contract with KidCare."

In addition to the situational barriers (Cross, 1981) she experienced, such as family, employment, and time constraints, Leah also experienced institutional barriers such as scheduling and childcare difficulties. Her grueling school schedule of having classes 3-4 nights per week in fall, spring, a*nd* summer made it difficult for her to simultaneously enact the roles of mom, educator, and student to her fullest potential. A

lack of onsite childcare facilities at AU meant that Leah had to seek care for her school-aged child in the evenings both throughout the school year and in the summer. This responsibility was a financial and emotional burden on Leah, and though it sometimes seemed to be too much to bear, she kept on going. Ultimately, Leah sacrificed time with her family to meet the demands of school and complete her bachelor's degree, which she felt would lead to better career opportunities and greater financial security. To overcome these barriers, she had to keep looking to the future ahead. Leah just kept pushing forward no matter what obstacles were in her way.

Supports

While Leah reported experiencing many barriers, she also described some of the resources and supports that helped her make it through the program. First, she discussed the library that was located on the main campus:

> I liked the extended hours, the hours of the library. That's very convenient because then I don't have to break my neck after work to get there, I know I have the whole evening to make it there to pick it up. Pick up the books, or whatever, or to even work there.

She also discussed the ease of being part of a cohort, specifically not having to select courses or register because of the pre-set schedule. While she liked these features, she was very forthright about how she interpreted the schedule on paper versus how she lived the schedule in reality:

> I think it is very easy having everything pretty set so you don't have to worry about registration and all that stuff. I guess, my biggest thing is just simply looking through the entire calendar (laughter) to kind of understand that you have all of these classes and just that whole thing. Understanding how much time you're gonna spend in school, versus, it's kinda part-time, kinda thing. And the *summer*. Gotta be prepared for the summer!

Another resource Leah utilized throughout the program was the mentor who was assigned to her as part of the EC program. A big part of Leah's coursework was implementing the EC content she was learning in her courses in the setting in which she was working. For Leah, this meant implementing the content with the two-year olds in her KidCare classroom. At first, Leah's mentor Janice was concerned about implementing the content with such young children. Leah was not only confident in her ability to implement the content, but also felt she could do it without guidance or support from Janice. She described her relationship with her mentor in the following way:

> I'm very thankful for Janice because in the beginning, she was like, I don't know how you're gonna do this with two-year olds. I'm like, I got this! I get it. My personality is that if I think I got it, leave me alone. I'm not going to let you keep influencing me to the point where I'm not sure. And so I was able to kind of push her back (laughter). I was able to kind of have her give me space to do what I know I can do, and then once she saw that it was working, she was like, oh, ok! And so, that's kind of our relationship. I pretty [much] know what I'm doing. Leave me alone (laughter).

Rather than looking to her mentor for help implementing content or with AU coursework, Leah reported relying on Janice to simply support her and help her see what was *good* about KidCare when Leah struggled to see anything positive about the program's philosophy or the existing educational model. Janice was more of an emotional support for Leah, helping her push through in a work setting that was less than ideal. Leah described Janice's role:

> I think she's helped me with work, because you know with school, I'm pushing through but at work I'm stalling. I'm like you have to help me, talk to me and tell me what's good (laughter) because I won't need you if I quit this job or get fired, so it's been more, she's been more of a support in that way.

“Finding a Place in the Field”

During the final interview, our conversation turned to program outcomes and what was next for Leah. When I asked Leah what she learned from her undergraduate studies, she explained how her core values had changed:

> My worldview has changed a lot and I think I’m more compassionate [now] because I'm more informed and learning new things has made me probably more aware than I was before. In this program, you're encouraged to think deeply and I've always thought more deeply than the average person, but now it's more of a focused thinking of being aware, being compassionate and thinking about others. With working with the people in my cohort and seeing where they come from, it's making me more aware of people on a more personal level.

She also discussed the importance of applying the content with young children:

> I always like learning for the sake of learning and understanding that, it's the *application* that makes it more meaningful…to be able to apply it, especially, like in the field of education, just understanding what it is that teachers really do and the whole point of it! (laughter).

Finally, she described the importance of making [learning] meaningful, both for young children and for herself:

> You say teaching, you just think teaching. But being able to connect it to children to be able to make it meaningful to children and understanding that they understand more when it *means* something. I've been trying to apply that for myself even in the learning. That it has to mean something…it has to connect.

In sum, Leah was leaving the program with a deep understanding of children and how to teach in a way that was meaningful to them. She gained knowledge of pedagogy as well as a deep understanding of teaching literacy. Despite her strong educational foundation, she was at a crossroads. She explained:

> Childcare is very....it breaks my heart ‘cause this is my passion. It seems like more and more people who have less experience are dictating the policy and the practice and they really don't know the actual effects or

> how hard or easy it is to implement it at the level of teacher. At least it looks good on paper then...

Sensing her frustration, I reassured Leah that getting her degree would open many doors in the future. We then had the following conversation:

> Kristen: Ideally, if you can graduate with bachelor's and [a] certification, it's gonna open so many options, mostly more higher-paying options.
> Leah: I guess I won't tell you that I don't want to teach. I will take the Praxis, but I don't want to teach children.
> Kristen: What do you want to do?
> Leah: I want to work in the field. Probably more in technical assistance or nonprofit, um, I don't know, maybe, I would like, what I would really like to do, is work for some organization where I kind of educate adults on child development. I wouldn't mind teaching, but these last few years at KidCare has kind of worn me down, to where I would like to make a *bigger* difference… not just directly with the children, but with the people who are making these decisions and have a more far-reaching impact.

Leah went on to describe her hopes of finding a place in the field, albeit not in the classroom:

> I'm hoping that I can find my place in the field because I do feel like, I'm feeling more and more as if my place is not in the classroom anymore, full-time. But I would like to be of assistance to the people who are in the classroom. So, I don't ever want to be that person who's so far removed from the classroom, that I don't get it anymore. That I just rely too much on the theory, because I see from KidCare, that theory alone isn't the answer. You have to put it in practice to see if it needs tweaking or not. I'm hoping that somewhere there's a place for me to be able to help others and parents, too. I guess, what I *really* want is for the people who spend the most time with children, to understand where the child is coming from and just what they are capable of.

Leah's passion for working with young children extended far beyond the classroom. Although the "theoretical model" looked good on paper for places such as KidCare, Leah saw the disconnect and the need for better options for young children and their families. Leah's time at AU was a journey, and at the end of her undergraduate studies, she was processing what that meant and how to move forward in her professional career:

> Colleen said all semester about [the program] being a journey…. a kind of finding—a journey of all the places that you have been or the turns that your career pretty much takes and where you end up, that it's not just a straight shot. It can always change and I guess there's nothing wrong with that. Just in the very back of my mind, I'm doing this [program] and so I should be teaching, right? Then, why do I wanna leave the children? I don't want to feel guilty about that. I want to be able feel good about the choices that I do make and know that I may not even end up there, I may end up somewhere else and it's ok. Because there's still, there's still gonna be some [importance] to helping and advocating for children.

Leah ultimately decided she did not want to be a teacher in a classroom of young children, and a sense of guilt accompanied that realization. She explained:

> People always ask, so you're getting your degree, where you gonna teach? I don't want to teach! I don't really want to teach, but I feel awkward saying that to people because you know they're thinking, well what are you doing this for, and it's like, I'm getting a lot more out of this than just how to be a teacher. I'm getting an understanding of what it's like to be a teacher and to, what's going on and learning about families and then all of that, too, so. It's opening a lot of doors, or piquing my interest in a lot of different areas, so I don't have to feel trapped.

In the end, Leah's journey gave her the content knowledge to make a difference in the lives of young children and families. While she did not yet know where her journey would take her next, she believed that earning her degree would open doors. At a minimum, the degree would free her from feeling trapped in her current work setting.

Reflection

As we wrapped up the final interview, Leah—the strong, single mom and cohort cheerleader—became very emotional. When I asked how she was feeling, she explained what the interview process was like for her and described her need to finish the interview process:

> I just needed to finish [the interviews] 'cause rehashing all that stuff…. I've had, like a very emotional week (laughter)…I need to wrap this up! I haven't cried this much in forever! It's just…you know, that walls are

> coming down and I'm just, getting to express things I don't normally get to… there's no one [who] sits and listens to my stories! (laughter)

In the EC program, students were frequently required to reflect on their lives, their experiences, and their teaching. For Leah, the interview process was similar. During the interviews, she was constantly reflecting on her life while at the same time making some important discoveries about her experiences and how they had shaped who she was:

> It's that reflection thing, it's like talking about it and I had a couple of "aha" moments. It's just like, oh, that explains a lot! Well, just thinking a little bit about my personality and why I'm not very touchy-feely and affectionate with other people, that whole thing. Just, why I feel a disconnect [from] other people. Not to *children,* but to adults and my family, and just in general.

Leah went on to explain one of the "aha" moments she experienced during the interview process:

> Well, just from moving around so much in my childhood and not really having, like a stable environment, and the different people that I lived with… it was more about *circumstance*, rather than just, life, you know. Just, the ordinary kind of experience people experience I did not really experience.

Finally, Leah explained why she believed she was more comfortable listening and watching from the perimeter than making direct connections with others:

> It's just who I am. I think like…I don't have your experiences so I can't really understand where you're coming from, whereas most people have more like a commonality or something. I just automatically feel on the outside, so I try to figure it out, and kinda connect wherever I can, but it's just kinda, it seems artificial (laughter). I can't just naturally connect to people and talk to them and all of that, and I'm not very comfortable with that as much as just, kind of listening and watching.

The field notes I recorded after our final interview suggest how emotional the interviews and reflection process were for Leah:

> I thanked Leah for coming and told her that I had texted last night to make sure that today was still a good day to meet. Her response was that she "just needed to get this done" [the interview] because it had brought up a lot of emotions.
>
> I asked her to tell me more about this and she seemed hesitant. Once she started to explain this, she teared up, especially when talking about how much she moved around and never really bonded as a child. I tried to then connect this [experience] to her and what this has caused her to become…she was still a little hesitant at first, but then teared up again as she was explaining what it means to be an educator. (Fieldnotes, 4/9/2011)

During the final interview and as I reflected on the process, I realized what an emotional journey the interview process was for Leah. She shared her life story and her road to completing her bachelor's degree with me. More importantly, it seemed that as she reflected, she had some personal realizations that extended to issues far deeper than her educational journey. The thoughtful reflections she expressed during our final interview were not the last thoughts Leah would grapple with regarding how she was feeling about her work at KidCare or her place in the field of early childhood education. About two years after the completion of our interviews, I asked Leah to do a member check on her chapter and she emailed me the following response:

> "Reading my story"
>
> At this point in my journey, I recognize that my passions include children, nature, education, and the process of learning particularly for those who do not have regular access to experiences. The tunnel vision of closing the achievement gap has to widen to include the child as a whole being. I was just explicitly told that the KidCare Learning Network's mission is to close the achievement gap, which explains why I have been having such a difficult time fitting into the existing system there. I thought the social-emotional well-being of children was a priority and it is not. It's presumed to be a given. Unfortunately, we are seeing more and more infants and toddlers coming to us with social-emotional and behavioral issues from many forms of trauma they experience.

> In my opinion, this thinking of teaching academics in a vacuum and the incessant amount of documentation of everything related to outcomes that guarantee gaining/maintaining funding stretches outside the walls of KidCare and further marginalize[s] the people who need more than just to "learn how to read" to succeed/survive in this world. So where does this leave me? I know I think too hard about the big picture and need to think about the smaller accomplishments that are within my ability. I just don't know how to take this broken educational system. People of color suffer the most and so it appears that people are so quick to say settle for the smaller accomplishments because if they fall through the cracks who really cares?
>
> Maybe advocacy [at] some level is my truer calling. Working on the front lines in a facility like KidCare and seeing families/children in their current states is very hard to take day in and day out. (Personal correspondence, 7/19/14)

Like other "nontraditional" students, Leah encountered many barriers throughout her educational journey and the completion of her bachelor's degree. Despite these barriers, she completed her degree. Not only did she complete her degree, but she embarked on a journey that I am confident will lead to her to finding her calling in the field of education and finding happiness in whatever role she fulfills.

I am in awe of the aspirational capital Leah drew upon throughout her journey. She faced endless barriers and feelings of being "stuck" in a work setting that was, at its core, not best for the children. Despite these feelings, Leah pushed on and continues to search for a career path that will allow her to make change for children and families. In addition to utilizing aspirational capital, Leah drew on resistant capital, being a voice of strength in her cohort, especially when others felt that they had no voice or could not express themselves.

Most of all, as I think of Leah, I feel honored to have been a part of her journey. Meeting her in the first semester of her coursework and being able to interview her as she navigated throughout the program allowed me to see her during different stages of her

journey. One of my proudest moments was seeing her on graduation day, knowing that the transition symbolized a door opening for her and that her presence would improve the field of early childhood education. I felt honored to know such a strong, courageous woman and I am confident that wherever her journey takes her, she will be amazing, because although she may not realize it yet, she already is an inspiration. And for that, I will always be thankful.

Chapter 8: CONCLUSION

This study examines the lives of three "non-traditional" undergraduate students enrolled in the early childhood (EC) program at Assisi University (AU). I draw on the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) to counter the deficit view of "non-traditional" students frequently adopted by institutions of higher education. I employ an asset-based approach to "non-traditional" students, in which I highlight what they *bring* to higher education, rather than what they *lack*.

As part of this asset-based approach, I draw upon the concept of community cultural wealth (Villalpando & Solorzano, 2004; Yosso, 2005) to describe the various resources, or capital, utilized by "non-traditional" students throughout their educational journeys. The community cultural wealth framework emerged from Bourdieu's (1986) class-based analysis of culture in which "cultural capital" was defined as a set of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities. I was drawn to CRT, and specifically to the community cultural wealth perspective, because of the theory's critique of the deficit perspective and also because many "non-traditional" students are also students of color.

Like Villalpando and Solórzano (2004) and Yosso (2005), I espouse a broader interpretation of the traditional definition of cultural capital. In other words, rather than narrowly defining cultural capital according to White, middle class values, I argue that indeed there *are* forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups possess—forms that traditional cultural capital theory has neglected to recognize. I argue that the three "non-traditional" students in this study are each members of groups that are marginalized, sometimes in very similar ways and other times in strikingly different ways. Roy is a White male childcare teacher in a predominantly female workforce, Thalia is a Latina

female for whom English is her third language, and Leah is an African American female and a single mother of two children. The students in this study are often included multiple student categories including "non-traditional," working class, first generation, and students of color. These categories often overlap, and in some cases it is difficult to separate the issues that are related to being "non-traditional" and the issues that are related to membership in other categories such as race or gender. Using an asset-based approach, I critique the assumption that "non-traditional" undergraduate students come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies, and instead highlight the strengths and forms of capital that study participants brought to their educational experiences.

I began this study with two central research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of "non-traditional" students in an early childhood baccalaureate completion program? (2) What sorts of knowledge and experiences did participants in this study bring to their experiences? Embedded in these questions are issues surrounding a deficit view of "non-traditional" students.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the findings of the study and discuss their implications. In the first section, I discuss the findings from Roy, Thalia, and Leah's stories and use the cultural wealth framework to describe and compare the types of capital each utilized throughout their journeys. Next, I describe my use of CRT as a lens through which to consider the role of gender, race, and language. I then identify four themes that emerged in my analysis of the data. Next, I examine the EC program at Assisi University (AU) more closely and discuss program encouragements, constraints, and recommendations. I begin the latter part of the chapter by "troubling" existing definitions of "non-traditional" students. Next, I discuss the implications of the findings from the

perspectives of three groups: researchers, teacher educators, and institutions of higher education. I then focus on the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research. The chapter concludes with final thoughts.

Discussion of Findings

Roy

Roy is a 36-year-old White student, and his story describes "the long unusual route" he traveled as he completed a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Roy considered his route "non-traditional" because it deviated from what is perceived as the traditional path leading to an undergraduate degree. For the purpose of this research study, Roy is considered a "non-traditional" student based on his age and his full-time work status. Roy's story represents a journey of perseverance: a combination of life, work, and educational experiences that encompass a span of 17 years between his high school and college graduation ceremonies.

Of critical importance when considering Roy and other students is the deficit model that is often used to characterize "non-traditional" students as being underprepared or lacking some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed (Smit, 2012). The deficit perspective is directly challenged when an asset-based approach is used instead as a way to explain the forms of cultural wealth that Roy brought to his experience.

The forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006) Roy drew upon throughout his educational biography included aspirational, navigational, social, and familial capital. First, Roy utilized aspirational capital starting as early as middle school when he began his work with young children and aspired to become a teacher. Roy faced many

challenges that created “detours” in his winding road to an undergraduate degree. Despite the length of his journey, Roy reported that he would not want to change anything about his route. In fact, he viewed all of his experiences as integral to his education.

Another asset that Roy employed was his use of navigational capital. Roy navigated easily through the various schools and programs in which he was enrolled. This included navigating through various courses, the EC program, and the larger university and systems including financial aid and scholarship programs.

Roy also utilized social capital as he identified support systems provided by students and faculty. In addition to the cohort members that became part of his extended family, Roy also had a group of friends outside of college with whom he socialized. In addition, Roy established a support network at work that included colleagues and the center’s director.

Finally, Roy employed familial capital. This was the earliest form of capital that Roy drew on, and it was always present in his life and studies. In addition to the unyielding support provided by his parents, his family also instilled in him the importance of an education.

In the end, each of these forms of capital interconnected to create the sense of empowerment Roy felt upon completing his undergraduate studies. The label of “non-traditional” student is one that Roy is “proud to wear” and his story highlights two of the characteristics he quite fittingly used to describe “non-traditional” students: dedication and persistence.

Thalia

Thalia is a 46-year-old Mexican student, and her story highlights the "journey of faith" she experienced as she completed a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Thalia's educational and work experiences, as well as her quest to obtain a bachelor's degree while simultaneously learning her third language are important aspects of my research. For the purpose of this research study, Thalia is considered a "non-traditional" student based on her age, full-time work status, and emerging English skills. Thalia described herself as a "special" student, when compared to "regular," more traditional students. Throughout our interviews, Thalia described her determination to challenge herself and try college, even though her English was not "so good." Thalia also considered the program in which she was enrolled a "special program" in comparison to the "regular" programs in which traditional college students like her daughter are enrolled. Her status as a "special" student can also be interpreted as a "non-traditional" student, a label that is often characterized from a deficit perspective.

Of critical importance when considering Thalia's story is the deficit model that is often used to describe "non-traditional" students as being underprepared or lacking some of the academic and cultural resources required to succeed in higher education (Smit, 2012). Thalia used the words "other person" to describe herself and students in her program whom she felt lacked English proficiency and the basic educational skills that she deemed essential to succeeding in school. Thalia's determination and her use of each of these alternative forms of capital resulted in her successful completion of her undergraduate degree. Being a "special" student entailed specific challenges, and for

Thalia, one of the biggest obstacles to meeting her ultimate goal of becoming a certified teacher was passing the Praxis exam.

As with Roy's story, Thalia's complete educational biography (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) and the biographical stages she moved through in her journey are integral to her story. Unlike Roy, Thalia faced learning a new language and navigating through institutions that were unfamiliar to her. In addition, throughout Thalia's undergraduate studies, the role of full-time student was always accompanied by the roles of wife, mother, and full-time teacher's assistant in a bilingual elementary school.

It is important to consider the resources that Thalia utilized throughout her "journey of faith." Thalia drew upon various forms of capital including aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and linguistic capital. Thalia's aspirational capital centered on her dream of becoming a teacher. She faced significant challenges including learning three languages, passing the exam to become a U.S. citizen, and struggling to pass the state exam that will allow her to become a certified teacher. Despite these challenges, I argue that she found success as she completed her bachelor's degree.

Thalia also drew on navigational capital throughout her undergraduate experience. She frequently sought assistance from cohort members and faculty. Navigating the university often was difficult for her because she was learning to deal with complex systems such as financial aid in her third language, and she was frequently marginalized and categorized as "other" or someone who lacked the skills to succeed in her undergraduate courses.

Both Roy and Thalia utilized social capital during their journeys. Thalia's social capital was linked to a support system composed of fellow students, faculty members, her

mentor, and the teacher with whom she worked. Both Roy and Thalia benefited from the social capital they procured; Roy embodied a leadership role within in his cohort making sure that all of his fellow students were on the right path, while Thalia looked to others in her cohort for guidance and often sought out other Latina students to work together to gain a mutual understanding of concepts and assignments. As Thalia became more confident in English, she took on more of a leadership role within her cohort.

As it was for Roy, familial capital was the earliest form of capital that Thalia utilized. It was present throughout her life and her studies and she was guided by the encouragement and wisdom of family members such as her grandfather. For both Roy and Thalia, their cohorts became an extended family that was precious to them.

Linguistic capital was utilized by Thalia and was integral to her story. Thalia consciously sought opportunities to improve her language skills and this effort was especially evident during her undergraduate experience. By learning a third language, Thalia was able to achieve significant accomplishments including passing the U.S. citizenship exam and completing a bachelor's degree.

Finally, a source of support that was constant throughout Thalia's life, including during her undergraduate studies, was her faith in God. God was a force that was omnipresent in her life, from keeping her safe during armed robberies in Mexico, to having a Bible in her suitcase as she crossed the water, to sending her signs that teaching was the path that she should follow. Religion was important to Thalia and she used it not only to guide her, but also to improve her English. Thalia believed in God and called upon her faith throughout her life and educational journey.

Leah

Leah is 38 years of age and identifies as an African American female. At the time of the study, she was both a full-time student and a full-time childcare provider, and even more important to Leah, she was a single mother of two children. Leah's story represents the struggles she experienced throughout her undergraduate studies as she balanced work, school, and family.

The forms of capital (Yosso, 2006) that Leah utilized throughout her journal were familial, social, resistant, and aspirational. First, Leah utilized familial capital throughout her life, although this type of capital was different for her than it was for Roy or Thalia. Because she was geographically separated from her parents starting in middle school, in many aspects her siblings raised Leah and she utilized them as resources throughout her young adult life. As one of 16 children, she had many siblings to turn to for support and she used them as resources when she sought advice or a place to live. Although Leah felt that moving around created some "attachment issues" for her, her experiences with different family members helped her develop an awareness of who she was and how she came to be this person.

Leah also utilized social capital throughout her life, often through the support of mentors, in both work and school settings. In addition to her mentors, Leah used the classmates in her cohort to help push her through the 33-month journey to obtain a bachelor's degree. Social capital interconnected with her use of navigational capital as she and her classmates worked their way through content and systems that were unfamiliar to them. At times, Leah followed the lead of other classmates when

navigating systems such as financial aid, while at times she was a leader in her cohort who encouraged classmates not to give up and to "push each other through."

Unlike Roy and Thalia, Leah also drew on resistant capital among both family and classmates. Despite the support of her family, when Leah first became a mother, she confronted opposition from her family regarding her parenting abilities and techniques. Her ability to advocate for young children seemed to begin when she became a parent and persisted throughout her educational and professional experiences.

At work, Leah constantly used her resistant capital as she argued against current systems that created inequality while continuously advocating for children of color. As a person of color, Leah related to the experiences of the students of color. Despite these shared experiences, Leah was "stuck" in a power struggle because as an assistant teacher, her input was not valued and it was not part of her role to tell the lead teacher (often a White teacher) how to teach the children. She had an understanding of young children and she also had the perspective of a person of color, but neither was valued because of the hierarchy of a model in which predominantly White female administrators and teachers were making decisions for a population that was predominately students of color from a low socio-economic background.

Leah also drew on her resistant capital as a student at AU; she served as a voice of strength in her cohort, especially when others felt like they had no voice or could not express themselves. As the sole person in her cohort to oppose Tanisha's attempts to marginalize other students, Leah advocated for the women fluent in a language other than English. She assumed this role, in part because of her core belief that she would *never* be put in a position in which she could not have a voice.

Finally, Leah continually utilized aspirational capital to get her through life, work, and school. Although she faced many barriers, she still dreamed of the future. In Yosso's (2006) terms, her aspirational capital helped her to maintain her dreams for the future because she *had* to do something to change her current work situation. Staying at KidCare was not a feasible option either financially or emotionally. She faced endless barriers and feelings of being "stuck" in a work setting that was, at the core, not best for the children. Despite these feelings, Leah pushed on and continued to search for a career path that would allow her to improve the lives of children and families.

Acknowledging that Race (and Other Categories) Matter

I was drawn to CRT because "as a form of oppositional scholarship, CRT challenges the experience of Whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color" (Taylor, 1988, p. 122). As a researcher, I recognize that forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin are pervasive in U.S. society. Simply put, I recognize that race matters, and this was something I needed to consider thoroughly as I analyzed the experiences of the students in this study.

Thus, while the three students in the study all belonged to the category of "non-traditional" student and were in some ways very similar (e.g., they were similar in age, they worked full-time while attending school, and they struggled to pay tuition), they were also different in significant ways (e.g., gender, race, and language). Thus, I needed to consider the journeys they experienced as a White male, a Latina Female, and an African American female. I needed to analyze the impact gender, race, and language had on these students' educational journeys. I knew such an analysis would prove difficult

because two of the students in this study were considered both "non-traditional" *and* students of color, making it difficult to determine which issues were related to being "non-traditional" and which were specifically related to race. In the analysis, I used CRT to flesh out some of these categories as a means of understanding Roy, Thalia, and Leah as "non-traditional" students, as well as the role of race, gender, and language in their educational experiences.

Being a "Non-Traditional" Student

Leah, Roy, and Thalia were all considered "non-traditional" students at AU. They shared this label based on several characteristics including age, delayed enrollment, financial independence, and full-time work status. Unlike "traditional" students who range from 17-22 years of age, the students in this study were significantly older. At the time of graduation from AU, Leah was 38, Roy was 36, and Thalia was 46 years of age.

Unlike "traditional" students who enter college immediately following high school, the students in this study delayed enrollment. Leah and Thalia had a gap of several years between finishing high school and beginning to earn their associate degrees. While Roy first enrolled in college immediately after high school graduation, there were times on his path to higher education during which he was not consistently enrolled in a four-year university or working on his associate degree.

Another characteristic of "non-traditional" students that the participants in this study shared was full-time work status during college. When enrolled at AU, Leah, Roy, and Thalia were financially independent from their parents and each worked at least 35 hours per week. Leah, Roy and Thalia were all employed as early childhood educators and each brought many years of EC work experience with them to college.

As “non-traditional” students, Leah, Roy, and Thalia faced many of the same barriers including balancing working and studying full-time as well as the financial struggles of being an undergraduate student. While they shared membership in the “non-traditional” category and experienced similar barriers, race, gender, and language played different roles in their educational experiences.

Gender

For Roy, gender played out in a variety of ways throughout his journey. From an early age, he was interested in the field of early childhood education, a field that is dominated by women. The fact that women dominated his chosen career path did not deter Roy’s interest in pursuing EC as a career. Initially, his mother questioned his choice of career, causing Roy to wonder if he had chosen the right path. However, as Roy gained more confidence and experience in the field, he believed that working in EC was his calling.

As he worked toward his associate degree and then his bachelor’s degree, Roy was the sole male in his courses and often the only male in his work setting. This did not bother him because he valued the diversity of his classmates and their work experiences. However, as a male in a workforce that was female dominated, he was a member of a group that was sometimes marginalized.

Although being a male in the field of early childhood education was marginalizing at times, it worked for Roy. Because AU was created within a historically patriarchal society, Roy fit in. Because he was a male, his capability to succeed as an undergraduate student was not questioned.

Gender had very different impacts for Leah and Thalia. As early childhood educators, being female worked for them. Their gender matched the predominately female workforce of the early childhood education field, and no one questioned whether or not they should be educators in early childhood classrooms based on their gender. At AU, being female was not unusual because women accounted for a high percentage of undergraduate students. However, the large number of female students did not mean that there were not challenges associated with being a female student. Unlike Roy, Leah and Thalia experienced a variety of barriers specifically related to being female.

For example, Thalia was married and a mother of two children. Attending classes meant being gone from her children and husband, and having someone else take on the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and caring for her family. Like Thalia, Leah was the mother of two children, although she was divorced and was the primary caregiver for her children. For Leah, being a student meant sacrificing time with her family and leaving her children with other family members or sometimes on their own while she worked, attended classes, and studied. For these two female students, balancing work, school, and family was a constant struggle. Unlike Leah and Thalia, Roy did not experience these struggles as a single male. He was able to find a way to balance work and school and still managed to make time for friends and fun. Thus, gender influenced the experiences of Leah, Thalia, and Roy in different ways.

Race

As a White student, Roy came to AU and his other educational experiences with a significant amount of cultural capital. Being White afforded Roy certain privileges. He was a member of the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995) and this worked in his favor,

although sometimes in ways invisible to him. School worked for him. He knew how to "do" school because he spoke the language and he could navigate the systems, and because he was White, he fit in and students and faculty members never seemed to question whether or not he belonged in higher education.

As an African American student, Leah had a very different experience than Roy. She grew up in a significantly different context, in which it was not uncommon for her to be in proximity to members of the Ku Klux Klan. Growing up, her classmates, and all her teachers except one were African American. As she entered middle school, this changed dramatically and for the first time, she was in the minority and was surround by mostly White students and teachers. Her parents did not attend college and it was not expected that she would attend college.

At work, Leah constantly argued against current systems that created inequality while continually advocating for children of color. As a person of color, Leah related to the experiences of the students of color with whom she was teaching. She had an understanding of young children and she also had the perspective of a person of color, though neither was valued given the hierarchy of a model which has a majority of White female administrators and teachers making decisions for a population that was predominantly students of color from a low socio-economic background.

When Leah enrolled at AU, she was a member of a larger university that was predominantly White. Even though students of color were the majority in the cohort, they experienced marginalization from another cohort member Leah served as a voice of strength in her cohort, especially when other students of color felt that they had no voice or could not express themselves. As the sole person in her cohort to oppose Tanisha's

marginalizing comments, Leah advocated for the women fluent in a LOTE. She did this, in part, because of her core belief that she would *never* be put in a position where she could not have a voice.

As a Latina student, it was difficult for Thalia to feel like she fit in at AU. Although she was surrounded by many other Latina students in her cohort, she spoke Spanish and was still learning English, the language of the culture of power. Thalia considered herself an "other person," a label that highlights her feelings of marginalization in the program and society. Feelings of "otherness" have followed her since she the age of six, when started school and was marginalized for not speak Spanish fluently. As an undergraduate student and a student fluent in LOTE she worked tirelessly to simultaneously learn English *and* use it to complete her readings and course assignments. Despite all her efforts, Thalia continued to view herself as "other," a descriptor that usually implies that someone is lacking, rather than has much to give.

Language

Roy was fluent in English, the language of the culture of power. Leah was also fluent in the language of the dominant culture because she had significant experience and exposure to a predominantly White school system throughout middle and high school. Unlike Roy and Leah, Thalia was not fluent in the dominant language or "ways of being" in U.S. classrooms

As a student fluent in LOTE, Thalia faced a variety of obstacles inherent to schooling and standardized tests such as the Praxis exam. Ultimately, it was not because Thalia failed to progress that she was unable to become a certified teacher, but rather

because the required exam was first and foremost a test of English proficiency and thus not a fair way to accurately measure content knowledge.

This is something that was problematic for Thalia, a bilingual student, as high-stakes tests such as the Praxis exam "ultimately reflect a 'language-as-problem' or 'deficit model' orientation in recent US language policy, where language has become a liability for ELLs" (Menkin, 2008, p.152). This is of great concern, because through this 'language as liability' framework, Thalia is viewed through the lens of the deficit model yet again. Despite all of her accomplishments, Thalia is still labeled as 'failing' in an educational system where standardized testing continues to serve as a gatekeeping function that perpetuates the power of dominant groups (Menkin, 2008).

Critical Race Theory and Counter-Stories

Ultimately, analyzing the experiences of Roy, Thalia, and Leah sometimes proved difficult because two of the students in this study were considered both "non-traditional" *and* students of color, making it difficult to separate what issues were related specifically to race and what other issues were related to being "non-traditional."

However, when analyzed collectively, the categories of "non-traditional" student, gender, race, and language all mattered. Importantly, all of these students were acting within an institution that was part of the culture of power. For Roy, speaking English and being privy to the "ways of being" within the cohort and institution made it easier for him to succeed. While Leah and Thalia both succeeded in earning a bachelor's degree, they did it while facing the many barriers associated with not being a member of the culture of power.

CRT and LatCrit allow researchers to listen to the stories of Leah, Roy, and Thalia and honor the voices of "non-traditional" students while using their experiential knowledge and community cultural wealth to create an asset-based framework in which to view their experiences. Rather than seeing them as what they *are not*, an asset-based framework allows observers to view their experiences and narratives as counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that illustrate who the participants *are*. Roy was a male who was passionate about early childhood education and never gave up pursuing his dream of teaching young children. Thalia was a trilingual woman who spent her entire life acquiring the *gift* of being able to speak three languages. Leah was an advocate for both students of color within her cohort and the young children of color she taught.

Themes

As an assistant professor in the EC program I was amazed by my students, their stories, and their accomplishments. Despite being part of a larger institution that often viewed the students from a deficit perspective, I realized that my students were actually quite successful and ultimately met their goal of completing a bachelor's degree.

As I considered the stories of Roy, Leah, and Thalia, it was evident that despite long and arduous journeys to achieving their educational dreams, all of the students were ultimately successful. As I analyzed the data, I identified four common themes present in their journeys: barriers, supports, perseverance, and empowerment.

The first theme I identified was the barriers the participants faced. Each faced institutional barriers such as difficulties with financial aid and limited access to the support services offered by the university. In addition, language was a barrier for Thalia,

because it was difficult, especially at the start of the program, for her to develop proficiency in course content when it was presented in her third language.

The second theme I identified was the supports used by the participants. In the previous section, I discussed how social and navigational capital served as a support in the form of peers, mentors, faculty, and family members. Leah, Roy, and Thalia drew from these support networks, which were integral in their successful baccalaureate journeys.

The third theme I identified was perseverance. Throughout the EC program, perseverance was a word that was used repeatedly as we discussed narratives and "grand themes" (O'Keefe, 2010) to explore with young children. I found that perseverance was one of the major attributes of my undergraduate students and the participants in this study were no exception. Each identified the goal of becoming a teacher many years before completing their bachelor's degree. Throughout their journeys, Leah, Roy, and Thalia persevered and were eventually rewarded with bachelor's degrees. In addition to fulfilling that accomplishment, they all strived to pass the state Praxis exams. Roy and Leah accomplished this and Thalia is still working toward this dream. I have no doubt that she will accomplish it. She may not pass until she achieves greater English proficiency and thus is even more confident, but Thalia will persevere and she will succeed.

The final theme I identified was empowerment. As an instructor in the program, I saw a change in students as they moved through the program. I noticed that the students' confidence levels increased and near the end of the program, students became more empowered, both in themselves and in their role as teachers of young children. This

change became evident in Roy's description of the program and his experience, in which he repeatedly used the word "empowerment":

> So, it's an empowering, I guess I would call this program a very empowering program, so, being a "non-traditional," it empowers you. It's tough...but it empowers you, I guess would be the fair way to put it, or the best way.

Although Thalia never explicitly used the word "empowered" in the same way Roy did, I argue that she was also empowered. She advocated for her young students and her family members and she became more comfortable navigating systems that were unfamiliar to her. As she gained more confidence in her language skills, she also felt empowered to help others and become more of a leader in the field of early childhood education.

I argue that Leah also left the program at AU having become empowered, although at the time of the study, in seemingly unknown ways. She constantly struggled to find her place in the field, although she was an always advocate for young children. Through her studies, she was empowered to serve as an advocate for children and families and while she continues to search for her place in the field of early childhood education, she has been empowered to serve on behalf of others.

These four themes are representative of three "non-traditional" students who succeeded within a larger university context that often viewed them as marginalized and deficient. I chose to share their stories because not only did they succeed, they became *empowered*, both professionally and personally.

The Early Childhood Program at Assisi University

This study examined the lives of three "non-traditional" undergraduate students enrolled in the EC program at Assisi University. The program at AU was created, in part,

to respond to the need for EC teachers to obtain a bachelor's degree by 2013. The program's primary purpose was to provide an intensive professional development program to prepare culturally and linguistically diverse educators who would reflect the current population of children within the Lake City community.

Unlike the preexisting undergraduate teacher education programs at AU, The EC program was strongly committed to urban education and serving the diverse population of students in Lake City. The program was described as a bachelor completion program on the AU website, which stated:

> The Early Childhood Bachelor Completion Program is geared toward current Early Childhood providers with Early Childhood Associate Degrees, who wish to obtain their Bachelor Degree and/or Teaching Certification in Early Childhood (birth through third grade). (Assisi University website, 2011).

To better understand the collegiate experience of the "non-traditional" students in this study, it was important to examine the program in which the students were enrolled. As with any program, the EC program at AU included a variety of encouragements and constraints.

Program Encouragements

The EC program included four integral components that I argue are encouragements including the cohort model, onsite field experiences, mentor services, and integrated course content and application in early childhood settings.

Cohort Model

> The Early Childhood Bachelor Completion Program operates in a cohort model. Each cohort begins in the fall and runs for three years. Courses are offered in the evening starting at 5 p.m. Students attend class two nights per week with a third night once a month. (Assisi University website, 2014)

While the cohort model was advertised as groups of 15-20 students, by the time Leah, Roy, and Thalia graduated, each of their cohorts consisted of fewer than 10 students. Some of the aspects of the cohort model that the participants appreciated were the small class sizes, 1:1 support from instructors during class and on evenings and weekends, set classes and schedules, and a diverse student population including many bilingual learners.

Onsite Field Experience

> On-the-job field experiences are completed every semester. The students apply university course content in their classrooms during the day. So, in addition to obtaining an undergraduate degree, the students also receive ongoing professional development to support them in their daily instruction. (Assisi University website, 2014).

Onsite field experience was integral to each of the participants coming to AU. Because all of the students worked full-time in an early childhood setting, the idea of being able to complete fieldwork and student teaching within their current work settings meant that they would not have to take time off of work (or lose compensation) while they earned their degree. They also benefited from having a context in which they could apply course content both immediately and continually.

Mentor Services

> Another unique component of our program is that each student is assigned an experienced mentor who will accompany them throughout their three-year program. Through weekly visits, the mentor will provide modeling, support and encouragement to help the student grow into a seasoned teacher. (Assisi University website, 2014)

Each of the participants felt that the mentor component of the EC program was important. Throughout courses and interviews, they described their mentor as an invaluable support in both navigating through the program and applying the content that

they were learning in courses. In addition to the weekly visits, mentors also attended monthly fieldwork courses with students, thus providing further opportunities to mutually learn about content through the guidance and modeling of the AU instructor.

Integrated Courses

> This program is unique in its design, whereby the courses within the semester are woven together to deliver integrated content. This content is applied in the student's classroom with the children that they teach. Therefore, the course content is very relevant to the daily instruction that our students are delivering to their own students. (Assisi University website, 2014)

The intentional design of the EC program offered a unique model in which onsite field experience allowed students to apply the content that they were learning immediately and on an ongoing basis. Unlike traditional programs in which the content of different classes can be very disconnected, the intentional connectedness of the design allowed students to think about content in many different ways, therefore deepening their understanding of content and offering opportunities for application.

In addition to these four components, one of the encouragements of the program that I found was most powerful was the culturally and linguistically diverse population of undergraduate students enrolled in the program. These students reflect the demographic characteristics of the Lakeview Public School District and the surrounding areas in which these teachers will be teaching. The EC program "strongly emphasizes language and literacy development and the use of developmentally appropriate research based practices to address the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of young children" (Assisi University website, 2013). I argue that having a diverse population of undergraduate students provides a rich context for sharing stories and life experiences, and thus offers

opportunities for students to consider multiple perspectives, something that is an essential skill for working with young children and families.

Program Constraints

Despite the EC program's appreciation of diversity and commitment to urban education, the program is situated within the context of the larger university, a community that has traditionally catered to the needs of a more "traditional" student. In 2009-10, Assisi University reported a total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3,070. About 28.6% of all undergraduate students were students of color including: 22.4% African American, 3.9% Hispanic, 1.8% Asian and 0.5% Native American. In stark contrast, 85% of the undergraduate students enrolled in the EC Program are students of color, including many who reported having a low socioeconomic status. Latina students make up 54% of the total enrollment in the early childhood undergraduate program. These statistics illustrate that the demographic characteristics of students in the program are quite different than those of the students at the larger university. This difference is accompanied by perceptions and questions about who *these* students are and their ability to achieve success within the program.

One of the biggest constraints of the EC program was the lack of support provided by the larger university in which the program is located. The EC program began with one cohort and eventually had three cohorts attending simultaneously. Interest in the program spread via word of mouth through students, mentors, and instructors at Lakeview Technical College. Despite the interest in the program, the larger university provided little, if any, marketing or networking to support the program, and thus all of these tasks defaulted to the chairperson of the EC program.

The chairperson of the EC program, like other tenured faculty at AU had a 30-credit teaching load spread over 10 months. In addition to all of the other teaching responsibilities in numerous undergraduate and graduate programs, the responsibilities of the department chairperson included creating courses, hiring and training adjunct faculty, hiring and training mentors, interviewing all undergraduate students and processing applications, creating the program schedule, creating marketing materials, meeting with technical colleges to recruit students, teaching in the EC program, and meeting with students during evening and weekends.

One of the biggest tasks of the department chairperson was to advocate for "non-traditional" students and to seek support for the services that they needed to support their learning and success. This was often a losing battle because the larger institution did not deem it necessary to extend the hours of facilities or provide financial aid services at class sites for students.

Because the content of the courses was integrated each semester, faculty from multiple departments had to teach within the program. Unfortunately, many tenured faculty who taught at AU's main campus did not want to teach in this program because classes were located at the central city campus. Even more concerning, some faculty members did not want to teach in this program because they believed that the students in the program were not prepared for college and could be successful, thus perpetuating the deficit view of "non-traditional" students. These assumptions were made before the faculty members even met the students.

Another way that the larger institution did not provide support to the EC program was failing to operate support services and facilities beyond a traditional 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

schedule. For example, the university bookstore, a facility students must visit often to purchase course materials, is not open on evenings or weekends, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, for students in the EC program to access course materials. In addition to limited hours, the bookstore and other university services such as financial aid are located on AU's main campus, which is a 15-minute drive north of central campus. This location made it difficult for students to access these services.

Once students accessed these facilities, the services were poorly organized and confusing. For example, the financial aid department was often unable to provide an accurate balance or bill for tuition, making it difficult for students to know how much financial aid they would each semester and plan their finances accordingly. Students for whom English was a second (or third) language were even more frustrated with the lack of support from the financial aid department. Students reported that the personnel in this department often made them "feel stupid"; in addition, they were frustrated because they were unable to understand complex information on the financial aid forms and the people who were supposed to provide support were instead causing frustration and feelings of marginalization. Roy, Thalia, and Leah each reported frustrations with the financial aid department during their time as students.

The chairperson of the EC program was aware of these constraints and advocated for financial aid and other services to be made more accessible to EC students. Something as simple as providing book vouchers so \ students could purchase books before their financial aid was processed would be an easy solution, although the larger university made such options difficult, if not impossible. Rather than the university providing convenient access and support to materials and services that students needed,

the institution penalized students because they were not able to access the materials they needed.

Due to the lack of support for both faculty and students at AU, many faculty, including many tenured faculty who had provided years of service to the university, have left AU. After three years of working in a program that I felt made an amazing difference in the lives of many undergraduate students and the young children with whom they were working, I was among the first faculty members to leave AU due to frustration with the lack of support for students, the program, and faculty members; in my case, I also wanted to return to the early childhood classroom. Since my departure, the chairperson of the EC program has resigned, as have other key personnel in programs with a commitment to urban education.

Program Recommendations

The findings of this research study led me to create a number of recommendations. Some specific recommendations to better support students at AU include the following:

1) Expand hours for bookstores to include evening and weekend hours. Many students work during the day and are unable to access the bookstore between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. on a weekday. These students are often on campus during the evenings and also on the weekends. Extending hours would allow them to access materials without having to take time off work.

2) Provide financial aid services at the central city campus so that services are convenient and accessible to students before and after evening classes. Support services located at a campus different than the one where students attend class make it difficult for them to access these services. Currently, there are no financial aid services available during the evening hours when EC program students are on campus attending classes.

3) Hire bilingual personnel in support services such as financial aid. Obtaining financial aid is a complicated process involving substantial paperwork and jargon specific to loans and tuition. Bilingual students often find this process frustrating and it would be helpful for students to communicate and ask questions in another language, often Spanish.

4) Provide book vouchers so students are able to purchase books while their financial aid is being processed. At the start of each semester, many students in the EC program were unable to purchase the course materials they needed because of a delay in processing of their financial aid. Vouchers could be provided so that students could obtain the materials they need *prior* to the start of classes and come to the first classes prepared.

5) Provide on-site childcare at central city campus so students have reliable and affordable childcare during classes. Many students in the EC program have young children and finding affordable and reliable childcare during evening classes was often a challenge. Most universities in the surrounding area have on-site childcare, making it convenient for students to attend classes and also care for their family.

6) Create a bridge program between Lakeview Technical College and AU for the summer before students begin the EC program. Many universities provide bridge programs for new students coming from high school into higher education. Students in the early childhood program would benefit from a summer program introducing AU and content-specific areas such as writing.

7) Hire faculty with a disposition to work with a diverse population of students.

"Troubling" Existing Definitions

Next, I examine the limitations of using a single term (non-traditional student) to describe such a heterogeneous population and further explore what it *really* means to be considered "non-traditional." The lack of consistent definitions makes it difficult to study this population of students and has led to conflicting findings and multiple definitions surrounding "non-traditional" students.

Historically, researchers and institutions have defined the term "non-traditional" student in many ways, including based on age, background characteristics, and risk factors. Much of the research has used age as the main identifying feature of "non-traditional" students. However, this approach has limitations. First, students who are 25 years of age and older do not represent a homogeneous group. Second, students who are under 25 may share characteristics with students who are over 25 (Kim, 2002). Specifically, students under 25 may also work, have families, and/or come from a variety

of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Traditional students may have much in common with their older counterparts, and might benefit from pedagogical approaches and services similar to those accessed by “non-traditional” students (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Third, using age to define “non-traditional” students perpetuates the binary of “non-traditional” and traditional students. Although grouping students by age may be an easy way to collect and analyze the demographic information of students, it is not an effective way to define “non-traditional” students or identify their strengths or needs.

Using background characteristics and risk factors to identify “non-traditional” students seems to be a much more inclusive approach, although such definitions also have limitations. The use of background characteristics and risk factors tends to be too broad; with more and more factors being considered in the definition of “non-traditional” students, an increasing number of students are being categorized as “non-traditional.” For example, using an expanded definition means that a significant majority of community college students will be considered “non-traditional” (Kim, 2002). This trend is common at both two-year and four-year institutions. According to NCES (2002), “73% of all undergraduates are “non-traditional” in some way, making them the majority rather than the exception on today’s campuses” (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, p. 73). These expanded definitions raise several questions: Who *is not* considered “non-traditional”? Do current definitions really reveal anything important about “non-traditional” students? Does using the term “non-traditional” effectively define such a heterogeneous population of students?

Further exploring the potential problems of existing definitions of “non-traditional” students, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) described a discourse in which

adults are portrayed as "different" and in need of "adjusting" to the institution and its traditional norms. In this discourse, "non-traditional" students are not only considered to have significant needs, but these needs are also portrayed as interfering with the needs of traditional students. In other words, this discourse focuses on what "non-traditional" students lack and how their needs will take away from the services offered to "non-traditional" students. This perspective views "non-traditional" students solely from a deficit perspective, giving no consideration to their strengths or the responsibility of the institution to make adjustments to current models to meet the needs of *all* students.

Kasworm (1990) suggested the need for a change to a definition that captures the reality of a "transactional relationship between adult students and the undergraduate institution" (p.365). In this sense, changes do not need to be solely the responsibility of either the "non-traditional" student *or* the institution, but rather something that both work toward together to identify and build on the strengths of adult students, which are seen as adding something positive to the academy. This additive approach would lead to a very different perspective on "non-traditional" students, which would contrast starkly with the current view of these students as "high risk" and/or weak academically.

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) further suggested the need for new models that consider adult students' contributions to higher education, in which "difference would be seen as richness and multiple lenses would be used to capture the complexity of *studentness*" (p. 46). In this regard, moving beyond the current labels of "traditional" and "non-traditional" would allow researchers to not only accept, but also embrace the heterogeneity of today's students, while creating a language that reflects the complex realities of the entire undergraduate population. In addition, the field needs alternative

definitions that position "non-traditional" students as making significant contributions, rather than viewing them from a deficit perspective. Levin (2007) suggested using the term "new" "non-traditional" student to represent a large population that is "comparatively distinct" (p. 10). While this definition offers another perspective, continuing to use any part of the term "non-traditional" still implies a comparison to traditional students, and thus continues to incorporate a deficit view.

Offering an alternative to existing definitions, scholars such as Schuetze and Slowey (2002) have identified three criteria they consider central to the definition of "non-traditional" students: educational biography, entry routes, and modes of study. Based on these criteria, each student has a unique educational biography that tells the story of their journey to higher education. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) argued that much can be learned by considering these three criteria.

In this section, I outlined the limitations of existing definitions. These definitions often contribute to students feeling marginalized based on their status as "other" compared to traditional-age students. As a researcher and an instructor, I was bothered by a term that implied a deficit view of the students whom I perceived to have many assets and the capability to succeed in whatever they set out to do.

Leah, Thalia, and Roy did not seem to share my annoyance with the term "non-traditional" students. When I asked Roy about the term, he said he was "proud to wear it." He viewed both his status and the program as "non-traditional" and it was a characteristic he embraced. In contrast, although Thalia did not have negative feelings about the term "non-traditional," she preferred the label "special student" in a "special program."

Thus, I continue to consider the term "non-traditional" student. I began the study troubled by the term and anticipated that by the end of the study I would create an alternate definition. However, at the end of the study I am left with more questions regarding the term: What are the limitations are of this category? What does the category have to offer? Would eliminating the term actually be problematic?

I now believe that one crucial step toward creating a variety of teacher education programs that support *all* undergraduate students is a better understanding of the "non-traditional" undergraduate teacher education candidates' lived experiences both in and out of school. Maybe the term "non-traditional" is not what needs to change, but rather our *understanding* of what it means to be "non-traditional" for each student.

Limitations of Study

This study was conducted over a short time period and included a small number of participants, which limited the breadth of the findings. Ideally, data collection would begin a few months before the start of the program and then follow students beyond graduation as they entered their professional teaching careers. Such an extended timeline would provide more opportunities to examine the students' self-perceptions as they proceeded throughout the program, as well as more fully identify the existing supports used and further supports needed by students as they navigated through the program. In addition, a greater number of participants would provide valuable information about the ways different students experience challenges and successes.

Further, it would be helpful to observe each participant in their work (teaching) context. Although I observed participants in the college classroom as students and I learned about their teaching experiences through class discussions and the interviews, I

never observed them actually teaching young children. Workplace observation would add important data to this study because participants' work roles and identities as teachers were integral to their stories. To fully develop an asset-based approach to "non-traditional" students, researchers must fully understand all of their strengths and the contributions they make to higher education, including contributions related to their roles as teachers. In addition, workplace observations would further highlight the assets that help these students find success within the many roles and identities that make them who they are.

Implications

The implications of this research must be understood from the perspectives of three entities—researchers, teacher educators, and institutions of higher education—because each of these populations have direct and indirect impacts on "non-traditional" teacher education students.

Researchers

> Adult education discourse plays an important role for the field, for practitioners and for higher education scholars in constructing the identity of adult undergraduate students. Are adult students "other," different, and more needful and deficient when compared to traditional age students? Or, are adult students individuals who also belong in the academy and enrich it by virtue of their presence? (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006, p. 6)

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two illuminates "non-traditional" students' marginal status in research, policy, and institutional practices (Chao & Good, 2004; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005. In addition to the historically marginal status of "non-traditional" students, other significant limitations also hinder existing studies. Levin (2007) argued: "Customarily, the literature on adult students does not delineate such matters as student demographics, institutional type, and

theoretical assumptions and purposes of the scholars and those reporting on data" (p. 7). These inconsistencies in reporting limit the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future researchers should offer clear delineations so that findings may be generalized across similar institutions or demographic categories.

Currently, there is a lack of research on "non-traditional" students, and an even greater paucity of research on "non-traditional" teacher education programs and candidates. Although a variety of pathways to certification exist, alternative programs "dominate the literature" (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998, p. 188) while traditional university teacher education programs have been underutilized as a context for studying "non-traditional" teacher education candidates. Studying "non-traditional" teacher candidates in a variety of contexts would yield significant findings that would facilitate the development of teacher education programs.

Finally, an avenue of research that has yet to be explored is the identity construction of "non-traditional" teacher candidates. A deeper understanding of the lived experiences and identity construction of "non-traditional" undergraduate teacher education candidates would help create a variety of teacher education programs that meet the needs of and support *all* undergraduate students. These studies would further demonstrate the need for researchers, in conjunction with teacher educators, to actively develop instructional practices that provide "non-traditional" students with a variety of programs and curricula that respond to their heterogeneous needs.

Teacher Educators

The results of the current research have implications for teacher educators who work directly with "non-traditional" students. Using what is known about differences

between "non-traditional" and traditional students, teacher education programs must "customize their roles and coaching techniques to address the differences in maturation levels and how these two groups process the experience" (Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1998, p. 183). Past studies have clearly identified the unique needs of "non-traditional" students. What is needed now is a shift away from the binary of "non-traditional" and traditional students and toward an approach that meets the needs of *all* teacher education candidates.

As the literature suggests, educational relationships are critical to the success of "non-traditional" students, and thus it is imperative to create a positive support system for students. These caring and supportive educational relationships have a significant impact on students' ability to successfully navigate through their educational journey.

One way that teacher educators can create these relationships is by gaining an understanding of both the identity construction process of their students and their own role in this process. As Kasworm asserted (2007), students enact a variety of positional and relational identities that often develop through their interactions with faculty members. One of the most significant relational groups for "non-traditional" students is faculty, and they play an important role in co-constructing student identities. The current findings indicate the importance of teacher educators, specifically the roles they play in supporting "non-traditional" teacher education candidates and co-constructing the identities of students.

Institutions of Higher Education

Despite the growing population of "non-traditional" students, institutions still operate primarily to fulfill the needs of the younger, more traditional students. Given

what is known about "non-traditional" students and their unique strengths and needs, programs and courses that meet the demands of these students are needed. Areas that should be addressed by institutions of higher education include financial assistance, convenient course times, access to childcare, and tutoring and support services that operate in the evening and on weekends. The first step to embracing "non-traditional" students is to support these students by offering services that address the responsibilities of their many "competing roles" (Jacobs & King, 2002, p. 214).

Institutions of higher education also play a significant role in the educational experience of "non-traditional" students. Historically, institutions have viewed "non-traditional" students as having deficits compared to traditional students (Levin, 2007). This deficit perspective, which often focuses on areas such as academic background and economic status, must shift to a view that highlights the benefits that adult students bring to higher education.

Based on the current enrollment trends in higher education, researchers and practitioners must recognize that "non-traditional" students are a diverse group in terms of age, education level, class, language, and culture (Warren, 2002). Further, those in the field of education *must* embrace the linguistic diversity in U.S. classrooms, rather than viewing it as problematic. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 17.9% of all Americans, or nearly one in five, speak a language other than English at home (Menkin 2006, p. 29). Thus, there is no question that students enrolled in higher education today are quite diverse. The issue that must be addressed is how to use the diversity of students as an asset, especially when rethinking current assessments and ways to best assess students.

For years, standardized tests have been used for used for gatekeeping purposes despite evidence of testing bias against racial, ethnic, and language minorities in the United States (Menkin, 2008). Furthermore, standardized tests such as the Praxis exam required at AU and for certification in the state, were developed to assess native English speakers, not those fluent in a LOTE. Garcia and Menkin (2006) argued that these types of tests assess language proficiency rather than content knowledge. As a result, standardized tests administered to English language learners are not a valid basis for high-stakes decision-making.

At Assisi University, the Praxis exam is a barrier to obtaining a teaching license for many bilingual students. Many students take the Praxis exams repeatedly without passing. Importantly, the failure of students like Thalia to pass the exams is not due to a failure to progress. With each testing, students improve their scores, although due to the linguistic complexity and lack of sufficient accommodations, students fluent in LOTE typically do not perform as well as native English speakers (Menkin, 2008).

This is quite problematic, because by using exams such as the Praxis to determine who is licensed to teach and who is not, the system is failing to recognize the gifts that linguistically and culturally diverse pre-service teachers bring to the classroom. Garcia and Trubeck (1999) argued:

> Linguistically and culturally diverse students generally have deep knowledge of their community and its use of language and culture, needed assets in teaching poor urban children. The linguistic and cultural resources that minority teachers bring are valuable in establishing meaningful relationships with parents and community, tapping into the community's "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992), and identifying the students strengths, all useful in promoting student learning. But although this teacher knowledge is used extensively and valued in urban schools, teacher certification exams seldom test for this knowledge. (p. 2)

Now is the time for institutions of higher education to move beyond the deficit model, which reflects a "language as problem" or "language as liability" framework, and focus on possibility rather than liability, especially for bilingual students.

Final Thoughts

> Adult education discourse plays an important role for the field, for practitioners and for higher education scholars in constructing the identity of adult undergraduate students. Are adult students "other," different, and more needful and deficient when compared to traditional age students? Or, are adult students individuals who also belong in the academy and enrich it by virtue of their presence? (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006, p. 6)

It is critical for researchers, teacher educators, and institutions of higher education to work collaboratively to create an asset-based definition and understanding of "non-traditional" students. There are currently a variety of competing definitions of the term "non-traditional" students, and a need to create new language that more accurately reflects this heterogeneous population. A revised definition would position students as having something unique to offer to the field of teacher education, rather than viewing them as having deficits or being "at-risk." Through this shared definition, a new discourse surrounding these students might be created, one that embraces these diverse students and all that they bring including multiple, often competing identities.

In this dissertation, I argued against the deficit perspective that is often attached to undergraduate students such as Leah, Roy, and Thalia based solely on their membership in the category "non-traditional" student. Instead, I used an asset-based approach to highlight the resources and experiences these students brought to AU. Like Smit (2012), I argued that researchers need to view students according to what they *are,* rather than categorizing them as what they *are not.*

Further, like Garcia and Guerra (2004), I believe now is the time for the "deconstruction of deficit thinking." In response to the "essentialized 'deficit' model which focuses on the gaps the individual 'disadvantaged' students are seen to have" (Marshall & Case, 2010, p. 492), researchers must think differently about student diversity within higher education. Rather than continually asking if all students are ready for higher education, researchers and practitioners should ask whether institutions of higher education are ready for *all* students.

Thus, there is a need for an "ontological turn" (Barnett, 2007) in the scholarly thinking about students in higher education. In an attempt to counter the deficit perspective, I argue for a need for a sociocultural perspective on student learning in which higher education combines a traditional focus on knowledge and skills ("knowing" and "acting") with a new focus on "being." (Barnett, 2007; Gee, 2001). Like Marshall and Case (2010), I believe that "learning is more than a cognitive process, needing account to be taken of broader aspects of the student learning experience that might not have been previously considered under the topic of 'learning'" (p. 492).

These new discourses allow the possibility of moving away from the deficit model surrounding students in higher education. "Non-traditional" students are not so much lacking or deficient, but rather are often "outsiders to the discourses of academia and unfamiliar with what is valued in higher education…. What students need is access to the 'ways of being' in the disciplines that take into account what matters in higher education" (Smit, 2012, p. 375). What matters in higher education are students and their experiences. To honor their experiences, researchers and practitioners must listen to the stories that constitute who they are.

The findings from life history studies such as this one can serve as a "catalyst" for restructuring coursework and programs based on the needs of *all* students. It is the responsibility of teacher educators to "capitalize" on the "knowledge, strengths, and needs as teachers" (Gomez, 2008, p. 1639). In other words, the findings of life history studies offer significant information that teacher educators *must* consider to understand the development of teacher candidates and to create programs and courses that meet the needs of their students.

I believe in the power of stories. I believe that to better understand my students, I must *listen.* In listening to my students, I am both recognizing and honoring the stories and experiences that make them who they are. Through these stories, I am able to see the assets and gifts they bring to their lives, the community, and the classroom. I am able to view students according to what they *are,* rather than categorizing them as what they *are not.*

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Appendix A

Examining the Social and Learner Identities of Nontraditional Undergraduate Students in an Early Childhood Bachelor's Completion Program

Research questions:

What are the lived experiences of nontraditional female students in an early childhood bachelor's completion program?

- What sorts of knowledge and experiences to students in this study come to AU with?
- Why did students decide to come to AU?
- How do participants understand these experiences? What might be the impact of these experiences?
- What challenges have students faced in the program?
- What types of support systems have been used (through AU or personal supports)

How do the learner and social identities of students shift throughout the program?

- What do they attribute these to?
- What messages do they receive at *** about who they are and who they can be? What are their own perceptions of who they are and who they can be?
- What do they identify as difficulties/barriers, if any, to thinking about themselves as students? Strengths/advantages that may contribute to their success? Do these change throughout the duration of the program?

What are the implications of these findings for program development? For higher education?

- What can faculty members do to encourage and support nontraditional students as they progress through the program?

Life History Interview Protocol:

These protocols are adapted from protocols created by Atkinson, R. (1998) and Johnson, A.S. (2007).

Personal Information

- Participants name, address, year of birth, marital status (year of marriage), birthplace
- Describe yourself.
- Who would you identify as being in your immediate family? How many brothers and/or sisters do you have? Birth order and spacing.

- How old were your parents when you were born? Occupations. Hours? Highest levels of schooling/education?
- Who looked after the children while your parents were at work?
- What characteristics do you remember about your grandparents? Parents?

Life at Home (Growing up)

- What language was spoken in your home? With other family members? At school?
- Can you describe the house where you grew up? How were the rooms used? Who lived in your house?
- Who was mostly responsible for looking after the children? Who did the following with or for you: Cooking? Bathing? Reading? Telling Stories? Taking you places?
- What were your responsibilities? Expectations?
- What was your expected bedtime when you were a child?
- Who put you to bed? Was there a routine surrounding this?
- Did you share a bedroom with anyone else? Who?
- Where did your family have their meals? Who did the cooking? Where? Did all the family sit at the table for the meal? How was the meal served? By whom? What types of food did you have?
- Were you allowed to talk during meals or not? Who did the talking? What sorts of things did you talk about?
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-

Cultural Setting and Traditions

- What is the ethnic or cultural background of your parents? You?
- Were there any stories of family members or ancestors who immigrated to this country?
- What kinds of cultural activities or customs were evident in the home you grew up in?
- What was growing up in your neighborhood or house like?
- What family or cultural celebrations, traditions or rituals were important in your life?
- Was your family different than other families in your neighborhood?
- What cultural values were passed onto you and by whom?
- What beliefs do you think your parents tried to teach you?
- What was your first experience with death? What was that like for you?
- Was and is religion important to you?
- How would you describe the religious atmosphere in your home?
- Was religion important to you as a child?
- Were there any religious ceremonies that you observed?
- Is religion important to you now?
- What cultural influences are still important to you today?

- How much of a factor in your life do you feel your cultural background has been?

Immigrating to US

- If your family are immigrants, when did your family immigrate to the US? Who came first? Where did you go? How did you choose a place to settle? What did you do upon arrival?
- What do you remember most about coming to the United States? What was exciting? What was challenging?
- Describe your school experiences in the United States.
- When did you learn English? How?

Childhood Activities

- As a child, whom did you play with? Brothers, sisters, neighbors, cousins, etc. Activities.
- What games did you play? Where did you play games?
- Did you visit places together? Where?
- Did you have any hobbies? What were they?
  Did you take part in sports? Which ones?
- Did you belong to any youth organizations? Activities?
- Did your parents give you any spending money? What did you spend money on?

Family Activities

- When you had a birthday would it be different from any other day? Would you have a party? Presents? Guests?
- When you graduated from high school, did you have a party? What kinds of gifts did you receive? From whom?
- Does your family holidays?
- Were there books in the house? What kinds?
- Did you belong to the library?
- What newspapers and magazines did your family read?
- When your parents were not doing their work, how did they spend their time?
- How did people spend time together?
- Could you tell me how your family spent Saturdays and Sundays?
- Did your family attend church? How often? Where

School Experiences

- How old were you when you first went to school?
- Were you given any lessons by anyone before going to school? Who?
- What is your first memory of attending school?
- What type of school?
- Where was your school in relation to your house?
- Did you enjoy school?
- What do you remember most about elementary school?
- Did you have a favorite teacher in elementary school? Middle school? High school?
- What are your best memories of school?
- What do you remember about how you were taught in school? (discussion, teacher-directed, student-directed).
- Did teachers think about you as a 'good' student? How do you know this?
- What are your worst memories of school?
- What accomplishments in school are you most proud of?
- What activities and organizations were you involved with in school?
- What kinds of things do you remember reading in school? What kinds of writing do you remember doing in school?
- Describe a memory you have of writing in school. Reading. Any particular activities.
- How did your teachers describe your abilities on a report card?
- Describe what you did after school
- What was your homework like? In what grade did you start getting homework? Where did you complete your homework?
- When did you graduate from high school? Did you have a ceremony or celebration?

College

- What prompted you to get your associates degree?
- Where did you get your associates degree? When? Describe the experience. What were courses like? What were the expectations?
- What prompted you to get your bachelors degree?
- Why did you choose stritch?
- What do you enjoy most about college courses? What is most challenging part?
- How do you complete your schoolwork? When? Where?
- Desribe how you balance work, school, family life.
- Describe a typical day
- Describe the process of completing your schoolwork?
- How do you feel about being a student?
- How does your family feel about you being a college student?
- What are your classes like? What kinds of classes have you taken?
- When and why did you decide to become a teacher?
- Why did you choose this program (at AU) to get your bachelors degree?

- How did you find out about the ECUE program?
- Do you feel like you have changed since you started this program? In what ways?
- What do you like to do when you are not at work, school? What kinds of things do you like to do with your family or friends?
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Work/Teaching

- What was your first job? What age were you? What were the responsibilities?
- Where are your currently working? Describe the setting and your responsibilities.
- What is your view of the role of education in a person's life?
- Describe the community where your school or center is located.
- Think about how you were taught literacy; are your views on literacy instruction consistent/inconsistent with those? If so, how?
- What kind of teacher are you?
- How do you connect with your students?
- How does your identity impact your teaching?
- How does the identify of your students impact their learning?

Future

- What do you plan to be doing in 3 years? 5 years?
- What will you do when you complete your bachelor's degree?

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