

Life History: A Methodological Approach to Understanding The Successful Completion of The  
General Educational Development (GED) and a Technical College Program by Black and  
Latin@ Students.

By

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## Abstract

This study examined the persistence of Black and Latin@ students with a GED in a two-year institution. The intent is to better understand the experiences of GED recipients attaining an associate's degree using their interpretations. A life history method was used to collect data and a thematic analysis to organize and make meaning of the narratives. The data was then interpreted using a theoretical framework by Paulo Freire to better understand academic challenges. The intent is that practitioners, policy makers, and future researchers will be able to better make connections between experiences, demographics, and institutional characteristics instead of viewing them as isolated variables.

Three students participated and provided a narrative about their educational life history leading to the completion of a General Educational Development Certificate and an associate's degree. The nine themes recognized within the challenges were: (1) family; (2) economic; (3) employment; (4) teaching Style; (5) educational environment (6) developmental education; (7) social & living conditions; (8) cancer; and (9) cultural interpretations. The ten themes stated within persistence were: (1) security/control; (2) Children; (3) teaching style; (4) resources; (5) jobs; (6) Motivating Environment; (7) bilingual; (8) sacrifice; (9) self-awareness and (10) obligation. The seven themes within advice were: (1) complete education; (2) stay focused/goal setting; (3) be vocal/ask; (4) sacrifice; (5) resources; (6) know yourself; and (7) remain positive. Many of these themes were identified as both, facilitating or mitigating academic performance. A strong relationship between themes existed within the narratives of participants. When organizing these themes, a network of influence between themes and greater social constructs is identifiable.

Freire recognizes the pedagogical, cultural, and organizational influences that impede

academic performance. A Freirean interpretation is identified within three categories of understanding: collaboration through dialogue, dealing with difference in diversity, or altruistic concern for others. Within these categories, students experienced a sense of inclusion and affirmation that led to persistence. The experience of exclusion and despair was experienced by all students and they considered discontinuing. If it weren't for participants sacrificing basic needs and the positive and affirming support within the institution by faculty, advisors, and support staff that increased the sense of belonging, that they were able to persist. The interconnected nature of a student, environmental factors, classroom setting, and institutional policy/practices all work to facilitate or mitigate a student's successful transition throughout college.

Key Words: GED, General Educational Development, associate degree, junior college, technical college, community college, higher education, students of color, Black, Latin@, Hispanic, African American, retention, transition, and persistence.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

High school is no longer a sufficient minimum educational experience within the United States. In today's society, a post-secondary education is used as a means to obtain employment and determine salary (Bailey & Karp, 2003). A high school diploma is no longer seen as a terminal degree, but it is seen as a prerequisite to access a post-secondary education. Individuals unable to complete a high school diploma have limited economic mobility and are expected to participate in an alternative academic pathway to enter college. This pathway typically consists of the completion of the General Education Development Certificate (GED) and labels a student as "at risk" of completing a post-secondary education. Two-year colleges also known as technical colleges or community colleges typically provide the most accessible avenue of post-secondary education, particularly to individuals labeled "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" (Coley, 2000). The associate's degree is consistently recognized within research, literature, and census data as the lowest possible post-secondary education degree that will increase employment opportunities and annual income. Unfortunately, the completion rate for individuals identified as Black and Latin@ are disproportionately lower than other racial groups within each educational juncture and is expected to be contributed to external influences (McCabe, 2001; Fox, Connolly & Snyder, 2008).

### **Economic Benefits of a Post-secondary Education**

The attention on educational attainment is due to the economic benefits that will improve the social and living conditions of Black and Latin@ communities. The increase in level of education is correlated to an increase in economic benefits which include an increase in employability, job opportunities, wages, and job security (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2008;

Murnane, Willett, & Levy; 1995). The connection between education with employability, wages, and job security impacts people with less education negatively and those with higher education positively. The facilitation of educational attainment may therefore facilitate economic mobility for low income and disadvantaged groups.

The employability of an individual is directly impacted by one's level of education and improves with the advanced completion of a level of education. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) identified the unemployment rates for 2013 of a high school diploma or GED at 7.5 percent unemployment while an associate's degree is 5.4 percent. Comparatively, the least employed were people who discontinued high school at 11 percent and the most employed were Doctoral degrees with 2.2 percent unemployment. An Associate's degree is recognized as a post-secondary credential to increase employment and provide an additional economic benefit. Researchers believe that employers associate a post-secondary education with certain characteristics. It is assumed that, "... degrees mark other attributes that employers find worthwhile, perhaps unobserved ability such as motivation and perseverance" (Arkes, 1999, p.133).

The job opportunities that typically require a postsecondary education for entry are increasing. Current data for 2012 identify roughly one-third of jobs require a post-secondary education for entry (Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Richards & Terkanian reviewed 820 occupations and projected the employment growth for jobs in 2022. They estimated the most increases to occur in jobs that typically require a post-secondary education. The most growth is expected to be in jobs requiring a Master's degree with an 18.4% increase from 2012 to 2022. The second largest employment growth is in jobs requiring an associate's degree with a 17.6% increase. In comparison, the least job growth is projected in occupations requiring a high school

diploma or equivalent at a 7.9% increase.

The benefits of an associate's degree over a high school diploma extend beyond the growth of entry level jobs and has an impact on annual income. A correlation exists that increases annual earnings with an advanced level of degree attained. This trend is most evident within the recent calculations from The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), which identifies the overall median annual income for 2012 wages for a high school diploma or equivalent at \$35,170. The completion of an associate's degree is a higher estimate at \$57,590. This equates to a 61% increase in income from a high school diploma or equivalent to that of an associate's degree. This benefit in degree attainment is a trend that has existed since 1975 and is supported by years of census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, P. 3). This data does identify a racial inequality within each level of educational attainment, but this doesn't negate education as a critical component in understanding the variation of a person's annual earnings (Table 232, p. 152).

The ability to get a job and earn a livable wage are some of the benefits of obtaining a post-secondary education like an associate's degree, but aren't the only considerations. With the recent recession, job security is a fresh concern. The advancement of technology is impacting the view employers have towards low-educated workers as easily replaceable and therefore not as valuable. The increased likelihood to obtain or maintain employment is thought to be due in part, by the level of cognitive functioning and decision making that is required of advanced educational expertise and skill. Autor (2011) reviewed the job opportunities within the U.S. labor market within the Great Recession, which officially took place within December 2007 to June 2009, and recognized the expendable nature of low-education required jobs. "In particular, job and earnings losses during the recession have been greater for low-education males than low-

education females, and these losses have been most concentrated in middle skill jobs” (p.13). He identified many middle-skilled cognitive and production activity type jobs as being replaced by computer software, machines, or sent electronically to foreign worksites to low-wage workers.

### **Educational Disparity of Black and Latin@ Students**

High school is the traditional educational juncture necessary to access a community college. It is an important juncture to complete to advance their educational pursuits. The most conservative data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, reviewed high school students that entered as freshman and calculated the amount that finished within 4 years. The data revealed the average student completion rate of high school to be 81% (Kena et al, 2014, p. 138). When reviewing this data regarding racial demographics, it revealed Black students completing their degree to be at 68%, Hispanic students at 76%, and White students at 85%. These numbers are at the highest rates of completion from reports found, others include students that discontinued from primary school and calculate a lower percentage completion rates for all racial groups while maintaining a significant gap between White students compared to those of Black and Latin@ students. These racial differences identify Black and Latin@ students to be more at risk of discontinuing high school and therefore eliminating the opportunity to attend a community college and pursue an associate’s degree. The addition of an educational credential called a General Education Development (GED) is required to enroll into a post-secondary education such as a community college for students who dropped out of high school (Patterson, Zhang, Song & Garrison-Dowdy, 2010).

The second educational juncture to access a college education is the General Education Development (GED) Certificate and is recognized in institutions of higher education to satisfy admission requirements as a substitution for a high school diploma. “Roughly 98 percent of U.S.

colleges and universities accept GED<sup>®</sup> graduates in the same manner as high school graduates” (GED Testing Service, 2014). Admissions into a degree program at a post-secondary institution require the completion of a secondary education. Individuals unable to complete high school or obtain a GED are ineligible to attend college. The completion rates for the GED is provided by the 2012 Annual Statistical Report and revealed an overall completion average of 73.9%. Much like the high school rates, these rates contained a racial disparity between White, Latin@, and Black racial groups (GED Testing Service, 2012, p.71). The report identified the completion rate for White candidates at 83.1%, Latin@ candidates at 68.9%, and African American candidates at 61.6%. Black and Latin@ populations maintain a significantly lower completion rate compared to the average and a large gap exists between their White counterparts. Over half of those able to complete the GED look towards attending a two year technical college where they may receive an associate’s degree. The amount of GED test takers with the intent to attend a 2 year or Technical College is 54.8% (GED Testing Service, 2012, p.59). Student’s interest may be able to get them into a college, but the concern becomes the performance at college.

The third and final educational juncture in review is a two year technical college that offers the associate’s degree. The benefits of an associate’s degree are significant, but the completion rates are less than those of high school and GED. The National Center for Education Statistics published web-tables regarding the characteristics of first time associate’s degree attainers. It reviewed all public 2-year public institutions and identified the completion rates of an individual’s first attempt at an associate’s degree. The data was obtained from a cohort of students that started in Fall 2003 with an expected completion by Spring 2009. It identified the completion rate for Black students at 8.5%, Hispanics at 10.1%, and Whites at 12.4% (Green & Radwin, 2012, p.5). The completion of a two year degree is considerably less than the previous

educational junctures of high school and the GED. This increased disparity at the technical college reflects a system that is disjointed and the racial differences reflect previous educational junctures of academic attrition that impacts Black and Latin@ students at a greater frequency.

### **Unequal Conditions of Black and Latin@ Students**

Educational attainment is a prime mechanism to escape poverty, but poverty is a persistent problem that impacts aspects of life that interfere with educational outcomes. This is a vicious circle that indoctrinates the following generation and requires a multidimensional approach to overcome. The various conditions in which Black and Latin@ people live are within higher levels of poverty, unemployment, lower wages, and often with fewer precautionary measures such as health insurance. Poverty is typically defined with a reduction of assets within economic standards, but also limits the social networks, resources, and availability of social support. The ability to meeting basic needs are not universal within the U.S. and impact the learning experience. The combination of lived experiences, environmental factors, and biological stresses impair learning and are often factors that push students to withdraw from their education. These statistics on poverty, unemployment, income, and health insurance are disproportionately negative towards Black and Latin@ populations.

Currently, within the U.S., the poverty levels for both Black and Latin@ groups are the highest within the nation. The *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) identified 15.0% of the non-incarcerated population of the U.S. to be impacted by poverty. When isolating racial demographics, it revealed two subgroups with the greatest levels of poverty; Black citizens at 27.2% and Hispanic citizens at 25.6%. In comparison, the least affected by poverty were White (non-Hispanic) citizens at 9.7%. This is a snapshot of poverty recognizes two types of poverty identified by Payne (2005)

as situational and generational poverty. The distinction between the two is that situational is traced to a specific incident within a lifetime while generational is a cycle that passes from one generation to the next. Payne identifies that Black and Latin@ communities experience more generational poverty than Whites.

Black and Latin@ students are more likely to experience poverty within K-12 and into college. To understand the continual impact of poverty on a life, we must start with their youth and educational development within elementary and secondary public schools. The focus on public schools is because during 2009-2010 school year, “White students’ share of enrollment was greater in private schools than public schools (73 vs. 55 percent), while the opposite was true for Blacks (9 vs. 17 percent) and Hispanics (9 vs. 21 percent)” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p.26). Of these public institutions many are high poverty. High-poverty within the Department of Education is defined as having more than 75% of the student population receiving free/reduced lunch. Of these high-poverty institutions, “Black and Hispanic students, in contrast, were overrepresented in high-poverty schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p.86). This means that Black and Latin@ groups are increasing in representation within public institutions that are found to be in communities of poverty. Although there is diversity within the students that discontinue high school on many levels, students of color from low socioeconomic status (SES) families tend to be more at risk (Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Students without a high school diploma may obtain employment, but are limited in income potential considering a higher degree is correlated to a higher income average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, P. 3).

Black and Latin@ racial groups are correlated with a disparity in annual earnings. The *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012* (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2013) identified the median household income for 2012 to average \$51,017 a year. Separated by race the amount and percentage difference between the averages is accentuated. Black populations earning an annual household income of \$33,321 and calculates to be 65.3% of the average. Latin@s earn an annual household income of \$39,005 and calculates to be 76.4% of the average. The highest annual income are Whites, “not Hispanic,” at \$57,009 and calculate to be 11.1% above the average. These income disparities alone aren’t a cause for labeling Black and Latin@ as unable to meet economic responsibilities, but it does highlight the differences in economic surplus that affords greater opportunities and freedoms for adults and their children.

Black and Latin@ people also experience higher levels of unemployment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) had a news release that identified the non-seasonally adjusted unemployment rates for citizens 16 years and older as of April to be an average of 5.4% of the population. Reviewing race, Black had a 9.6% unemployment rate, Hispanics/Latin@s had a 6.9% unemployment rate, while the least affected were Whites with a 4.7% unemployment rate. Although unemployment is highly connected to poverty, it is not exclusively connected to unemployment. The ability to be employed doesn’t ensure a livable wage. “. . . workers in jobs requiring relatively few skills have special concerns, for their wages frequently will not keep their family out of poverty” (Maxwell, 2006, p.1). Decreasing the level of poverty for Black and Hispanic/Latin@ requires a consideration beyond a job and look at wages connected to employment.

The annual income provided by a job may be supplemented with health benefits and provide additional economic stability and safety. The purpose of health insurance has been recognized within the Healthcare.gov website as protecting you from unexpected, high medical costs and obtaining preventative care. The *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in*

*the United States: 2012* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013) identified the percentage of individuals without health insurance coverage and revealed more racial disparity. The overall number within the U.S. was 15.4%. When reviewing the racial demographics of that 15.4%, a disparity was revealed. Black citizens were at 19.0% of their population without insurance, Latin@/Hispanic citizens were identified at 29.1% without insurance, while the least uninsured was White citizens at 11.1%. To be considered as “uninsured”, it had to be for the entire year that they were not covered by any type of private or government health insurance. Unforeseen expenses on a limited budget cause additional stress and limit availability for future planning like the delayed gratification and benefits from a post-secondary education. Black and Latin@ populations are the least insured populations and have the lower income averages nationally.

## **Conclusion**

Economic and educational frameworks within the U.S. are highly interconnected and influence one another to maintain and perpetuate disparity. Black and Latin@ populations experience have and continue to experience the most adversity within both systems and are therefore experiencing a system that has enforced and maintained their academic, economic and social conditions. The completion of a post-secondary education will increase employment opportunities and annual earnings for both Black and Latin@ people, but the inability to complete high school, GED, or an associate’s degree limits economic mobility. Students that withdrew from high school typically complete a GED to enter a college. The most accessible college for students with a GED is a community college and the highest level of degree offered with an economic benefit is an associate’s degree. The ability to understand the persistence of students from Black and Latin@ communities will provide valuable context for understanding the barriers within economic, academic, and social systems that perpetuate disparity but may be

itself disrupted.

### **Problem Statement**

The academic, social, and economic capital impacts the capacity for mobility within society (Bourdieu, 1986). A high level of any three forms of capital may provide some support within increasing the other two. Unfortunately, Black and Latin@ communities have experienced a higher incidence of hardships that include: poverty, attrition rates, low wages, unemployment, and fewer securities like health insurance. The combination of hardships within academic, social, and economic capital systems strengthen the intensity of poverty and increases the level of support necessary to overcome all three systems.

According to Bourdieu (1986), the educational and economic systems function in a way to legitimize class inequalities. The perceived lack of economic resources and the lack of social support within today's society will eliminate those areas as possible solutions to promote an equitable educational experience for Black and Latin@ students. The attainment of a post-secondary education is the most realistic arena of influence to facilitate an increase in economic and social mobility. The interpretation of challenges within academic persistence has been viewed through many lenses and haven't resulted in adequately addressing the problem for Black and Latin@ students. The cycle of poverty for both Black and Latin@ populations is impacted by the interdependent nature of both economic and academic systems.

Current models used to understand the phenomenon of attrition and persistence are based on traits that are identified as deficits within either a student or an institution. These approaches are highly interpretive regarding the cause and make many assumptions. The models have undergone updates to increase the scope of attributes, but remains slow in changing with the times and remains highly predisposed since it has a theoretical approach imbedded within the

selection of characteristics and meaning. The models are therefore biased and doesn't include student interpretations. The inclusion of student interpretations regarding student attrition would provide data and context to the limited representation, understanding, and interpretation within retention and persistence models.

The organized ways of interacting between students and institutions require an intentional evaluation of the representation, understanding, and interpretation of the problem. The impact of marginalized individuals at a greater incidence, requires a system that recognizes the individual differences of students to provide individualized services and effectively meet the needs of all students. The cultural biases within the attrition and retention models work in collaboration with academic and economic systems to perpetuate the continued services of dominant groups and the neglect of marginalized populations. The continued disparity therefore exists for Black and Latin@ students and requires a different approach to collecting, organizing, understanding and making meaning of attrition and academic challenges. The lack of representation, mutual understanding, and diversity within the meaning making process facilitates the development of oppressive structures that maintain and enforce marginalization in ways that perpetuate and support a system of inequity.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current systems of knowledge production and meaning making are produced within oppressive structures that enforce and perpetuate oppression. The purpose of this study was to interact in ways that facilitate shared meanings and co-construct new knowledge regarding the educational experiences of Black and Latin@ students. The process of obtaining the information and interpreting the data was examined differently than traditional methods in understanding attrition and persistence. It incorporated a dialogic qualitative approach within the process.

This research included the student's voice within the understanding and meaning making process. It identified the factors of influence recognized by students as facilitating or mitigating their completion of education leading up to an associate's degree. The dialogical format was chosen to provide opportunities to interact with students and enable the co-construction of meaning and facilitate an inclusive environment for a student to share their educational experiences and narratives. The attention on a student's perceptions generated new ways of understanding and knowing the persistence of Black and Latin@ students. This information is valuable for future researchers to facilitate the academic achievement of Black and Latin@ students within this particular educational pathway.

### **A Dialogic Approach to Making Meaning**

All things being equal, an inclusive society would have a proportionate representation of the population within all facets of the educational and economic systems. A lack or over representation of any population would therefore indicate an exclusionary or preferential social structure. Unfortunately, not all things in society have been, or currently are, equal for Black and Latin@ people. A history of racism has facilitated disparity and the current education and economic systems have perpetuated this inequality by not recognizing the discrimination while actively maintaining it. This "blindness" within social systems is a passive agreement to maintain disparity. Two systems recognized as direct contributors to the disparity of Black and Latin@ populations are the education and economy. Both structures have collaborated to maintain and support a system of disparity by either facilitating or mitigating the experiences of individuals within each structure. A post-secondary education has direct economic benefits, and these economic benefits directly improve the quality of living that in turn provide additional comforts and supports to pursue additional education. The opposite also is true. The lack of a

post-secondary education hinders economic benefits and directly decreases the quality of living that diminishes comforts and reduces supports to pursue additional education.

Black and Latin@ communities experience unequal living conditions, higher incidences of poverty, higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and higher attrition rates. These unequal conditions have historical origins, but the current conditions are explained by the active maintenance and facilitation of inequality within the economic and educational systems. These systems are influenced and organized within cultural contexts that reward values congruent with the structures values or penalize incongruent values.

Culture permeates institutional policies, procedures, and practices. Cultural beliefs and behaviors shape the structures within society and aspects of educational and economic practices. As genuinely defined culture is “. . . the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different from each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (Matsumoto, 1996, p.16). The concepts of culture exist within organizational structures within policies, procedures, and practices (Smircich, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 2012). Since society has structured policies, procedures, and practices, they therefore contain and enforce concepts of culture. A society that is racist or ethnocentric will therefore have structures that perpetuate racism. Racism and Ethnocentrism comes from valuing hierarchies, devaluing difference, and demanding conformity. Organized structures within a racist culture would then reproduce racial or ethnic disparity. These cultural attitudes of hierarchies, authority, and conformity facilitate inequality and preference in systems, and is known as institutional racism/discrimination (Omi & Winant, 2014).

The most accessible organizational structure to implement a multidimensional approach and diminish the impact of marginalizing behaviors is within the field of education. The

educational structure provides access to environmental, personal, and social factors that impact the learning experiences and processes. It is a pedagogical approach that shifts the values from hierarchies, authority, and conformity to that of collaboration, altruism, and diversity. The attention is placed on recognizing the interconnectedness between systems and provides a diversity of influences and contexts necessary for understanding the situation and more adequately resolving the problem with a long-term solution. Introducing this new pedagogical approach will impact how people interact with others, identify themselves in relation to others, and make meaning.

Paulo Freire provides an in-depth understanding of this pedagogical paradigm. He has both written and joined in writing over 12 books that are widely used by teachers and people within the field of education. He has been recognized by many educational researchers as an important contributor to educational research and three of his influential books may be found on Google Scholar as widely cited. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been cited by 44,841 articles, the second, *The politics of education: culture, power, and liberation*, has been cited by 2,718 articles, and the last was *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage* has been cited by 2,408 articles. These books are also mentioned within this section to support the three concepts of collaboration, diversity, and altruism.

Freire's work within education is characterized by his passion for justice, critique of knowledge production, and inclusion of relationships within the learning environment. He identifies the deconstruction of power within education to control students (collaboration), liberating students through empowerment (diversity), and the construction of safe spaces to create equality (altruism). His framework operates from the premise that education is not a neutral process and is linked to economic, political, and historical contexts (Freire, 1985).

Freire's main principle connects social values and education, ". . . it is not education that molds society to certain standards, but society that forms itself by its own standards and molds education to conform to those values that sustain it" (Freire, 1985, p.170). The cultural values, beliefs, and practices within the educational system work to selectively reward similar virtues or penalize those that are different. Isolating for racial or ethnic factors within this paradigm, translates to the over representation of Black and Latin@ communities within poverty, unemployment, and attrition rates than other racial groups.

Freire has constructed a dynamic framework for educators that reviews 3 main relationships within non-oppressive structures that include: collaboration, altruism, and diversity. He contends that, "The theoretical foundations of my practice are explained in the actual process, not as a *fait accompli*, but as a dynamic movement in which both theory and practice make and remake themselves" (Freire, 1985, p.11). The educational setting is therefore seen as an active learning environment that emphasizes relationships within and between people and ideas. Freire has identified the teacher as a main contributor to facilitating the learning environment. Whether the teacher is authoritarian, undisciplined, competent, incompetent, serious, irresponsible, involved, a lover of people and of life, cold, angry with the world, bureaucratic, excessively rational, or whatever else, he/she will not pass through the classroom without leaving his or her mark on the students" (Freire, 1998, p.64). The instructor impacts students through all interactions and is highly influential within the learning experience. The teacher both models the socially acceptable behavior for others and facilitates these behaviors between each other. This concept extends beyond behaviors and into the production of knowledge by making meaning of the world and people within the world.

## **Education as an Oppressive Structure of Control**

Education historically has been used as a tool of control, by assimilating a conquered people into the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the dominant culture (Adams, 1995; Spring, 2013). Most often this control has been used within education to further the interest of European settlers and either maintain or obtain power over non-European people. The overt racist and cultural behaviors of assimilation are no longer practiced, but the values of maintaining a primarily homogenous Eurocentric society remain. “Since this is not a mechanical process, a society that structures education to benefit those in power invariably has within it the fundamental elements for its self-preservation.” (Freire, 1985, p.170) The concept of assimilative control is multifaceted in that it is enforced through different modes of interactions. These modes of interactions include those of social, academic, and economic factors and are comprised of a collection of small modifications. These modifications alter behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes over time to the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the dominant culture. The changes in perceptions begin from youth in K-12 education and continue through adulthood within post-secondary education. The ability to persist is the ability to assimilate.

The technique used within the assimilation process has been identified as a “banking concept” (Freire, 2000). “Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator” (Freire, 2000, p.75). Students are considered passive within the learning process and are empty vessels to be filled. “The teacher teaches and the students are taught, the teacher knows everything and students know nothing, the teacher thinks and the students are thought of, the teacher talks and the students listen-meekly” (Freire, 2000, p.73). The learning environment is constructed around the principle that a lack of

information is equated to a lack of understanding. Students are conditioned to feel inferior to the teacher as they are the content expert and students are viewed to have a deficit.

The instructor's interactions with students and the banking process is not sufficient to alter one's thoughts, perceptions, and behavior alone. It is in addition of curriculum that structures the questions and responses that perceptions are influenced and eventually altered. "How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control" (Bernstein, B., 2003, p. 85). The banking concept of interacting, instructor influences, curriculum and assessments are all a part of a multidimensional approach within education to socially condition student behaviors. This transformation takes place over time and is enforced by other systems like the economy.

Education and the economy are highly correlated, but marginalization of these structures is disguised with individual responsibility and assistance programs. The social conditioning of individual responsibility puts blame on the victim. "Racism, discrimination, segregation, and the powerlessness of the ghetto are subtly, but thoroughly, downgraded in importance" (Ryan, 1976, p. 5). The greater the differences in culture of a person than those of the dominant culture, the greater the challenges experienced within the structures of the society. The disparities within educational, economic, and other organized structures are often distractions in themselves. "Welfare programs as instruments of manipulation ultimately serve the end of conquest. They act as an anaesthetic, distracting the oppressed from the true causes of their problems and from the concrete solutions of these problems" (Freire, 2000, p.152). The welfare services are an inadequate assistance in that it is structured in ways that enforce victim blaming and doesn't resolve the condition of economic oppression. The approach to resolving these challenges

requires deconstructing organizational structures and restructuring new ways of making meaning.

The educational system restructured to facilitate new ways of knowing and understanding will produce new meanings. “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Shaul, 2000, p.34). The collaborative interactions of the teacher and student are the primary source for facilitating change against structures of conformity. “They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on ‘authority’ are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side of* freedom, not *against* it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world (Freire, 2000, p.80). The experiences in the classroom are taken to make meaning of the world that extends beyond the walls of the educational institution. Education is therefore seen as a means to influence and impact other structures of oppression by providing students with a sense of agency. Students are able to model the collaborative skills and transform other spaces.

The development of equality within educational institutions require attention be given to the role of educational leaders in promoting a place of learning that consists of accumulating content knowledge, exploration of self, and potential. “We should devote ourselves humbly but perseveringly to our profession in all its aspects: scientific formation, ethical rectitude, respect for others, coherence, a capacity to live with and learn from what is different, and an ability to relate to others without letting our ill-humor or our antipathy get in the way of our balanced

judgment of the facts” (Freire, 1998, p.24). Within institutions of learning, the teacher, staff, and administrators are important in facilitating equality within classrooms, meetings, organizations, and other services. The forms in which we interact influence the form in which we relate, understand, and make meaning of self and others within the world.

### **Collaboration through Dialogue**

Education may be used to facilitate equality, but it requires a change within the policies, practices, and procedures within the classroom. The current banking concept within the educational structure facilitates inequality by valuing hierarchies, devaluing difference, and demanding conformity. The concept of equality is a contrasting ideology and therefore requires collaboration, inclusion, and diversity as its values. This pedagogical approach changes the classroom by altering the ways in which teachers and students interact. Banking is a unidirectional transference of knowledge between the teacher and students, and equality is the use a dynamic exchange of ideas used to construct knowledge. “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.” (Freire, 2000, p.80). Equality permeates all aspects of teaching, learning, and making meaning. The classroom transforms into a community of learners that are inclusive by valuing one another and the differences between them.

The role of the instructor changes within dialogue from the authoritarian to collaborator. The practice of the teacher at a similar status as the student within dialogue facilitates equality. “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (Freire, 2000, p.178). Freire believed strongly that communication is important in comprehension and learning. That is to say, dialogue with curiosity about an object of knowledge isn’t an end in

itself but a means to develop a better understanding about the object of knowledge. “What is really essential in this process is that both the teacher and the students know that open, curious questioning, whether in speaking or listening, is what grounds them mutually-not a simple passive pretense at dialogue” (Freire, 1998, p.81). An equal education is an equitable education attained through dialogue to obtain different ways of knowing, understanding, and making meaning. A genuine dialogue requires an open space, and an open mind.

The freedom to share thoughts, values, and perceptions within educational spaces produces a diverse dialogue in which different ways of knowing, understanding, and meaning may take place. The silencing of others has an impact on the willingness to share and is a destructive to culturally inclusive environments. “No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so” (Freire, 2000, p.85). As humans we exist and interact in cultured ways of knowing and being. The limitation on sharing implies a limitation on cultural ways of knowing and by extension cultural ways of being. “The struggle to bring dignity to the practice of teaching is as much a part of the activity of teaching as is the respect that the teacher should have for the identity of the student, for the student himself or herself, and his or her right to be” (Freire, 1998, p.64). The struggle to maintain an inclusive dialogue is a struggle to value diverse ways of knowing and diverse ways of being. As a teacher, this includes a responsibility to maintain a culture of acceptance.

A culture of collaboration and acceptance isn't easy and has many challenges from external influences. The classroom is a fragment of experience for students and is built within a larger construct that comprises the education system. An instructor must be conscious of the influential factors of the classroom that include the students, classroom, teacher, and administration. The teacher must be aware of the self as a contributor to the cultural setting

within and outside of the classroom. “This is the road I have tried to follow as a teacher: living my convictions; being open to the process of knowing and sensitive to the experience of teaching as an art; being pushed forward by the challenges that prevent me from bureaucratizing my practice; accepting my limitations, yet always conscious of the necessary effort to overcome them and aware that I cannot hide them because to do so would be a failure to respect both my students and myself as a teacher” (Freire, 1998, p.69). Freire recognizes the limitations of this pedagogy, because it is a challenge to other social systems and ways of knowing and being. This is not to be a discouraging realization, but a recognition for social change. “Only through communication can human life hold meaning” (Freire, 2000, p.77). Freire ties knowing and being together and are intrinsic within the experience of dialogue. His principles recognize that the way of knowing the world is by being in the world, and being in the world is to interact with the world. Therefore, to know the world is to interact in the world.

### **Dealing with Difference in Diversity**

The act of being in the world carries with it cultural ways of knowing and interacting with the world. These interactions between beings are interpreted with another set of unique cultural ways of knowing and understanding. The lack of dialogue between two beings facilitate the existence of preconceived attitudes, behaviors, and values that often lead to misinterpretation and are often seen as different and unrelatable. “No one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. I cannot be in the world decontextualized, simply observing life” (Freire, 1998, p.73). Everyone is culturally contextualized within unique life experiences. Disregarding the context of another will only provide the observer with their own framework of knowing as a reference and therefore impose their own bias and prejudices within the interpretation. Put into simpler terms, the greater the diversity, the greater the

opportunity for misunderstanding and the greater the need for dialogue.

In Freire's work to create dialogue, he acknowledges that working with people is always changing and therefore challenging. The constant interactions in the world and with other beings provides new knowledge that shapes how we understand each other and ourselves. "For us, to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing—none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit" (Freire, 1998, p.67). These constant changes make the process of learning and making meaning an exhaustive practice. The risk to be misunderstood increases with the increase in diverse populations, but the adventure of spirit included within the creativity of the instructor to maintain an environment that is inclusive is a means to work around the risk. This risk also extends to being aware of everyone's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings and those of themselves. Freire explains that, "No matter how much someone may irritate me, I have no right to puff myself up with my own self-importance so as to declare that person to be absolutely incompetent, assuming a posture of disdain from my own position of false superiority" (Freire, 1985, p.51). The teacher is both a model of the behavior expected by students and a facilitator of safe spaces for dialogue. The position of the instructor is at the same amount of risk for misunderstanding as the students, and the creativity to facilitate a dialogue mitigates that risk.

The dialogue with a diverse population facilitates ways of understanding that shape the meaning of the world, others within the world, and an individual's identity in the world. The understanding and meaning happens with the process of dialogue either between people or within the self. Within an educational framework, this has students envision a future, reflect on the past, and see themselves through the eyes of others. "It's impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that are in the

process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school. I can in no way underestimate such knowledge. Or what is worse, ridicule it” (Freire, 1998, p.62). The abilities, skills, knowledge, and identity of an individual are highly integrated in a person and carry additional meaning when interacting with others. The cultural ways of knowing and being are integrated within the learning process. Any negative interactions such as the devaluing or dehumanizing acts towards another within the learning environment produce insecurities of abilities, skills, knowledge, and identity. The maintaining of diversity requires a safe space to value the unique insights and contributions of all students.

Spaces that promote dialogue and celebrate diversity, have reduced fears of prejudice and intolerance because they acknowledge meaning within the dynamic process of mutual understanding and mutual meaning making. Freire relates these concepts to his personal life history of knowing and understanding, “The more I give of myself to the experience of living with what is different without fear and without prejudice, the more I come to know the self I am shaping and that is being shaped as I travel the road of life” (Freire, 1998, p.120). The unknown is considered fearful because it is unknown, but it is only unknown because it is unengaged. As stated earlier, learning occurs within an engaging and inclusive dialogue that considers all people as valuable participants open to listening and speaking. Celebrating diversity is the outcome of collaborative learning environments, because people are willing to share, comfortable to be themselves, and value others.

The ability to maintain a dialogue with an increased level of diversity poses its own challenges. The creation of inclusive environments that value all members within the learning community is not a mutual value. The approach to valuing others is a modest view on one’s own

way of being or knowing. Humility is an expectation of all within a class or learning environment within dialogue, this applies to both student and teacher. "Humility cannot demand that I submit myself to the arrogance and stupidity of those who do not respect me. What humility asks of me when I cannot react appropriately to a given offense is to face it with dignity. The dignity of my silence, of my look" (Freire, 1998, p.109). The way in which people treat each other when dealing with disrespect must be in respectful ways, otherwise it facilitates exclusion by destroying dialogue. Having the courage to engage with discomfort and remain dialogical promotes ways of being and knowing that facilitate tolerance and may eventually lead to acceptance. The cultural ways of knowing, being, and interacting are not all the same within all cultures and a common culture within the classroom environment will need to be facilitated and modeled. "The world of culture, which is also the world of history, is the world where freedom, choice, decision, and possibilities are only possible because they can also be denied, despised, or refused" (Freire, 1998, p.57). The absolute terms that recognize one way of knowing as true are remnants from the banking concept and system of thinking and behaving. Within the classroom, these are constructs viewed as right and wrong and don't apply in understanding and meaning making. Emphasis is important in the understanding and being open to questions of inquiry, not of proving one's self as right or wrong. The development of sensitivity within others is an important step in constructing a space of dialogue and diversity.

### **Altruistic Concern for Others**

Structures that enforce banking concepts have identified authority to particular individuals and view non-recognized people as objects that are devalued and depersonalized. The inclusion of individuals not previously recognized within banking concepts aren't an appropriate solution. "The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but

to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’”(Freire, 2000, p.74). The value of people regardless of authority is a concern for all people. Authority is only a form of structuring and exercising power over others. It conditions behavior, thinking, and identity. Freire recognizes disparity as a product of institutional structures of power that devalues people. Extending the considerations of authority to a specific group doesn’t change the oppressive ways of being and interacting between people. The modification of oppressive structures to include specified groups or individuals is also a moot point considering people are dynamic and always changing. The static institutional policies aren’t dynamic enough to maintain new ways of being and would therefore be unrecognized within the authoritative structure. The altruistic concern for others doesn’t require to have institutionalized protections because they are already enforced within dialogical practices and seen as equally valuable.

The inclusion of others within any collaborative environment requires the ability to genuinely relate and interact with others. The regard for one another must be an authentic consideration for the welfare of others. The freedoms to be are the freedoms to let be. “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed” (Freire, 2000, p.85). The use of the terms, fellowship and solidarity, is a mutual benefit that translates to supporting others and being supported by others. This concept can’t exist where trust is absent. The development of regard for others is based on genuine behaviors of being honest to self and honesty to others. This is attained in environments where dialogue is open to listening, and speaking is possible.

The ability to construct and maintain collaborative forms of knowing and being are beneficial in developing and maintaining self-worth. The safe spaces with a dialogic exchange

affirms the value of each other by recognizing the contribution everyone has to the learning environment. This acknowledgement of one another affirms the abilities, skills, and potential of an individual. Freire's personal experiences highlight this concept when he stated, "The gesture of the teacher affirmed in me a self-confidence that obviously still had much room to grow, but it inspired in me a belief that I too had value and could work and produce results—results that clearly had their limits but that were a demonstration of my capacity, which up until that moment I would have been inclined to hide or not fully believe in" (Freire, 1998, p.47). A positive and constructive environment facilitates the development and formation of self-worth and worth of others. The constructive dialogue is at the core of Freire's ideology of learning communities and constructs a shared way of knowing that identifies all students as having worth and providing insight.

### **Conclusion**

The disproportionate representation of Black and Latin@ students within the completion of a GED and associate's degree are impacted by their economic hardships and work together to maintain inequity. Using Freire's pedagogical approach, I will be able to do the following: (1) identify the factors that impact the completion of an associate's degree; (2) describe the relationship between educational experiences with social and living conditions; (3) make meaning of student experiences; and (4) provide suggestions for different ways of interacting to improve the educational completion of Black and Latin@ students. The development of the research questions, choice of methodology, analyses of data, and interpretation of the data will be filtered by the concepts recognized by Freire (1985, 1998, 2000). Freire identifies the use of oppressive ways of interacting that use power and control within authority, and the need to use collaboration through dialogue to dismantle it.

## Research Questions

This study aims to understand the successful educational experiences of Black and Latin@ students from the completion of a GED to that of an associate's degree. The narratives obtained by these students will provide valuable information regarding the successful completion of an associate's degree under the unique economic, social, and academic challenges. The inclusion of high school experiences is identified within literature to shape the ability and desire to go beyond high school and provide context for future educational decisions (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Johnson, Duffett, & Ott, 2005). They therefore provide a background of past experiences that impact the perceptions and meanings of challenges included within the GED and leading to an associate's degree.

The questions in this study are structured to identify narratives in the data while interacting with participants in ways that will increase the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Black and Latin@ participants will not have known the researcher prior to the interviews and will have graduated from the college within a year of soliciting participation from the Midwestern community college. The following research questions are presented to guide the development and data analysis of this study:

- 1). What stories do Black and Latin@ students tell that reflect the difficulties experienced while pursuing a GED and Associate's degree?
- 2). What stories do Black and Latin@ students tell that reflect the ability to successfully complete the GED and Associate's degree?
- 3). What advice do participants believe Black and Latin@ graduates would benefit others also working towards a GED or Associate's degree?

### **Definition and Terms and Concepts**

This section includes clarification of key concepts to be used in this study. These concepts provide context for the current research project and are defined in accordance to their application to this study.

Black– A socially constructed term used by the United States Census as an inclusive word that identifies the social categorization of a perceived phenotype associated with the idea of partial ancestry to the native populations of Sub-Saharan Africa. The terms is an umbrella term that includes identities as: African American, Black American, Afro-American, and specific African descendants with citizenship.

Latin@ – (The use of the @ represents the use of both genders within the construct of the word.) A socially constructed term used within the United States Census as an ethnicity that includes the ethnic people of Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, South or Central America, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. The term is an umbrella term that includes the term Hispanic and specific Spanish speaking country descendants with citizenship.

White – A socially constructed term used within the United States Census as an inclusive word identifying the perceived phenotype associated with the idea of partial ancestry to the native populations of Europe. The term is an umbrella term that includes the following identities: Caucasian, European, North African, and Middle Eastern.

Students of Color / People of Color – An inclusive term regarding non-white identified people. This includes Black, Latin@, Asian, and other socially constructed racial categories.

K-12 – A system of education that includes primary and secondary education within the United States. It is also considered Compulsory Law in all states for youth to attend, but the beginning and ending ages vary. Ages enforced range from 5-8 years and end 15-18. Some

states allow early leave with parental approval.

Higher Education – An educational attainment obtained by a post-secondary institution that is able to award either of the following degrees: Associate, Bachelor, Master, or Doctorate.

Equit (-able, -y) - the adjustment of quality, quantity, size, degree, or value in the establishment of a fair or reasonable treatment, status, or ability.

Equal (-ity) - the same quality, quantity, size, degree, or value in treatment, status, or ability.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant in many aspects that include the approach, population, and production of knowledge. This research recognizes the limitations of current retention models and expands the theoretical approach of Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) to include the racial/ethnic dimensions of the human experience to understand and make meaning of oppression. The approach used in this research is unique from the current body of knowledge by the following three paradigm shifts: (1) understand attrition and retention using completers instead of discontinuing students; (2) using qualitative methods instead of quantitative methods; and (3) making meaning of attrition by recognizing the oppressive structures that facilitate it.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide my process in locating information to build a foundation of historical knowledge. I am including the following areas: (1) my literature search parameters, (2) prior research on the GED recipients in higher education, (3) traditional models of understanding attrition and persistence, (4) limitations of traditional models of attrition and persistence, (5) historical inequity in the education systems: K-12, GED, and technical college, (6) a comprehensive model in understanding learning experience, and (7) summary of the literature findings and limitations.

#### **Purpose of the Literature**

My interest on the academic achievement of Black and Latin@ students with a GED was to improve the attrition rate for Black and Latin@ students. The current body of knowledge excludes student perceptions within the interpretation of educational experiences in obtaining the GED and an associate's degree from a two-year institution. I desired to understand the lives of Black and Latin@ students within the context of the educational setting that would identify and explain the challenges and persistence within the completion of a GED and associate's degree. The disparity within degree attainment, income, unemployment, and poverty is a historical problem that has yet to be adequately addressed and continues to exist today. I have reviewed various forms of literature and historical data to provide some context of the problem and situate the academic challenges of Black and Latin@ students in higher education.

The intent is to expand the current body of knowledge about Black and Latin@ experiences in attaining a GED and an associate's degree using student perceptions. The lack of qualitative research within the topic is a deficiency within the literature. The use of a dialogic

interaction within the information gathering and meaning making process has contributed to a comprehensive approach in understanding and making meaning of attrition for Black and Latin@ students. The use of narrative inquiry increased the scope of understanding within current literature about the economic and academic relationships that negatively impact both populations at a greater frequency.

### **Framework of the Literature**

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences contributing to the persistence of Black and Latin@ GED recipients at a two-year institution that obtained an associate's degree and consequently improve their economic opportunities. I reviewed the literature related to the experiences of GED recipients in higher education and found the data limited. The research on the persistence of GED students is primarily quantitative, normed to apply to a general population, and focuses on transition into a community college. The research was selective in understanding a segment of the student experience. These segments were typically about transitions between credential attainment, completing the GED, completing an associate degree, or first semester experience within a college. I then focused my attention to current models that are general for used for understanding transitioning, attrition, and persistence. The idea was to obtain an institutional view of the potential challenges experienced by students since none could be found regarding the sequence of educational experiences. The frameworks were limited in understanding the needs of marginalized students and lacked student involvement within interpretations.

Considering the lack of research on the educational experiences of students attaining both a GED and associate degree and the institutional interpretation used within attrition and persistence models, I looked towards reforms within education to obtain a basis of institutional

responses meant to satisfy the needs of marginalized students. I found a pattern of mandated reforms within the development of K-12, the GED, and community/technical colleges. The perpetual lack of needs satisfied for marginalized people, then led to me consider the current understanding of basic needs. The theory used in understanding the basic needs of students also identifies its influences in the learning process. Considering many marginalized students have not had many needs satisfied, it made reason to use the influence of unmet needs influenced the departure of marginalized students from the high school, the GED, and an associate's degree. The connection between education, economics, and oppression became clear as most educational reforms were formed to protect the rights and needs of marginalized groups. Marginalized groups have traditionally been unrecognized or underserved within the larger social, political, or economic systems. This inequity has been recognized within the literature from Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) that explains the intersection of academic, economic, and socio-political components in maintaining oppressive behaviors for marginalized groups.

### **Literature Review Parameters**

No research could be found that examines the perceptions, understanding, and meaning of academic experiences of Black and Latin@ students as they progress along the academic pathway that includes the completion of a GED and an associate's degree from a community college. My inquiry into similar research topics consisted of sources that were indexed to particular bodies of literature and included the topics of the GED, Black students, Latin@ students, attrition, persistence, community colleges, and an associate degree. I examined PsychINFO, Academic Search, ProQuest Research Library, Web of Science, JSTOR, EBSCO Host, and The Chronicle of Higher Education. These preliminary sources yielded no documents that linked the topics together. A few articles were found to contain variants of my topic, but

were deficient in more than two of the following criteria: either the population sample, inclusion of the student experience, attention towards persistence, attainment of a GED, or attainment of an associate degree.

The previous body of research within the GED have had limitations to the application on Black and Latin@ populations. The trend in prior research has been to collect data based on experiences and have an overrepresentation of White students. This data has then been normed to describe and explain the average student. The data used was primarily based on demographics and later became inclusive to the considerations of external factors beyond the institution. Unfortunately, the data remained consisting of normative forms of understanding, making meaning, and knowing. The inclusion of student voices were absent and a holistic perspective was limited to the parameters of understanding the cultural nuances of the individual. The traditional models used to understand attrition and persistence have limitations regarding their applicability to both marginalized populations and the method of meaning making is highly imposition. The history of the educational development within the U.S. provided context to understand the habitual unmet needs of marginalized groups. The understanding of basic needs situates the institutional and structured ways of interacting that facilitate oppressive behaviors, interactions, and ways of knowing that limit the ability of Black and Latin@ students to be academically successful at the rates of their White counterparts.

I have gathered relevant pieces of research that give a historical, social, economic, and educational perspective on understanding the multiple hardships experienced by Black and Latin@ students that work together to facilitate attrition and lack of responsiveness from understanding and meeting student needs to facilitate persistence. The following research was compiled to formulate a framework of understanding as identified by Paulo Freire (2000)in

contributing to the oppressive behaviors of institutional policies, procedures, and practices. It is in understanding the phenomenon of Black and Latin@ student experiences within completing a GED and an associate's degree, that the characteristics that facilitate persistence is identified. I have synthesized what I have learned from each document in preparation for writing this literature review. My findings and considerations are derived from prior GED research, popular retention models, and the most applicable theory of learning, and Freirean interpretation of the use of oppressive behaviors.

### **GED Research in Higher Education**

The research regarding General Educational Development recipients has had three main shifts within its field of study. Although these aren't an absolute paradigm shift within the research, much of the research found supports these categories. Each shift has added to the complexity of understanding the challenges in academic performance. The initial research focused on identifying preparation and performance of GED students based on demographic differences from students with a traditional high school diploma. This clumping of research between is primarily during the 1940's through the 1980's. It was centered on the comparison of demographics between high school graduates to those of GED recipients. The next shift of studies were between the 1980's and 1990's, and the focus was on outcomes like employment and educational pursuits. This research emphasized the impact of the GED on student's lives. The last shift which started during the early 2000s and is still continuing. This research focuses on the contribution of institutional factors and student life experiences that may facilitate and mitigate a student's academic performance.

The research on the GED started with a focus on it as a single factor that was in isolation to predict a student's success, this was viewed as inconclusive in correlating a predictor to a

student's performance. The concept of student performance has also evolved beyond the grades. The recognition of additional factors that include: academic, economic, and social were identified to be additional factors that increased the predictability of impeding or facilitating a student's academic performance. This realization has developed chronologically in three phases that have built off concepts of prior research and identifies the complexity of the human experience within the various social, economic, and academic structures within the U.S. that influence a student's performance.

#### **40's to 80's**

Since the implementation of the GED in 1942, a majority of the first forty years of literature were targeted over the GED recipients' adequacy in preparation for higher education. The research focused on GED holder enrollment information and focused on preparation and performance (ACE, 1956; Bledsoe, 1954; Rogers, 1977; Quinn, 1986). The term preparation often measured grade point averages (GPA) or comparative research on GED graduate characteristics and their performance. This towards the later end of this period became more dominant with literature comparing the performances between GED and high school graduates.

One example of the initial research is the American Council on Education (1956) conducted the first major study of GED completers in secondary education, higher education, industry and vocation, and tests and testing techniques. Within the higher education component, the study found that a large number of students admitted to colleges using a GED performed well overall. The study concluded with a lack in math and natural science preparation and suggested GED recipients be required to complete preparatory classes within the unprepared disciplines prior to enrolling in regular college courses. It also identified a need for future studies to determine the weaknesses of students that fail to complete college are the same for a GED

recipient as high school graduates.

### **80's to 90's**

Research within the 1980s and 1990s focused on the impact of earning a GED on employment and participation in future educational pursuits (Cervero & Peterson, 1982; Hartwig & Beder, 1992; Owens, 1989; Kroll & Qi, 1995). These researchers typically performed a comparative analysis between high school completers and GED completers as the researcher before them, but also began to look into the evaluation of outcomes related to employment and further education. This research focused on transitions into the world of work or continuation of education at a post-secondary institution. The experiences of students within the GED was not addressed beyond demographics.

Owens (1989) studied the first semester performance of 506 GED completers. It identified 253 GED graduates, 50% of the population to earn a Grade point average of at least 2.5 during their first semester of college. The students more successful at completing courses with a C or better were recognized to be over the age of 25 years than younger students. It also found that 49% didn't re-enroll after the first semester. This study concluded with the possibility that GED recipients may experience difficulties during the first semester of college and contribute to discontinuation. The focus of this research was on the first semester experience and experiences within the first semester that were derived from demographic data.

### **00's to present**

The 2000s and 2010s is where researchers began to include the influence of both institutional and student experiences that may contribute as a factor on the attrition of GED recipients in college (Choy 2002; Duke & Ganzglass, 2007; Murnane, Willet & Tyler, 2000; Reder, 1999; Tyler, 2005; Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006). This shift in the research of GED

participants goes beyond the comparison of demographics and academic characteristics between GED and high school obtainers. The attention is directed towards the GED recipient's environment in identifying influential factors on their academic performance. The characteristics of a student with a GED and those of a high school student are identified to have specific differences in social, academic, and personal responsibilities. The term "nontraditional student" is used by Choy (2002) to identify the special considerations that are present specifically, or in higher frequency, for GED students than those of high school graduates. Choy identified the following characteristics to impact the likelihood of graduating: delayed enrollment, attending college at a part-time status for at least part of the year, working full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled, financially independent for financial aid purposes, dependents other than a spouse, and being a single parent. Choy's research has provided insight on the student within a context of confounding variables that impact the learning environment and experience.

The characteristics identified by Choy have been expanded beyond the living conditions and include the financial and social challenges directly impacting performance. In a study by Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn (2006), they identify the need to recognize and address the financial and social constraints of GED students. The ability to access and persist at a post-secondary institution identified key features such as: (1) academic preparation such as that in reading, writing, algebra, and the use of computers; (2) financial constraints from lost wages in full-time workers, hidden college costs, transportation, childcare; (3) effective strategies of time management and prioritization from the demands of work, family, relationships, childcare, and school; (4) understanding the academic culture, processes, policies, and procedures; and (5) personal and psychological barriers that include confidence and counseling. This research recognized the need for effective strategies to manage demands of work, family, relationships,

and psychological barriers. These factors are recognized to be an important consideration in the academic performance of “nontraditional students,” but the limitation of this study and recent studies is that it identifies the need to address the social, personal, and institutional ways of interacting. It doesn’t offer suggestions to mitigate the production of attrition for GED recipients.

## **Conclusion**

The history of studying the persistence and completion of the GED has traditionally been a comparison of GED to high school completers. The trend has changed within the last 20 years and focused attention on the impact of non-institutional related factors, but it has yet to provide a structured approach to construct meaning. The construction of a concrete ideology that facilitates and improves attrition and persistence remains elusive. The suggestions for improving the economic or social environments for the unique demographic needs of the diverse student population requires an approach that is adaptive. The past and current research have had little to no representation of Black and Latin@ experiences within research studies and often don’t recognize or address the unique circumstances regarding both populations. The unique living conditions, economic circumstances, and academic performance of these communities require a look at the interaction between poverty, attrition, low wages, and unemployment. It requires a theoretical framework that recognizes the distinctive situations of the individual without generalizing and omitting the experiences of marginalized people such as that of Black and Latin@ populations. Currently, attrition research is based on ways of understanding that is based on survey data that provides demographics, characteristics, and institutionally directed forms of information. The inability to meet diverse needs requires diverse ways of interacting and that currently doesn’t exist within two year institutions.

### **Traditional Models of Retention and Attrition**

The most common frameworks and consideration in understanding persistence and attrition are from Tinto's integration model (1975) and Bean's attrition model (1980). These two models are recognized within many institutional policies, practices, and procedures when working with students. These two models are constructed within a set of values that identify a source of influence and are predictive in identifying attrition or persistence. The problem with the correlation, is the meaning between cause and effect that requires judgement and circumstance is absent. The interventions offered by both Bean and Tinto are highly influenced by cultural attitudes and set of values based on the researcher.

#### **Tinto's Model**

Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) reviews the academic and social integration of students within institutions. Tinto asserts that attrition results from the interactions between students and the educational environment during a student's stay within an institution. The theory hypothesizes that persistence is a function between matching an individual's motivation and academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics. Tinto asserts that there are two main commitments that lead to the completion of a student's education. The level of the student's commitment to completing college (goal commitment) and the commitment of the respective institution of higher learning (institutional commitment) are the main concepts in academic persistence. A high level of commitment in both the student and institution will increase the probability of persistence.

The integration and patterns of interaction are identified by Tinto as critical during the first year of college. He identifies integration to include the formal and informal academic and social systems of the college. Tinto recognizes three main sources of student departure from an

academic institution as: academic difficulties, level of student commitment, and the academic and social integration. As a result, he focused on the nature of student contact outside of the classroom by expanding orientation, freshman seminars, and a variety of extracurricular programs (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). He advocates that student affairs professionals must assist students with making an academic and social transition into the college through early contact and community building.

Tinto's model (1975, 1993) traditionally focuses on social variables within four-year institutions and is often used within the constructs of interventions that address institution and student interactions. His model has had more recent modifications to include the classroom as an area of attention within the study of persistence and the inclusion of external events on student lives (Tinto, 1997). He has produced research that revisited his prior understanding and expand the engagement and involvement of students from the developmental needs and first year experience (Tinto, 1999; 2001). These expansion to his research are and will continue to reveal a fundamental flaw within increasing the parameters of influence. It will require habitual updates as changes occur over time. These changes have and will include the advancement of technology, cultural changes, and institutional policies that will influence the subject, understanding, and meaning of commitment.

The usefulness of Tinto's theory has been praised by researchers. Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) have designed a study to evaluate its theoretical and practical implications and found, "the Tinto model, as it presently stands, describes in a rather general fashion both the nature of the particular variables believed to be most importantly involved in attrition and the relations believed to exist among them" (p.281). He has been praised for his research to best be suited to institutional analysis of the persistence of traditional undergraduate students (Maxwell,

1998; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The focus within the institution and away from what happens before or outside of college has been an issue of contention.

Critics have cited the limited applicability of his model to nontraditional students as his attention has focused on in school influences. The primary constructs of Tinto's theory have been from a four-year institution with a population derived by high school graduates. The adaptability to marginalized students has been challenged by researchers addressing Tinto's value structure inherent within the theory (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Tierney, 1992). Tierney (1992) states "essentially, models of integration have the effect of merely inserting minorities into a dominant cultural framework of reference that is transmitted within dominant cultural forms, learning invisible cultural hierarchies intact" (p.11). Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) identify "the empirical internal consistency of Tinto's theory is indeterminate for both African American and Native American/Alaskan natives" (p.158). The needs, values, and experiences of nontraditional undergraduates are unrecognized and unsupported within Tinto's theory and makes the use of this model limited to Black and Latin@ students.

### **Bean's Model**

Bean's attrition model (1980) suggested the discontinuation from college is similar to employee turnover within the workplace. He implies students leave college for the similar reasons that employees leave their jobs. Bean also suggests that organization factors as: a structured routine, communication, institutional quality, and commitment to goals will increase satisfaction and eventually decrease student attrition rates. This model places importance on the role of factors external to the college that influence attitudes and enrollment decisions.

Bean (1980) identified student attrition as being influenced by the institution's structured ways of interacting with students. The student's experiences are understood through an

institution's organizational structure and the attitude-behavior interactions with students. He examines the organizational attributes and reward structures within policy, practices, and procedures as having a significant impact on a student's satisfaction and persistence within an institution. He identifies that nontraditional students are more affected by external environmental factors than social integration variables. His attention is on the psychological concepts within organizational studies like worker turnover to develop his model. Bean speculates that behavioral intentions are shaped by a process where beliefs shape attitudes, and attitudes in turn shape behavioral intents. These beliefs then affect a student's experience within different components of an institution.

He has been recognized to include the organizational, personal, and environmental variables in shaping attitudes and intents that lead to persistence and attrition. His unique perspective recognizes the impact of external factors of an institution can play a major role in affecting both decisions and attitudes towards remaining or discontinuing college. "Bean's work expanded on the previous work of Tinto and Astin by integrating academic variables, student intent, goals, expectations, and external and internal environmental factors into a revised model of persistence" (Metz, 2002, p.7).

The level of his external influences has been critiqued as limited by researchers within the field of attrition and persistence. An example of this limitation has been identified within the limited recognition of financial factors (Cabrera, Stampen & Hansen, 1990; Hossler, Ziskin, Gross, Kim, & Cekic, 2009). Bean collaborated with Metzner (1985) and construct a theory for nontraditional student attrition. Most research utilized in the development of their model failed to report a significant difference in the rates of retention based on ethnicity. The considerations included in this newer attrition model were: place of residence, age, and enrolment status. These

new factors were identified in the research by Stahl & Pavel (1992) to be a weak fit with the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model and that of community college data. Bean's attrition model and that of Bean & Metzner are limited in their application to marginalized students.

### **Comparison of Bean and Tinto**

Tinto and Bean presume that college persistence is the product of complex interactions among personal and institutional factors. The ability to persist is considered the outcome between the student and institution. These ideas are congruent with my own, unfortunately the means in which the interactions and outcomes are understood and made meaningful differ between the two and are both limited in representing and including marginalized forms of understanding and meaning. The use of these two models have been in multiple research studies in understanding persistence and attrition but have also been criticized in more recent years as inapplicable for use on all student populations. The blending of these approaches has been proposed to potentially provide a more comprehensive approach to understanding the relationship between institutions and students within attrition (Cabrera & Nora, 1994). The difference between both attrition/persistence models is best explained by the placement of attention on either the students or the institution as the primary cause of attrition or persistence, yet further development is necessary.

Tinto (1975) has an approach that focuses on the student qualities with less attention on that of an institution's qualities. The three distinct areas of focus are: (1) demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status [SES], family structure, residence); (2) cognitive attributes (e.g., ability, test scores, grades); and (3) behaviors (e.g., engagement in school, extracurricular involvement, attendance). These factors of influence are heavily weighted on the

student and less of the involvement of the institution. When students are viewed in relation to an institution, it is with the ideology that they must be taught to understand institutional policy, practice, and procedures.

Bean (1980) has an approach that focuses on institutional qualities with less attention on that of the student's qualities. Bean identifies the three characteristics within an organized structure to facilitate persistence: (1) facilities (e.g., school size, building, environment, technology); (2) academic structure (e.g., instruction, curriculum); and (3) social structure (e.g., inclusive, respectful, caring, sense of belonging). These factors of influence are identified to be heavily weighted on the institution and less of the student. When institutions are viewed in relation to a student, it is with the ideology that they must be responsive to the needs of the student's goals, intent, and values.

These models also have shortcomings that been identified within their respective areas of study as being limited in the applicability to two year institutions and diverse populations. The combination of these two provide a framework for understanding demographics and organizational structures, but remain limited within the meaning making process. The lack of dialogic interactions as identified by Freire (2000) decreases the ability to meet diverse needs. The need to have representation and inclusion requires a means of information gathering and understanding that is communal forms of knowing.

### **Insufficient Retention and Attrition Considerations**

Researchers and practitioners at two-year institutions have used these theoretical frameworks such as those of Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980) and identified limitations its practicality to community colleges. These models have been found to have no correlation or even a negative relationship between social integration and institution commitment, retention,

persistence, transfer, or graduation (Bers & Smith, 1991; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Halpin, 1990; Kraemer, 1997; Moss & Young, 1995; Nora, 1987, 1993; Nora, Attinasi & Matonak, 1990; Nora & Rendón, 1990; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Solis, 1995; Voorhees, 1987; Webb, 1989). These researchers critique the use of student demographics and institutional characteristics as a limiting way of understanding the experiences and interactions of students within an institution. They provide insights in making meaning of experiences that require an expansion of the social, economic, institutional structures, and environmental factors impacting a student and therefore influencing persistence or attrition.

Researchers have identified the characteristics of both successful and unsuccessful students in college. The most successful students have been correlated to having a strong high school record, attending college immediately after high school, coming from higher income families, having parents that went to college, attending college at a full time status, and maintaining continual enrollment till graduation (Adelman, 1999; Bailey, Alfonso, Scott & Leinbach, 2005; Cabrera, Burkum & La Nasa, 2005). While the least successful students at college are identified as at-risk (Jones & Watson, 1990; Kobrak, 1992; Thayer, 2000) and correlated to be: ethnic minorities, first generation college student, academically disadvantaged, disabled, of low socioeconomic status, and probationary students.

The use of characteristics have only been able to identify populations and correlate outcomes. The educational development of a student with at-risk characteristics remains a challenge for attrition and persistence models in making meaning. A shift away from demographics and the representation of students as a set of demographics is the problem. The

considerations of the whole person is where more meaning and understanding may be attained on the progression through and completion of college experience. The multiple dimensions and combinations of experiences construct multiple meanings and variations of needs. Needs unmet as identified within Maslow, make academic learning and being fully present difficult. The multitude of factors highly correlated with race, such as: remedial coursework, poverty, attrition, and unemployment construct a network of oppressive structures that make learning difficult. The institutionalized selection of certain characteristics as more impactful or relevant than others, is a subjective assertion.

### **Additional Considerations in Attrition and Retention**

The ability for institutions to provide impactful and relevant services to students requires interactions between students and institutions. The use of dominant themes from data and the construction of meaning within a structured framework is typically viewed as a sign of good research and theory. The approach to this method is highly directive and culturally contextualized. The institutional initiatives derived from this process create models that support dominant voices, experiences, and ways of knowing. This is a limited view of supporting the unique needs of marginalized students. Only through a dialogic interaction within models of understanding and making meaning will the specialized needs of marginalized students be addressed within models of attrition and persistence.

The contributions and considerations of additional theorist and researchers identify the need to view the details and intricacies of the interactions between institutions and students. The ability to adapt to student needs has been a trademark comment by additional researchers/theorist that include: Cullen (1994), Astin (1985), Hayes (1996), and Henderson & Milstein (2003). These researchers have identified different ways of identifying areas of interest that provide

additional considerations that are intended to increase the depth of understanding student concerns not addressed within the dominant theories of Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1983).

Cullen (1994) recognized key factors within the article that would facilitate retention and were in regards to: admissions, student induction, creating an adult learning community, teaching and learning, student support, dealing with non-attendance, and the quality of service in regards to being responsive to student's needs. Cullen recognized that for some students, a student's perceptions impacted their persistence and confidence. The students felt that they had previously been excluded from higher education and the expectations of students were extremely high for themselves. So much so that they could hardly accept that they were doing well. They lost confidence in their own abilities that they could not credit themselves for the work they did despite their support from tutors (Cullen, 1994). Cullen contributes a unique perspective of recognizing student responsiveness and student perception within the interaction between instructors and students.

Astin (1985) constructed a theory of involvement which determined that success in college is related to involvement which he defines as including: living on campus, working on campus, involvement in campus activities, having significant interactions with staff, faculty, administration, or peers, and having a close relationships with professors such as research. The core of Astin's theory is composed of three elements: student inputs (demographics, background, and prior experience in education), environment (all college experiences), and outcomes (student characteristics after graduating). The primary assumptions of this structured understanding is that a student gains from being involved in school and their academic performance is correlated with student involvement.

Hayes (1996) included adult student demographics in a study of students from Edinburgh University and Stevenson College. Hayes recognized that the main reasons for students' attrition could be minimized by accounting for the following key factors: admissions (a pre-course of information, advice and guidance, student induction, creating an adult learning community, teaching and learning, student support, dealing with non-attendance, and quality service, responsive to student needs. Hayes recognized that support services were not being used effectively and that respondents' attitudes toward staff depended greatly on their previous educational experiences. Hayes also mentioned in the study that ill health, personal/problems, loss of confidence in abilities, age, and pressure for juggling roles impacted student success. The considerations of prior educational experience played a role in attitudes of students with an institution. The interactions were more defined within this theory with psycho social factors as impacting students and are independent of the institutions direct influence.

Henderson and Milstein (2003) define general actions that mitigate risk and develop resiliency by: (a) increasing bonding with pro-social individuals, (b) setting clear and consistent boundaries, and (c) teaching life skills such as cooperation, healthy conflict resolution, resistance and assertiveness skills, communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and healthy stress management. The motivational and encouraging environment facilitates persistence through celebrating achievement and encouraging students with high and realistic expectations for themselves. These considerations recognize within this approach are the explicit communication of values, relationships, boundaries, and life skills as a part of the academic experience. The idea is to promote persistence of students by developing a collective social form of interacting.

These theories explain departure by recognizing the unique considerations within

psychological, social, and institutional factors that influence a student's decision to discontinue and continue their education. These collective ideas use various elements of collective forms of understanding, meaning making, and providing student services. They also provide insight in the need to view students within various aspects of their identity, experience, and feelings. Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1983) consist of hierarchies by only expressing dominant forms of knowing and making meaning. Both use characteristics and demographics to lead and determine areas of interest for understanding attrition and persistence. The use of relationship and collective ways of knowing challenge this concept and provide meaning that is egalitarian and equitably meaningful.

The limited applicability of support systems to students of color are compounded with barriers related both demographic and institutional ways of understanding and making meaning. This form of knowing and making meaning are constructs of hierarchy and bias. The nature of understanding and making meaning of categories without feedback facilitates institutional bias. The institutional responsiveness to the diverse needs of students is identified within the additional considerations of attrition and persistence researchers and theories to be a direct factor in facilitating persistence.

### **Institutional Responsiveness**

The ability for students to navigate postsecondary institutions may be difficult, the compounding challenges experienced by Black and Latin@ students may complicate the learning process and make it increasingly difficult to be fully present. This would then facilitate the decision of a student to discontinue from completing a program or level of education. Hagedorn (2005) described “four corners of friction” that adult students may be attempting the post-secondary experience may require- access, success, retention, and institutional accommodations.

Access is the flexibility of classes: schedule, format of delivery, testing, rigor, and responsiveness to adult commitments. Success is defined as a level of performance on graded work. Retention is the course completion of a student that remains enrolled the following year. Institutional accommodation is the responsiveness to student needs in identifying obstacles in attaining academic goals. The academic performance, retention, and institutional accommodations of marginalized students is the issue of contention.

The responsiveness of institutions towards marginalized groups has had a historical challenge and a lack of interaction between the student and institution facilitates the assimilation of students into the already existing values of the institution. This places political, social, and agency in favor of the institution. It is an approach that limits the responsibility of the institution and identifies the student as the primary figure to be changed. The other and less often used approach, identifies the student with limited responsibility and the institution as the body needed to change. These approaches are unequal in sharing the responsibility of persistence and representing and ignores the interconnected experience within the learning process. If all things were equal and organizations were to recognize the cultural structures imbedded within them, it would facilitate a mutual responsibility through collaboration and mutual influence.

Unfortunately, the interaction between marginalized students and institutions have of unequal influence and typically requires greater social support for educational reform.

### **Historical Inequity in Education**

Education has been, and continues to be, shaped by social, economic, or political influences. These influential pressures are often the result of a power of influence. This influence typically reflects the dominant needs, but at times it reflects the marginalized voice. The marginalized voices are not sought out, but reacted to once a critical mass of collected

voices are able to attain enough power of influence to advocates for itself with the objective to reallocate attention, resources, and services to their specific cause. This format of change is highly reactive and places responsibility on the marginalized group to attain enough power to be heard. The ease in which a majority voice is responded to and the need for marginalized voices to attain a critical mass often serves as a structured system of inequity. This reactive approach to change within the current education system is microcosm of the larger systems within American culture such as the economic and social systems within the U.S. that perpetuate the marginalization and oppression of marginalized groups. The current education systems of k-12, GED, and community college systems are not equally responsive to the needs of all populations.

There has been historical precedence of communities being underserved within each educational juncture. The interconnected nature of social, political, and educational structures within the U.S. require a comprehensive approach that doesn't only recognize factors but their influence on one another that either works together or against. The lack of a dynamic approach to satisfy the basic human needs of the diverse community needs within the U.S. perpetuates the dissatisfaction of needs and makes it more challenging for underserved and underprivileged populations to advance within the economic, education, and social systems. The integration of systems is evident from the connections of the economy and education. The advancement of education is important, and already established as necessary, to obtain employment and increase one's annual incomes. Individuals negatively impacted by these educational structures discontinue school and are often employed in jobs with few skills and are frequently unable to maintain livable wages (Maxwell, 2006). It is unlikely that oppressive structures would effectively deal with the inequality that arises out of a faulty system.

The framework of these institutional systems is recognized by Freire within a theoretical

framework used later, but understanding these structures as independent institutions that only change with external pressures of power is an important foundational understanding of the problem. Freire explains the use of financial power as a tool of oppressive behavior. “Societies which are dual, “reflex,” invaded, and dependent on the metropolitan society cannot develop because they are alienated; their political, economic, and cultural decision-making power is located outside themselves, in the invader society” (Freire, 2000, p.161). What I understand this to mean, is the ability for us to overcome oppressive behaviors requires personal connections with one another and making decisions internally without the influence of external power. His understanding of social reproduction is that discriminatory practices happen when there is no dialogue, because people are not being heard. “The earlier dialogue begins, the more truly revolutionary will be the movement” (Freire, 2000, p.128). The institutional structures of K-12, the GED program, and technical colleges are historically slow to change and listening to the needs of all people, but quick to respond to the needs or demands of larger groups with economic influence.

### **K-12 History**

Within the United States, education has evolved from being unregulated to having some federal guidelines. Education has been and continues to be a state and local responsibility. Initially, K-12 didn't resemble the current structure of elementary, middle, and high school that we know today. It originally had two types of schools that evolved over time, one was for the purpose of general education known as elementary schools and the other was preparation into colleges known as secondary schools. The debut of elementary education started in 1635 with the Boston Latin Grammar School. The development of a public high school wouldn't follow until nearly 200 years later with the Boston English High School that opened in 1821. The

names changed as levels of education were added to the structure we currently know.

A national approach to education was not official until 1867 with the creation of the Department of Education. There were inconsistencies within scholastics, resources, and admission policies between primary and secondary type of schoolings. It wouldn't be until 1892 that an organization known as the Committee of Ten established by the National Education Association would establish a response to the competing academic philosophies promoted at that time. It recommended 12 years of instruction consisting of 8 years of elementary followed by four years of secondary, to be called high school. Those suggestions wouldn't be recognized until 1910 that high schools would become core elements of the common school system. Education would then shortly become mandatory through compulsory law in all states by 1918 that required the completion of elementary school. The development of a national compulsory law was a 65 year development, from the first state, Massachusetts, to approve of compulsory education in 1852 and the last, Mississippi, in 1917. These structural changes and requirements made education mandatory and the next challenge was funding issues and social concerns regarding access.

Social movements in K-12 recognized nutrition, the efforts include the 1946 National School Lunch Act that was constructed to provide low-cost or free school lunch meals to qualified low-income students. Although this act addressed a basic need for food, a disparity in education between races was recognized. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* identified that it is illegal for segregation in public schools because of a disparity was identified between schools serving a predominant race that was favoring White students over Black students. In 1965 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided funds for primary and secondary education, known as Title 1 through Title 6 funding. Title 1

was intended to economically assist schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families. Title 2 was intended to provide library resources, textbooks, and other instructional materials. Title 3 was enacted to help expand their capacity to serve low-income students by strengthening their institution centers and services. Title 4 was to improve educational research and training of instructors, Title 5 was to strengthen state departments of education. Title 6 was originally a general provisions to pursue equality in education regarding race, color, and national origin discrimination. Title 7 would then focus on providing aid to handicapped children, and Title 8 would focus on providing bilingual education programs.

In 1972 the Title IX of the Education Amendments Act prohibited sex discrimination for federally funded education programs and activities. In 1975, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act was passed that prohibited discrimination and required schools to overcome barriers which prevent equal protection. This act was particularly important in protecting the rights of students with limited English proficiency. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act established funding for special education in schools to meet the individual needs and improve the results for youth with disabilities and their families. In 1984, Carl D Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act was passed with a goal to increase the quality of vocational-technical education in schools. This act was reauthorized in 1998 and 2006. Most recently nutrition has resurfaced within the 2010 Hunger-Free Kids Act which sets limits on calories, salt, sugar, and fat in foods and beverages served within schools. It promotes snack foods that have whole grains, low fat dairy, fruits, vegetables, or protein as a main ingredient.

The K-12 changes identified are in direct reaction to issues of discrimination, lack of access, lack of resources, and lack of funding. These changes identified have occurred with economic support and a large political and societal pushes. K-12 institutions are not well known

for their immediate response to societal needs, but have occurred from pressures of a critical mass, often in the form of a social movement or war such as: World War II (1939-45), Cold War (1947-1991), African American Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), Civil Rights Movement (1950-1980). This fundamental lack of immediate responsiveness within institutions, to community needs, facilitates disparity through ignorance or neglect.

### **General Education Development History**

Since its inception, more than 18 million adults have passed the GED (ACE, 2010). The initial intent of the General Education Development (GED) was constructed for military use and not as a substitute for high school. United States Armed Forces instituted the American Council on Education (ACE) in 1942 for people in the military to complete an academic credential and be qualified for civilian jobs. It has involved non-veteran graduates since 1959 and has since become a joint venture between the American Council on Education (ACE) and Pearson.

The GED is currently recognized within all 50 states as a legitimate credential. It has had five revisions over its lifetime: 1942, 1978, 1988, 2002, and a recent modification on January 2, 2014 (ACE, 2013). The updated version has changed the scoring rubric and content knowledge expectations are assigned to a higher grade level equivalent. These new changes will therefore impact future researchers considering the academic performance of associate degree completers with a GED and have no impact on my population considering they would have taken the GED over two years ago at the latest. The most relevant revision of GED to the population that I will be seeking to interview is the 2002 version.

The 2002 GED credential is obtained when five test scores have been satisfactorily completed and mastered. The five subjects being tested are: reading, writing, social studies, mathematics, and science. A minimum score of 410 is required within each section and a combined score of 2250. The curricular requirements for completing a GED requires the

successful completion of five subject test that take a total of 7 hours and 5 minutes to complete. The “GED recipients spend only an average of 30 hours preparing for the test, meaning that the process does little to improve academic skills” (Liebowitz & Taylor, 2004). The level of educational equivalence to the completion score of the 2002 has been equated to a ninth or tenth grade level. The eligibility requirements to take these five tests are set by age. The absolute minimum age requirement is 16, but 43 states require the candidates to be 18 years old to receive the GED credential and will allow a 16 or 17 year old to obtain it with additional documentation.

The role of the GED in attending college is based on the ability to satisfy admission requirements that require a high school diploma or an equivalent. Fortunately, “Roughly 98 percent of U.S. colleges and universities accept GED<sup>®</sup> graduates in the same manner as high school graduates” (GED Testing Service, 2014). Of the U.S. colleges and universities, “the community/technical college plays an important role in the development of a post-secondary education. “GED recipients are much more likely to be enrolled in 2-year community colleges, as opposed to 4 -year colleges” (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2008, p.6). The ability to study the attainment of an associate’s degree is important considering most students attend a two-year institution. The access and completion of education from two-year institutions are important to facilitate the educational development of Black and Latin@ students considering they have higher attrition rates from high school.

The five changes within the GED have been associated with influential movements that have been identified by Tyler (2005), “The effects on the GED program of more recent initiatives such as the National Institute for Literacy and Equipped for the Future, as well as the passage of the economically focused Workforce Investment Act, can largely be seen in the development of the latest version of the GED exams” (p.77). These movements have echoed researcher’s

critiques and concerns regarding the impact and significance of the GED. One such critique of the GED is aimed at a lack of academic skill development, considering the “GED recipients spend only an average of 30 hours preparing for the test, meaning that the process does little to improve academic skills” (Liebowitz & Taylor, 2004; Baldwin, 1990). Another critique is the racial disparity within the benefits of the GED as a method of increasing annual earnings. Tyler, Murnane, & Willett (2000) researched the benefits of the GED and found, “Our results indicate that the GED signal increases the earnings of young white dropouts by 10 to 19 percent. We find no statistically significant effects for minority dropouts” (p.431). This discrepancy in economic benefit highlights a systemic problem between the educational system and economic system that supports racial disparity. The GED then becomes a barrier for access to college without providing any financial benefits as it does to assist White populations.

### **Technical College History**

The history of American community college dates from the early twentieth century and didn't resemble the technical or vocational institution as it stands today. The two most prominent social forces to evolve the technical college were the desires of many universities to relinquish their lower-division preparatory work and the later need for workers to be trained in how to operate the nation's expanding industries (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Within the early 1850s and after, many presidents of 4 year universities were insisting they would be unable to become true research and professional development centers if they maintained their lower-division preparatory courses. This different classification of responsibilities distinguished universities from what was to be known as junior colleges.

A movement to expand on the mission of junior colleges beyond preparation for a university grew advocates in the 1930's, one such advocate was Byron S. Hollinshead.

Hollinshead (1936) wrote that they expand the mission of junior colleges and emphasized, “the junior college should be a community college, meeting community needs; that it should serve to promote a greater social and civic intelligence in the community” (p.111). He also stated, “. . . that the work of the community college should be closely integrated with the work of the high school and the work of other community institutions” (p. 116). In 1947, another push for an expansion came from the Truman Commission that encouraged further development in the direction of expanding the community college mission to include an increase in accessibility and extend educational opportunities (President’s Commission, 1947, pp. 69–70)

During the 1950s and 1960s, the term junior college was applied to lower-division branches of private universities and two-year colleges supported by churches or organized independently with the mission of education. The term community college gradually became used for the comprehensive, publicly supported institutions. By the 1970s, community college was typically applied to both types of institutions, lower-division private and public two year colleges. The greatest reform that matches our current system happened during the 1980s and 1990s, where the fastest growth in development of associate’s degrees related to technical and vocational education occurred. More current terms referring to these community colleges include: technical institute, vocational college, technical college, and adult education center.

Many of the policies within higher education have recognized low income students and framed assistance around financial aid. President Truman’s 1947 Commission on Higher Education requested equal education opportunities as a major goal for American democracy. These requests would be debated politically and not initiated into policy until 18 years later. The Higher Education Act (HEA) passed in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to provide financial assistance for students in post-secondary education. This would be substantially be

amended in 1972 and reauthorized in 1971, 1976, 1980, 1986, 1992, 1998, and 2008. These reauthorizations would provide students: a change in how they received grants and introduced loans as a form of aid regardless of family income (1992), ineligibility to receive financial aid if convicted with a drug charge or crime (1998), targeted financial assistance that identified as minorities within low to no representation fields of study (2003), and with disabilities the ability to remain eligible if they have a low level annual income (2008). These interventions are all financial assistance related. Another aid based initiatives is provided by the National Defense Education Act of 1978, which provided grants and loans to students in education and the sciences as a response to Sputnik. These programs and initiatives are often in response to a social need within society that is not being addressed. Higher education has typically been framed around financial assistance, but this approach has its limits and has been less effective considering grants have been replaced more and more with loans (Orfield, 1992; St. John & Noell, 1989). This concern is recognized within Roots (1999), “While the program has had a positive impact on the institutional power of American colleges, its final results has been to dramatically increase tuition costs nation-wide, decrease the mobility of graduates, and create a generation of overburdened workers” (p.501).

### **Educational Influences Conclusion**

The structure of institutional ways of operating has facilitated the lack of accommodations for marginalized students. The attention to unmet student needs has required support from influential positions of power that support the satisfaction of unmet needs and restructure ways of interacting to accommodate those needs. Educational systems have undergone multiple changes within the U.S. as a result of economic, social, and political movements advocating for specific marginalized groups. These movements have typically

operated independently from one another and as isolated considerations. The legislation that results from these concerns have operated within a silo of understanding within the considerations identified to the specific population. This form of organizational silo is resistant to change and operates to make challenges for communication and collaboration between ways of knowing, understanding, and making meaning. The ability to reduce any inequality is to understand the form of an oppressive system and how it works to oppress.

The improvement from any educational institutions will require a comprehensive approach that recognizes a student as a whole in which they are a collection of experiences and promotes a dialogue within the meaning making process. It is through providing a forum for understanding that the challenges within various education institutions and economic systems of oppression may be recognized. Wolanin and Gladieux (1976) studied the 1972 amendments to the HEA and identified some of these characteristics within higher education policy process as “. . . incremental in three senses: It occurs within the limits of a slowly evolving political culture; it’s built on and related to existing policy; and it draws from existing policy models” (p.257). These points echo previous educational junctures in which the problem of inequality is viewed in isolation from other institutional systems and without considerations of non-educational barriers.

### **The Learning Experience**

The learning experience is influenced by the relationship between a student and an institution, but external factors on the side of the student are recognized to play a significant role within student attrition and persistence. Unfortunately, many of the ways of understanding the problem of persistence and attrition are narrow in focus and identify only a few dimensions of the human experience and condition. The factors identified within current retention models are connected to the learning experience by student demographics and institutional characteristics.

This process simplifies and generalizes the problem by narrowing the attention to a limited selection of variables and isolates categorizes of understanding and limits the construction of meaning, application and efficacy.

The lack of a unique and complex understandings of how variables influence one another and impact a student are abridged to catalog dominant themes and support the dominant needs while perpetuating the avoidance and neglect of marginalized needs. Black and Latin@ students are the most impacted by attrition and have experienced greater incidences of hardships than other racial/ethnic groups. The problem of attrition has been a historical problem that has yet to be resolved. It is most likely unsuccessful since it requires an understanding of the learning experience that is multidimensional and includes the various spheres of influence including: economic, social, institutional, personal, cultural, and political.

The prior approaches of understanding attrition and persistence have focused on two elements, the student and institution and have focused on the relationship between the two. The researchers have identified an increase in external variables related to the student as impacting performance, but the construction of meaning and application of the variables are missing within the analysis, since the frameworks are typically updated to be more inclusive, yet remain with constructs that impose meaning that is free from student involvement.

The contextualization of needs for marginalized groups requires an individualized collection of data that is directly obtained from the student. This feedback is important within the understanding and meaning making of the conditions, circumstances, and events that influence academic performance, attrition, and persistence.

The interaction between institutions and students must interact differently to meet the individual needs of diverse populations. Addressing the needs of students is more aligned to the

interactions of a doctor with a patient. The needs of a student may be highly individualized and requires considerations that require an interactive experience. The multiple hardships of a student would be similar to those of multiple ailments within a patient. A doctor wouldn't see each ailment as separate and prescribe medications for each, but would review the interaction within and between each ailment to see if there are any root causes. The ailment would be reviewed as a combination of environmental, emotional, physiological, psychological, and stress related factors, and requires the feedback of the patient for clarification. Once the assessment is complete, the appropriate selection of medications with considerations to the patient's individual and specific needs. This part of my example would translate to the idea of allergies and require that a college/school take into consideration cultural attitudes, behaviors, and practices.

The most useful tool to organize the needs of students that is similar to a diagnosis tool is derived from Maslow's theory for the hierarchy of needs and the dialogic understanding of Freire is a means to disrupt the perpetuation of oppression. The attrition of marginalized groups has historically persisted and I attribute these to the lack of student involvement and external structured forces that limit the capacity to offer assistance to the specific needs of Black and Latin@ students. The unique needs and complexity of the circumstance influencing the discontinuation of schooling for marginalized or specific combinations of circumstances produce situations that require individualized education plans and resources to meet the needs of students.

### **Limited Understanding**

The understanding and meaning making of attrition and persistence has been conceptualized by researchers and theoretical models with data that correlates student demographics and institutional characteristics to a student's performance. The process involved within these models was created by researchers to collect, organize, and categorize data to

develop a model of understanding within the framework of the researcher's worldview of the data that identifies students at risk of attrition. This process has been used to construct interventions and support services. It has been both supported and critiqued by researchers on the limitations of their approaches. The habitual need for updates to occur after new research and data has been obtained, leads to revisions of the prior understanding and expand the dimensions of meaning with new concepts and categories.

The updates to these models are then seen to become more inclusive of variables, but this process of operating is a reactive framework that requires the existence of a problem. This problem would then lead to additional research and the results would then expand the model and be publicized within a later article. This process is limited in two main points. One is the process time of identifying the problem, work on a solution, and publication of a more comprehensive model. The other is within the selection of dominant concepts that filter factors within a structure of hierarchies and priorities. The use of dominant themes provides a model that isn't applicable to marginalized themes and marginalized identities or experiences. Unknown variables are not considered as potential elements to be anticipated within these models, but are later responded to after the research has been developed and models updated when a substantial quantity of outliers has been recognized.

Although it is important to be inclusive, the foundation of the two models used in understanding retention and attrition are problematic. The structures within Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1983) are narrow in scope and limited in range. The factors that impact learning are typically identified as independent variables, but the complexity in their interaction to support or mitigate one another is not addressed in either model. The impact of variables between students, within students, between institutions, or within institutions aren't discussed

within attrition and retention models. This integrative approach in understanding the factors require a context of the student to facilitate a comprehensive approach to a student's needs in being academically successful. The only way to understand the current cultural, political, economic, and social factors must be in real time and involve student feedback. The need for context increases the applicability to marginalized populations that isn't represented within Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1983).

The understanding of student attrition within popular models have used the information from student demographics and institutional characteristics to identify at risk factors that will impair learning. These require the labeling of identity to enact an intervention. They don't consider the cultural attitudes of the people involved within institutions and the behaviors of others within the classroom itself. The needs of a diverse population require that the educational experience of students recognizes the diversity of student experience that includes those of other students within the classroom, the culture of the institution, and the people within an institution.

The need to make meaning of a student's decision must start with the students understanding of their own experiences and history within an institution. The approach to use factors that identify students more at risk of discontinuing to apply retention efforts will ignore students who perform well that discontinue. A systematic approach of applying resources to the problem is a flawed approach. The paradigm shift to be inclusive and identify at risk factors must be negotiated between the immediate variables of the student needs and those of the institution while they are happening. The consideration of external variables influence both students and institutions and require communication and representation of each in providing a mutually beneficial solution.

The current retention and persistence models don't incorporate student feedback within

the understanding and meaning making process are inherently producing meaning that is biased. The theoretical frameworks of the models aren't factoring in the representation of the student's perceptions, culture, life experience, or economic conditions. The institutional use of these frameworks incorporates the biases of these approaches. Institutions have been recognized historically to underserve marginalized students. Reforms have been made to correct the biased approaches within institutions through mandates of social and political powers. The expectation is to address the concerns and special needs of marginalized groups within K-12, the GED, and colleges. Unfortunately, no model of understanding or approach to resolve the issue has been effective to eliminate the chronic education gap for Black and Latin@ students for decades. This educational achievement gap remains today and is evident within the current completion rates of Black and Latin@ students compared to White students (Allen, 1992; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Hatch and Mommsen, 1984; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Myers, 2003; Pathways to College Network, 2003).

The history of K-12 and college development, GED research of students transitioning into college, and models of understanding attrition and persistence have all viewed the lives of students, institutional practices/policies/procedures, and curriculum & instruction separate components. These spheres of influence all impact one another within a greater social structure that is impacted by economic, political, social, and academic pressures. This recognition of factors and considerations may seem overwhelming, but it is important to not concentrate on the details of identifying each factor and its influence, but the openness to listen, understand, and make meaning that is collectively constructed and equitably represented.

### **Basic Needs for Learning**

Learning is influenced within and beyond the experiences of an institution or student.

The focus to demographics to interpretation of the various experiences, conditions, and circumstances are identified within Maslow's (1943, 1964, 1970) hierarchy of needs theory. He has identified the primary structures of influence that may be applied to the interactions between a student and an institution. It has been used within the field of education by teachers within classrooms of adult learners (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012; Martin & Loomis, 2013; Miller, 1967). Maslow explains the variety of factors within each and between both as a complex interaction of necessities that influence the learning experience. The needs are factors of influence that have been general topics that have been left open to cultural interpretation. These needs include: biological and physiological (air, food, drink, shelter, and sleep), safety (security, law, order, and stability), love & belonging (friendship, respect, and attention), self-esteem (independence, achievement, and mastery), cognitive (knowledge and meaning), aesthetic (appreciation, enjoyment, and form), self-actualization (realize potential, self-fulfillment, and seek personal growth), and transcendence (helping others to achieve self-actualization). This semi-structured framework of categorized factors are generic enough to be interpreted culturally and are specific enough to identify the supporting or obstructing influences within the learning process.

The relevance of these factors have been tested and ultimately supported as a supported theory within learning. Contemporary researchers, Tay & Diener (2011), tested Maslow's theory by analyzing data from 60,865 participants from 123 countries. The survey was conducted between 2005 to 2010, and revealed that, "The emergent ordering of need fulfillment for psychosocial needs were fairly consistent across country conditions, but the fulfillment of basic safety needs were contingent on country membership" (p.354). Their support also provided a critique, stating that "need fulfillment needs to be achieved at the societal level, not simply at the

individual level” (p.363). Maslow focused on an individualistic approach and identified the self as the main contributing factor to learning and didn’t recognize the social influences of the self within a social context.

The recognition of social interactions are supported by other researchers as impacting the learning experience between student and teacher and leading to academic challenges. This social interaction impacts a student’s learning positively when it is constructive and negatively impacts student learning when destructive. “For example, discovering that a person is not helpful, reduces the probability of interacting with them, which means that knowledge of their expertise and how best to access them begins to fade. In contrast, having a positive interaction may reduce access barriers and lead to future interactions, increasing knowledge of that source’s expertise” (Borgatti & Cross, 2003, p.442). The role the interaction or dialogue between people is a significant factor in leading to a student seeking assistance that may be included within the love and belonging category under attention.

The satisfaction of biological needs within the learning process has been recognized within research on youth and cognitive development. “The development of the brain reflects more than the simple unfolding of genetic blueprint but rather reflects a complex dance of genetic and experiential factors that shape the emerging brain” (Kolb & Gibb, 2011, p.265). Within a person, the ability to learn is influenced by one’s nutrition and diet (Lewis, 1990; Mahoney, Taylor, Kanarek & Samuel, 2005). The ability to learn impacts the ability to attain a degree. Many studies have reported associates between health and educational outcomes (Pollitt, 1990, Behrman, 1996; Walker, Chang, Powell, & Grantham-McGregor, 2005).

Maslow identifies the learning process to require the satisfaction of biological, cognitive, emotional, and social needs for optimal learning. These factors have been supported by

biological researches as identified earlier and the social needs have been extended by critics. If students are unable to complete levels of education, it is most likely because these basic needs are unsatisfied. This learning process is highly individualized to the understanding and meaning of the student and is often not included in retention models and institutional practices. The inability to recognize and satisfy these basic needs requires students to reprioritize time and the allocation of resources to learn. Students with unsatisfied needs are challenged within the learning experience either intentionally by the choice of the student or inadvertently by the lack of support or resources.

### **Holistic Approach to Learning**

The current dominant retention and persistence models used in understanding the student experience uses student demographics or institutional characteristics to identify at risk factors. These are normed on a general population sampling and have limitations on underrepresented groups and therefore skew the contextualization of marginalized student challenges. The interventions from these models have minimal responsiveness to the needs of Black and Latin@ students as evident by the continued increase in the levels of poverty, attrition, and unemployment of both populations.

Black and Latin@ students have traditionally been underserved by educational institutions and have only been recognized and responded to after a large economic, social, or political power has mandated a change through laws and regulations. This unresponsive behavior from institutions is embedded within the organizational structure that only addresses the needs of marginalized groups when a critical mass of influence is attained. The organizational structure of educational institutions construct a culture with the complex network of values, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that guide behaviors and expectations. The

organizational assumptions developed, nurtured, and enforced consciously or unconsciously are kept in written and unwritten rules and embedded within the organizations norms, philosophy, inner workings, and interactions (Schein, 1984).

A Black and Latin@ student that discontinues high school and obtains a GED, then later decides to attend a technical college for an associate's degree, experiences compound hardships than traditional frameworks recognize. The limited scope of "at risk factors" recognized within the student demographics or institutional characteristics captured are framing the concern and response. It is in this limiting framework to understand of the problem that a solution is developed and unable to satisfy the needs of special populations like "nontraditional" students.

Currently, there is no research on the completion of an associate's degree for Black and Latin@ students who discontinue high school and obtained a GED. Little is known about the student's perception within an educational experience (Cortese, 2007), and less are able to be found of studies that include the perspectives of Black and Latin@ specific experiences within educational attainment. Some information may be found that segments educational experiences for that of Black and/or Latin@ students with a GED or transition into a community college (Lechuga & Johnson, 2011), but they lack the information that facilitated the completion of a degree. Research regarding issues from Black and Latin@ students who were successful at completing the GED and an associate's degree after obtaining a GED may provide valuable information. These narratives may provide insight into the challenges of access, retention, and completion at various levels of educational attainment.

The use of an institutional theoretical approach or a student focused approach is limiting in understanding attrition and provides a limited scope of services. To only address the recognized characteristics in any approach is also limited in the time and cultural attitudes in

which the model was created. The challenges within understanding, making meaning, and developing a comprehensive approach requires a dynamic model that recognizes the learning process, institutional characteristics, student demographics, and environmental factors in which the student and society construct obligations and responsibilities. The need for a dynamic and responsive means of understanding is critical to provide appropriate services.

### **Summary**

Black and Latin@ students have traditionally underperformed academically compared to their White counterparts and are more impacted by social, economic, political, and cultural disadvantages. The interconnection between economic and academic systems are evident by the direct relationships between employers paying people higher incomes with higher levels of degree attainment. Education and the economy are supporting higher education and penalizing students with less education. Employers typically pay less to students without a post-secondary education. Students with lower incomes are required to work more hours to earn a livable wage and this in turn reduces the time available for educational pursuits. The higher income families have a greater expendable income which provides greater opportunities to satisfy basic human needs, while those with lower incomes and poverty are having less expendable incomes and less opportunities to satisfy basic human needs. The sacrifice of basic needs impacts educational performance as identified by Maslow and increases the possibility for attrition. The cycle of poverty is then facilitated by the collaborative structures of the economic and educational systems within the U.S. The economic benefits attributed to educational attainment for students, impact families with generational poverty the most (Payne, 2005).

The current attrition and persistence models used within higher education have a fundamental flaw in the understanding and making meaning of attrition and retention. The

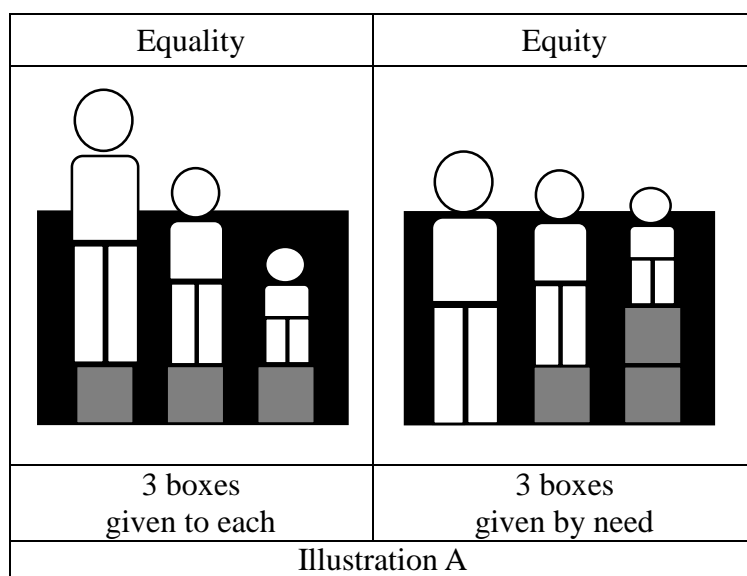
interpretation of a student's academic challenges are limited to particular concepts that are highly correlated to quantitative data. The life experiences of students are being interpreted without the student input to generate meaning and has a result, are being treated outside of the cultural contexts. The cultural relevance of any interaction is inclusive of the student and institution when understanding concepts of attrition and retention. The differences in cultural values, behaviors, and attitudes embedded within policies, procedures, and practices of institutions and models of understanding attrition are culturally biased and misinterpret the meaning of differing cultures.

These misinterpretations are often viewed as attitudes on equality and the focus is often on material equality. What is often neglected in understanding and making meaning is the context that impacts the applicability and therefore equity of any intervention. The expectation to treat everyone equally is flawed in

that everyone isn't equally receiving recognition, resources, or services.

Equity is the process of making sure that adjustments are made for circumstances, equality is the outcome that assures attainment.

This reflects the notion that equity is about fairness within the process and



not all are initially the same. An illustration of this concept is from a story about three impoverished children trying to look at a baseball game from behind a fence (Illustration A).

The three boys have varying heights. There are three crates available for each to stand on to see

the game. One child is the tallest and doesn't need one and the other two range in height by a third of the tallest child. If it is approached equally, all children get a box, if approached equitably, each child gets a box as needed to have a view the game.

Within the context of education, there are many structures of understanding and making meaning that facilitate the idea of equality than equity. The organization of policies, practices and procedures perpetuate the values and attitudes of the organization that constructed them. Those with different values or attitudes are often viewed as undesirable and therefore penalized. The current ways in which information is gathered and made meaningful is fundamentally flawed to only represent the dominant group. The frameworks developed from a homogenous sampling caters to the sample represented and therefore has a limited scope in its representation, understanding, and meaning. Therefore the application of the frameworks construct interventions that are culturally exclusive and biased. The partiality within these models is not the only bias. The use of attrition and persistence models have been based on the past research of GED students, attrition and persistence researchers, and institutional policies that have historically served more homogenous populations and discriminating practices. These past institutions, researchers, and theorists have focused on quantitative data and had a larger sampling of White students than marginalized groups like Black and Latin@ students. The construction of these past ways of interacting, understanding, and making meaning is then limited to the cultural ways of dominant groups like those of White populations.

The impact of communicating with a cultural context has a direct relationship to the interpretation, meaning, and function of interventions as explained by Freire. The use of dialogue increases the transfer of knowledge and awareness between people and the differences within the human condition. This practice is explained by Freire to disrupt the cycle of

oppression and within the United States, and is highly correlated to the cycle of poverty. The racial and ethnic correlations of Black and Latin@ representation experiencing poverty at higher incidences means they these populations have less access to social, economic, and employment opportunities within the U.S. This type of relationship perpetuates a system that is unresponsive to the needs of a marginalized groups. The ability to increase the social, economic, and employment equality requires a diverse understanding of the problem, cause, and a various solutions. This approach requires the representation of the entire population to fully understand and make meaning. This representations must be consistent within the means to collect data, analyze results, and construct meaning. The use for dialogic interactions are important within this process, because only with dialogue can cultural lenses be recognized and inclusion of marginalized ways of knowing and understanding be included. This impacts all levels of communication within academic, social, and economic systems. The methods of interacting include social interactions, cultural attitudes, practices, policies, and procedures within any type of organized institution.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a detailed explanation of the research methodology chosen in the use of this study. The chapter is organized into sections that provide a framework describing the research plan. A statement of purpose on the study is followed by the research questions that guided the collection and analysis procedures. Attention is given to the role of the researcher before a comprehensive plan is outlined. The chapter concludes with the rationale for life history and research design methodology for this study.

#### **Statement of Purpose**

This study investigates the experiences of Black and Latin@ GED recipients that have completed an associate's degree at a two-year institution. The past forms of making meaning and understanding the academic experiences of students in higher education are limited by the cultural understanding and meaning structured within attrition models and within the literature. The purpose of this study was to obtain information directly from Black and Latin@ students to understand and make meaning of persistence and situations that may have facilitated attrition. The form of interaction in gathering the data was intentionally facilitating a shared meaning between the researcher and participant. This required a dialogic experience for the co-construction of new knowledge regarding the educational experiences of Black and Latin@ students in attaining a GED and associate's degree from a two-year institution. The process of obtaining the information and interpreting the data was examined differently than traditional methods that use demographics and identify targeted areas of interest to develop interventions. The understanding of attrition and persistence requires a dialogue and a qualitative approach to obtain the uniqueness of both marginalized communities.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided the methods are identified below. They were constructed with the intent to capture data that is missing from the current literature and interact with students in a dialogic manner to construct understanding within a less structured interpretation and reduce researcher biases while increasing the student's representation within the results. The following questions were constructed to meet the desired results:

- 1). What stories do Black and Latin@ students tell that reflect the difficulties experienced while pursuing a GED and Associate's degree?
- 2). What stories do Black and Latin@ students tell that reflect the ability to successfully complete the GED and Associate's degree?
- 3). What advice do participants believe Black and Latin@ graduates working towards a GED and Associate's degree would benefit others?

## **Rationale for Life History Methods**

Limited literature exists regarding the persistence of students in pursuing an associate's degree after a GED. The research that does exist, lacks the inclusion of marginalized groups. Given the unique set of living conditions and high attrition rates of Black and Latin@ populations, a great may learned from a student's interpretation of events. The field of study most conducive to understand a series of events within a context of significance and meaning from the student is a qualitative approach. It will provide the most freedom in obtaining or maintaining a student's perspective. Within the qualitative approaches, narrative inquiry uses stories as the unit of analysis to research. It is a tool to provide an understanding of the way people create meaning in their lives through narratives. Within narrative inquiry, the use of life history methods will allow students to represent the subjective reality in which they exist.

The unique circumstances impacting Black and Latin@ populations provide unique historical meanings and provide a unique perspective that is not currently captured within literature or research. Understanding and making meaning of the lived experiences of Black and Latin@ students able to complete a GED and an associate's degree is an important step in addressing the issue of attrition that disproportionately affects these communities. The questions used within this research are intended to facilitate a reflection on the educational experiences leading and including the completion of the GED and associate's degree. The main questions facilitating this research include: What were the difficulties experienced by individuals pursuing a GED and associate's degree? What challenges did individuals experience and how were they overcome? What advice would be given to others in a similar circumstance?

### **Qualitative Approach**

A qualitative approach has three distinct features that make it an appropriate use for this study. The first is that this study is field-focused and heavily concerned with theories related to individual identities within specific contexts. The second is the use of participant voice within narratives for both data collection and within data analysis. The third and final feature is the recognition that the researcher is a contributing factor as both a framework for potential bias and an instrument of constructing meaning.

The first feature is to provide insight into the setting of a problem and generate ideas for a hypothesis and uncover prevalent trends in thought and opinion. The researcher is not aware in advance what is expected to be a result, although there may be a rough idea, there is no structured expectation of the outcome. The unique educational experiences of Black and Latin@ students are highly specific to a unique set of criteria that includes racial, economic, and educational experiences. These individual stories will provide contextualized details from

participants within a unique lived experience that is currently unknown.

The second feature uses methods to facilitate and utilize the voices of underrepresented, marginalized, and underappreciated groups to be heard and potentially better understood (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The scope of this research recognizes the construction of experience and meaning as best derived from participant stories and require the opportunity to provide a structure for context, significance and meaning. Frameworks within this qualitative method will provide access to data containing a greater representation of the human experience as both lived and seen through the participants. The position of a participant within their story and lived experience will provide constructs that will capture complex, multi-layered and nuanced understandings of the work so that we can learn from them.

The third reason to use a qualitative research method is because it recognizes the socially constructed nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative methods require that I uncover prevalent trends in thought and opinion with as little influence as possible while capturing the participant's voice within the research as much as possible. As the researcher I am also not to be aware, in advance, of what is expected as a result. There may be a rough idea of what to expect, but there is no structured expectation of the outcome. I am expected to become immersed within the subject matter and as a result are therefore increasing the potential for subjective influence. The collaborative nature of this process will require the inclusion of the participant and researcher relationship, methods used for structuring meaning, and collaboration involved within ways of knowing and understanding. To limit the bias and influences of the researcher's subjectivity, I will recognize my biases before, during, and after the interviews as to reduce the potential of influencing the meaning within the analytical processes.

## **Narrative Inquiry**

Within a qualitative approach, the type of inquiry most suitable to recognize the stories told by Black and Latin@ students is that of narrative inquiry. It will provide an avenue to collect great detail from the life story of a single individual and framework of understanding behavior. The dynamic nature of communication between researcher and participant in collecting and interpreting the narratives will allow the ability to address ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity.

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375).

Narrative inquiry recognizes the person as a key figure in constructing meaning of events. It increases understanding of a phenomenon by using the narrative of lived experiences and histories as a context for making meaning. The stories will provide a framework of reference and are presumed to be a holistic context that will allow the reflection and reconstruction of their personal, historical, and cultural experiences (Gill, 2001). The distinctive perspectives of Black and Latin@ students are impacted by high attrition rates, lower wages, unemployment, and poverty will provide a context to understand the unique phenomenon of their persistence.

## **Life History**

Within the various approaches of narrative inquiry, the recollection of events and experiences over a period of time is recognized within a life history method. It focuses on eliciting a reflective story of past experiences and provide meaning to life events of the past in relation to the present. It is defined as “a reconstruction of past events from the present feelings and interpretations of the individual concerned” (Cohen, Mainion, & Morrison, 2007, p.199). This technique will be used to guide the interviewers’ questions and helping respondents provide their answers chronologically, beginning at the start of their lives and moving onward in time. The most salient experiences within attaining an associate’s degree are impacted by the events that have shaped how students have interacted with others, see themselves, and make meaning of interactions. I will actively interact with participants in the structure of the narrative to facilitate a mutual understanding and meaning of salient narratives.

A life history method is a specific classification utilized within this research that falls within the category of narrative inquiry. Both terms often have been used interchangeably, however, the distinguishing feature of life history is that it is representative of a more general class of narratives. What this means is that all life histories are narratives, but not all narratives are considered life histories (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). “Life histories often take stories at face value and work off them in terms of content to generate interpretations. Narratives focus more on how the stories are formed and structured by the wider culture in terms of their telling, and during the face-to-face interaction that generates their telling” (Sparkes, 1994, p.168).

The use of a life history method is well suited for inquiry in education that recognizes the agency of individuals and the role of context within a life. Life history researchers recognize participants as collaborative partners within exploring, understanding, and making meaning of

past phenomenon. Participants actively remember and reconstruct their educational experiences through the telling of their story. This approach yields data that provides researchers insight in how the past events and relationships of participants influence current phenomena and how they understand their lives (Gomez & Lachuk, 2012; Sandelowski, 1991; Woods, 1985). The data collection will consist of responsive interviews that will facilitate the participants to lead the story development and allow for me to interact in specific cases of clarification for better understanding and meaning.

Concerns exist regarding the collect of data from memory that rely on people's present recollections about the past. The forms of autobiographical memory within this reflection are either a generic personal memory with a self-schema or a personal memory with autobiographical fact (Brewer, 1994, p.12). Regardless, it provides an understanding of events that will better assist researchers with making meaning of the interactions between students and institutions through their experiences.

### **Life History Methodological Design**

A life history approach will further the understanding of academic persistence for the unique life experiences of Black and Latin@ students pursuing an associate's degree with a GED. This approach recognizes the cultural values of the student within interpretation of events and salience of identity within providing meaning. The technique for collecting data will be done so "through the refracted medium of narrators' voices" that is designed to maintain "subject positions, social locations, interpretations, and personal experiences" (Chase, 2005, p.666). The narrative inquiry paradigm will explore different realities, forms of knowing, and meaning making that are specific to an individual. The considerations on the conduct of the study using RLH include: participant selection, structure of interviews, data collection process, contextual

interpretation, data analysis, trustworthiness of the study, and potential implications.

### **Use of Responsive Interviews**

The construction of new knowledge is facilitated through a dialogue of mutual understanding. The use of responsive interviews will be used to elicit detailed experiences and provide reflective opportunities for interpretation. This process will reduce organized structures of knowing and understanding by increasing student representation and reducing assumptions of the researcher. The responsive questions diminish assumptions through clarification. Geertz (1973) has identified the benefits of including follow-up questions within responsive interviews, as they provide a ‘thick description.’

“The essence of responsive interviewing is picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.5). The structure of these responsive interviews contain three types of linked questions: main questions, probes, and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.5). The main questions assure that each of the researcher’s questions are answered. The probe questions encourage the participant to continue talking about the subject and provide examples and detail. The follow-up questions are asked to elaborate on key concepts, themes, ideas, or events that were mentioned and provide a more accurate interpretation of the participant.

### **Interview Structure**

There are two structured interviews expected, but if additional meetings are required due to unforeseen circumstances, a verbal consent to meet again will be noted prior to the termination of the second session. An informed consent form ([Appendix B](#)) is obtained during the first meeting and a verbal consent will be requested prior to initiating the demographic form

([Appendix C](#)). The completion of both documents will be completed prior to initiating the interview process. Once completed, I will audio record each meeting and they will be secured on a UW Madison storage service called UW-Madison Box. The initial interview will be a responsive interview where I will interact with the participant if clarity or confusion is experienced on my part. Throughout both interviews member checking will be utilized to increase the accuracy of interpretation and meaning and reduce ambiguity and subjectivity of the researcher. This method is achieved by “asking a participant in the study if the researchers’ interpretation “rings true” (Toma, 2006, p. 413). This questioning will not deter from the structure of the narrative. The linear experience of the narrative is outlined by their educational pathway and to help construct a narrative; interview questions ([Appendix D](#)) have been provided for structure.

The first interviews are expected to last approximately 60-75 minutes and explore and categorize topics leading to completion of a GED and associate’s degree as identified within the questions ([Appendix D](#)). The use of a responsive interview includes the concept of member checking within this research and will provide a better opportunity to understand, interpret, and represent, the meaning of participants within life history. “Because we are afraid to ask for clarification, we make assumptions, and believe we are right about the assumptions; then we defend our assumptions and try to make someone else wrong” (Ruiz, 1997, p.64). Questions to address ambiguity will be used at this stage of member checking. The length of the interview may exceed the time expected, if the first interview has insufficient time, additional time will be prioritized during the second meeting prior to discussing emerging categories of the data.

The second interviews are expected to last 45-60 minutes and will be conducted to further develop the emerging categories from the data. If there is insufficient time from the first

interview, I will review the transcripts and my personal and thematic notes prior to the commencement of the continued narrative. This review will increase the understanding and meaning of the continued narrative. The intent of the second interview is to primarily review the thematic meanings obtained by the researcher from the first interview and confirm the accuracy of meanings with the participant. If the continuation of a narrative is not necessary, the second meeting will serve a function of member checking within my personal reflections and the additional notes of meanings made from the narrative of the first interview. It is important to me that the meaning I have derived along with preliminary themes are congruent with the intent of participants to be respectful of their story and their time and maintain the participant's voice.

A third meeting or email communication will be sent with students as needed. If the continuation of a narrative was necessary, an additional meeting will be required to review the second meeting narrative and confirm the researcher's understanding of meanings and themes. Regardless of the possible third meeting, participants will be sent a summary of the results to confirm any information and interpretation of information. This will be the final form of member checking that will require approval for the final product. After a participant has approved their chapter of the document, it will be used within the dissertation chapter.

### **Data Collection**

Students will be elicited to participate through an E-mail request ([Appendix A](#)) and referrals will also be forwarded the E-mail. Convenience sampling and snowball/referral sampling is expected to be used, due to the nature of the small population of associate degree completers with a GED and targeted racial population within it. A minimum of three participant narratives will be used to understand the phenomenon. Students will be given a demographic survey ([Appendix C](#)) to provide supplemental data within this study prior to initiating the

interviews. Within the interview, two in-depth semi-structured responsive interviews will be scheduled with each participant. The sessions will be made into a transcript and reviewed with participants afterwards and include notes and researcher identified themes. The raw data that will be analyzed using a six step approach identified by Braun and Clark (2006) and used in conjunction with the demographic survey for additional contextualization and supporting information. A final review of the thematically edited result will be reviewed by each participant prior to submitting the dissertation.

### **Data Analysis**

The data corpus will consist of the interview transcripts and demographic survey. The analysis will consist of participant's narratives, researcher notes, and memos being reviewed by me and the participants. The data will be subjected to a thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report on the themes and patterns within the data. The themes will be verified with participants for appropriate representation and meaning derived from the narrative and by my interpretation as the researcher. A Freirean framework will then be applied to contextualize the themes into a constructivist interpretation recognizing the social recapitulation perspective.

A structure for organizing the narrative's themes is provided by Braun and Clark (2006) that identifies the six typical phases within a thematic analysis. The first step is to obtain familiarization with data, the second step is to generate initial codes, the third step is searching for themes among codes, the fourth is reviewing themes, the fifth is defining and naming themes, and the last step is producing the final report. This process is written as a linear model, but is more of a recursive process. The results will then be ready for writing the results.

The initial data collection and interpretation will be reviewed with participants throughout the process to increase the accuracy of meaning and interpretation. I will become

immersed and familiar with the data by constant exposure and review of audio recordings, notes, and transcripts. I will segment the main narrative into topics that will be coded with summarized codes. A code is defined as the main idea and features of a segment of narrative. It will help organize the categories of topics in relation to the research questions. These topics will be reviewed in greater detail to identify themes within each cluster of similar codes. “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning with the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). The themes will then be organized into categories and cross referenced within categories. The identification of themes will need to be concise and identify how it fits within the overall story about the data. The weaving together of the analytic narrative will provide a persuasive story about the data and then be contextualized it in relation to a Freirean structure.

The data analysis is structured around a constructivist approach as identified within the Freirean framework. This approach recognizes that meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inherent within individuals (Burr, 1995). This also influences the considerations in which the data will be used to construct meaning. These considerations identify the participants’ views, researcher’s views, and Freirean interpretation to be within the results. “The angle from which an entity is seen, the values of the researcher that shape the questions he or she asks about it, and what the researcher considers important are all factors in the construction of knowledge about the phenomenon in question” (Kincheloe, 2000, p.342). The narrative will provide subject matter identified as significant to the participants within a context of lived experiences and history of the participant.

I will choose a *thematically* edited format for the mode of representation as a means to organize the results of the analysis. The data will be organized so that the “subject’s words are

retained intact but are presented by the researcher in terms of a series of themes, topics or headings, often in chapter-by chapter format” (Cohen, Mainion, & Morrison., 2007, p.199). The themes will be in response to the three research questions and interpreted through a Freirean interpretation that constructs meaning within the: power through control (conformity), empowerment through respect (collaboration), liberation through safe and constructive spaces (altruism). Each participant in their own chapter within the study along with a presentation of the results, articulation of the themes using their own words.

A section will recognize me, as the interviewer, within the process of analysis. It will be another topic within the research as it is a part of the life history process and provides a reference of my mindset and way of understanding experiences in general. These constructs inherently shape my understanding of the questions, responses, and meaning from the responses. To not acknowledge these influencing factors would have me operate with unrecognized biases and potentially distort results with personal bias. I have therefore included within the analysis three sections that focus directly on my reflections. The first is on how I view and understand the operational systems of education, the second is how I see myself within that structure, and the third are my notes taken within the research process known as field notes or coding notes.

### **Contextual Interpretation**

Drawing from Freire (1985, 1998, 2000), it is important to understand the contextual factors that influence the perceptions of students and therefore meaning from the experience. The details regarding the institution’s demographics are included to provide a context of the institutions cultural demographics, but the stories told by participants will be used to situate meaning. The participants will be selected from a Midwestern City Technical College (MCTC) within a Midwestern City as it provides a convenience sampling, because MCTC will be able to

generate a list of contacts with the appropriate demographics.

This study will be conducted with graduates of an associate's degree from a particular Midwestern City Technical College (MCTC) within the United States. Their experiences within the GED or high school may be from a variety of locations, but their common experience will be at the MTC institution where they received their associate's degree. Emphasis will be placed on the experiences within MTC considering it will be the most recent educational experience in memory and be the most relevant degree in attaining an economic gain. The MTC setting includes the racial demographics of the city in which the institution exists, the racial demographics of the MTC, and the racial graduation rates of MTC. The topic of study is impacted by the communities in which the students interact and provide another level of understanding within the potential environmental factors.

The racial demographics of the Midwestern City in which MTC exists are, and have been, racially similar. The most recent data for Midwestern City was gathered from 2013 and is comprised of 3 main racial groups: White at 82.5%, Black at 6.5%, and Hispanic at 6.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The most recent racial demographics of MTC taken from a similar period, 2012, reflects a similar 3 racial groups proportion with White at 76%, Black at 7%, and Hispanic at 7% (U.S. News, 2014). Both MTC and the Midwestern City are predominantly White with small populations of Black and Hispanic groups.

The racial demographics of Midwestern city compared to the enrollment rates at MTC are similar to the demographics of the city, but the completion rates are considerably less for Black and Latin@ graduates than White graduates. The percentage of the student population enrolled at MTC that identify as White is 76.1% and the percentage of all that graduate is 71.9%, Hispanics comprise 5.4% enrolled and only 2.8% of those that graduate, and Blacks are at 6.7%

of the student enrolled with 2.7% of the graduating class (StateUniversity.com, 2014). The percentage of the enrollment class compared to that of the graduating class have decreased by nearly half or more by either Black and Latin@ students, compared to the minimal change in Whites.

The racial demographics of Midwestern State for the GED completion rates are significantly reduced for both Black and Latin@ compared their White counterparts. The enrollment rates and completion rates for the state in 2012 are identified within the GED Testing Service (2013) and calculate Black test takers at 30.7% of all test takers enrolled and 21.1% of all that compete it, Latin@ are enrolled at 14% of the population and 11.9% of all that complete it, and White test takers are 49.7% of all students enrolled and 61.3% of all those that complete it. The completion percentage is decreased for both Black and Latin@ and considerably, while those of the White test takers have increased due to the higher percentage of other racial groups not completing the GED and further emphasizing a racial disparity in the completion of levels of education.

### *Fidelity*

To increase the trustworthiness of the research, I will start by establishing the concept of fidelity instead of truth as that of an individual's contention. The concept of truth by Guba can't be sufficiently addressed within the format of life history and it will be replaced by the concept of fidelity as an alternative to the concept of truth (1981). Blumenfeld-Jones (1995) as a constructivist, has identified two fluid criteria to consider in response to the idea of truth, he calls them "betweenness" and "believability" (p.33). Betweenness recognizes the significance of relationships in construction of meaning and has two distinct subcategories: between the participant and researcher and between the story and it's context. A focus on the participant will

require a setting description of the participant's educational experiences within attaining an associate's degree. A section within the research will be included to provide a nested context of the institution and better understand the behavior of participants. A relationship between me as the researcher and the participant will construct the believability of the narrative that requires a reasonable portrayal of the specific story as it resonates with me as the researcher.

### *Validity*

Maxwell (1992) and Plummer (1983) suggest that "understanding" is more suitable than "validity" in qualitative research. Validity is then interpreted to be attached to accounts, not to data or methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). The validity lies in the ability to represent the participant's subjective reality as defined by them. Plummer (1983) has identified several validity checks that facilitate accuracy of accounts and will be used within this study. These checks include: the subject's ability to auto-critique the entire product, a comparison with written sources to identify points of major divergence or similarity, and comparison with other interviews. Within this research this will present itself as each participant given a chapter for constructing their account, a separate chapter to include a comparison of the findings to literature, and another chapter to provide a comparison of the participants and findings.

### *Transparency*

The ability to be as neutral as possible within the research is not possible in dealing with people. The idea of disassociating one's person from research to remain objective is not a concept that is recognized within narrative research. The avoidance of ones being as an interpretive tool is addressed by constructing research that is as transparent as possible within a structure of the research. The procedures utilized to adhere to a structure is by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) where four steps are recommended "(1) formulate a research problem of interest and

value; (2) select participants to study using specialized sampling techniques; (3) collect data; and (4) analyze the data” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 551-568). The structure will include the steps to reduce bias, increase accuracy of accounts, and steps towards constructing fidelity are included within this process to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

### **Potential Conclusion and Implications**

The data expected to be obtained most likely will be used as an informative study for future scholars. The potential implications may be minimal based on the unique situation of these students and education. It is most likely that this will be used for generating topics of future study and provide considerations for policy and service providers working with Black and Latin@ students interested in obtaining both a GED and associate degree.

Limitations of this research are currently the reflective nature of life history. The memory of students may be inexact considering they may be remembering situations that happened in years past. Within the past year, a change has occurred within the GED. The GED takers in past years are under the recognized guidelines of this study, but future researchers of this topic will have to adjust for the new curricular and technological changes within the GED testing requirement. Although these are a few perceived limitations, other limitations may later be included pending future observations and experiences within the research.

### **Researcher in Position/Context**

My identity, personality, and experiences have shaped my unique view of the world. A worldview of mine that relates to this research, is that there exists social structures and processes that maintain a dominant cultural and social order. My behaviors, ideas, and attitudes therefore are based on those experiences and contain assumptions intended to help me process information quickly and facilitate meaning to an event within the world. This framework of understanding

the world inherently filters information that I receive from others and constructs how I communicate in return. This method of processing and style of communication may sound innocuous within a person, but when communication between people occurs, we must recognize the framework of another and recognize the potential for assumptions within and between communications. The awareness of perceptions in context, for both me and my participants is important to develop a shared understanding of events and their meaning. To do this, I will provide some experiences that have shaped my worldview, recognize myself in relation to others, engaged in reflection and representation, and shift between myself to participants.

My educational interest on the attainment of Black and Latin@ academic achievement for both the GED and associate degree began from my work at a technical college. I worked within the GED preparation department and was employed to educate and prepare students to pass the GED tests. My work environment was a lab setting that had an open door policy for students to accommodate irregular employment hours and be flexible to case manage and prepare an individualized education plan. I quickly realized the test preparation materials were not relatable to students and very irrelevant to the life experiences of the students that were predominantly students of color. I often had to change how things were stated and demonstrate an alternative example differently to help students relate to the material. This sparked my interest for a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction and where I am today.

My passion to incorporate and recognize race or ethnicity are from my own life experiences and reflections regarding education, disparity, and social justice. I was raised within a predominantly English household with an emphasis on individualism and personal accomplishments. I had a limited Spanish speaking experience and was the only child until age 13. I'm considered 2<sup>nd</sup> generation born within the United States from my mother's side and 3<sup>rd</sup>

from my father. I was closest to my mother and from her side of the family growing up. I recognized early that language was important, my grandmother had limited English and my mother only spoke English to me at home. I learned Spanish as an attempt to connect with my grandmother, and those experiences were infrequent and primarily to develop a verbal fluency. The values and practices passed onto me were intentionally selected so that I would be able to navigate and achieve more within American society than my mother was able to do. Which to me as a youth, meant that that Latin@ culture was not as important as American culture. As a product of this upbringing, I am the most assimilated of my cousins and the only one that left home to go to college. My grandmother still gives my mother grief to this day about her allowing me to go to college so far away from home.

My experience of being away from home and family, at a northern university, was very challenging. I didn't feel a sense of belonging at the university and I desired a sense of relationship to the campus and find a place that wasn't as alienating. I soon realized I missed home, the little Latin@ culture and family environment I had had become more important than I realized. I was not racially similar to the predominantly White campus, nor was I culturally able to relate to the rural and smaller city references and ideology. I sought out individuals like me and I found people that were both Latina/o and experiencing a similar sense of not belonging to the dominant campus community. I registered my second semester in an undergraduate class within the Chicana/o Studies Program that many of my new friends were taking.

My first assignment within the class was to reflect on family cultural experiences between generations. This assignment began my realization of the cultural, emotional, and social sacrifices of identity made by my grandmother trying to provide a better life for my mother, and that of my mother to provide me. These strong women in my life had the ability to persist with

little resources while providing a loving environment. They also held a belief of deficiency and limited worth within American society. Each generation teaching their children to be different from how they were raised because their way of life wasn't congruent with American culture. Each lesson taught to the next generation was to discontinue, forget, and change from the previous. The ideology of needing to change who you are to advance, within educational systems or obtain economic or social capital meant that American values were not in favor of my parents or grandparents way of life. The reflection of these changes provided me with insight that the explicit messages to increase English proficiency had an implicit ideology. That implicit message was of movement to an ideal that was not structured around the racial, cultural, and ethnic practices of my family. The social development from this ideology demanded for an increased in: independence, competition, social formality, self-sufficiency, and higher regard for individual work.

I share my story to provide a background of how culture and systems facilitate or mitigate opportunities. The institutional rules, regulations, and processes that are limited in cultural recognition inhibit the development of cultural diversity. My mother and grandmother have made choices to teach their children to be different from themselves, and the message within this, is that of a dominant society unwilling to embrace their uniqueness. I, as a more assimilated individual to the U.S. from my family, was not equipped to handle the values of a predominantly White campus, experiencing educational expectations that weren't explicit nor decipherable, and a constant message that consistently identified my performance as insufficient. The only retaining experience was that of a feeling of community and belonging initiated by student organizations for students. These organizations were facilitated by students ranging from freshmen to seniors. They were of similar backgrounds or experiences and encouraged and

empowered me to persist and succeed.

I feel strongly that the educational system is not neutral and facilitates a particular way of thinking and behaving that at times may or may not be culturally sensitive or accepting of different cultures or values. The incorporation of students' voices is valuable to contextualize and make meaning of a student's experience in context and capture their perceptions and positive results. The need to identify the ways in which students navigate institutions and attain an associate's degree may provide valuable feedback to influence policies, practices, and procedures that mitigate academic achievement of Black and Latin@ students. The completion numbers at each educational juncture for Black and Latin@ students are below average and disproportionately underrepresented. I believe an educational environment that is inclusive, affirming, constructive, and collaborative is the next development in creating a social change and will improve access, retention, and completion. What that looks like will involve the voices of students and hence the purpose of this research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I have identified within this section, the ethical considerations regarding institutions, participants, and me as a researcher. My goals are to provide for the safety and wellbeing of: the participants to be interviewed, the institutions in which the research is conducted, and my credibility as a researcher. I have assigned a paragraph for each consideration with a description of behaviors taken into account to prevent any potential malfeasance within this study. My protocols will begin with the institution, followed by participants, and conclude with me as the researcher.

The considerations for institutional safety was initiated through an institutional review process to commence my research. I obtained approval from two distinct Institutional Review Boards (IRB) processes. The first institutional approval was obtained from the community college that will provide the demographic data for eliciting participants. The receipt of confidential data from the institution required special considerations to the solicitation of participants and it was established that I will not exceed 3 attempts. The second approval was from the institution in which I am working to obtain my professional degree. The protocol for interacting with students was the primary concern with social implications of identity within my work with marginalized populations. Both institutions required a detailed formal application in which the safety of the participants was explained respectively of reducing psychological distress and personal safety.

The participant's safety will be captured within a text and verbal format. A document with the intention, expectations, and ability to withdraw from this study was created for the IRB approval and will be used towards participant consent. It is explicit at explaining the participant's freedom to participate and discontinue to participation at any time without a sense of obligation. Although the document is written, a verbal consent will also be obtained by all participants prior to recording. A signed consent form will be collected from all participants and saved for posterity. These documents

will be kept campus in a safe location within the department. The participant's anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained by removing all personal identifiable information and the use of pseudonyms. Although names will be changed the experiences and events will not be modified to best represent the participants while reducing the likelihood of harm.

As a researcher, I will maintain an ethical responsibility to accurately represent my participants with as little bias as possible. This is obtained through obtaining participant feedback of my interpretation of their stories. This will reduce my influences of interpretation and meaning within the data collection, interpretation of interviews, and analysis of the data. I will be actively engaging them within interviews to elicit clarification and context. I will also provide a transcription of the first interview conversation, the second interview, and provide personal notes for participant review. The interaction between me and the participant will be transparent to gain trust and accurately represent their story and its meaning as well as reduce the potential for researcher bias. A final review of their stories with theoretical applications will be provided to participants for review prior to submission of the dissertation and ensure student's meanings within a Freirean theoretical lens weren't misinterpreted or manipulated to satisfy his framework. These review sessions are important in constructing researcher credibility and respecting participants.

## **Chapter 4: Yuliya**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter is about Yuliya and her experiences working towards an associate's degree after obtaining a GED. The story of Yuliya's educational experiences is multi-layered and will be broken into three approaches of interpretation and making meaning. The first is a generic framework of Yuliya's narrative to construct a base of understanding. The second is a thematic analysis of the narrative topics discussed within her story. The themes have been organized around the three types of questions that include: her challenges, ability to persist, and advice to others. The third and final interpretation is the meaning applied from a Freirean framework of understanding. This approach will provide meaning from the oppressive cultural, social, and organizational constructs that facilitated her challenges and were used within her persistence.

### ***Yuliya's Introduction***

Yuliya is in her mid-thirties and self identifies as an African American female. The two most salient identities recognized within the interview include being a mother and an African American. Yuliya often referenced her children when talking about her challenges, her persistence, and her advice. Her family experience was central to her meaning making and identity. She identifies the need to pursue education as a factor to increase her economic and living conditions. She had a mother that was a college graduate while her father discontinued high school. Most of her K-12 education within Midwestern State, and obtained her GED and associated degree from Midwestern City. She attended Midwestern City Technical College within Midwestern State and graduated the previous semester with a business related degree. She references the social expectations of her parents and racial/ethnic group as impacting her life decisions. She enrolled within another program to expand her education as she

desires to learn other aspects of the business world. The following is the result of the thematic analysis from her educational life story within the U.S. educational system.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The themes that developed within Yuliya's academic life history narrative were structured in part by the research questions. The questions framed the categories of interest to include: challenges, persistence, and advice to other students. As a result, Yuliya's narrative structure had a similar organization. The codes derived are within similar organized structures of challenges, persistence, and advice to other students. The themes that were found between and within the codes were related to challenges, persistence, and advice and are discussed within the findings. The coding from the challenges narrative included: economic, health, employment, academic environment, and cultural attitudes. The topics around persistence were: security through control, children, supportive environment, and resources, and her advice was to make education a priority, stay focused, and be vocal for your own needs. The following is the context of the codes within her educational life story within the U.S. educational system.

### **Challenges**

Yuliya identified thematic challenges within personal, economic, academic, and social categories within her educational attainment of a GED and associate's degree. She identified many themes explicitly and were used within the coding process. She recognized the complexity of the challenges of social, cultural, and economic interactions. She described this complexity within the characteristics and influences of a "broken home." Yuliya's challenges within her pursuit of an associate's degree were coded within: family, learning styles, cancer, employment, and broken home.

### **Family**

Family was seen as an important part of Yuliya's identity. She often identified herself in terms

of being a mother and referred to her children throughout the interview. She identified initially that motherhood was a challenge to her education. Yuliya explained her pregnancy in high school interfered with her completion of high school:

I had enrolled at the Y.P.P. [pseudonym used] high school here in Midwestern City [pseudonym used] which is a Young Parent Program School [pseudonym used]. And after I gave birth, I continued a while but I didn't complete, so I dropped out, gave birth, and it was eight years later I enrolled in a GED program. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya would later change the tone of education on her responsibility and interaction with her children. She shifted from the obligation of giving birth to the time spent with her children as important and a loss. The time spent from her children was viewed negatively and the term used was "sacrifice." Yuliya explained:

Our routine was so regular, meaning I would get up in the morning and go to work, I would take them to school, and get home to have dinner, and do it all over the next day. And so, it was kind of a sacrifice to go to school when they were going to school, run to work and go home and the evening and so I lost a lot of time with my children by having to enroll into a program but I knew that it would be better for them in the long run and myself to get that education. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya stated her life to be routine. The decision to pursue her education was challenged by her need to work while in school and reduced time available with her children. This decision was rationalized to be an investment for not only her, but her children. The desire for more in her life led to her reprioritizing school over her family.

The main challenges were having the children and then as I stated, I was pregnant, so that kind of wore me from time to time. but um, I was living with my parents as well, so we weren't in our own home um, and that just comes with its own challenges being an adult with children, living with someone else, you know, it's an experience within itself. But, for the most part it wasn't anything I couldn't overcome. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The impact of her child rearing was described as impacting her physical well-being. She also required economic assistance from her parents with housing and caregiving support. Her personality was positive and very determined. She explained the impact of the family unit with a hardship within her schooling. Yuliya explained:

Um, it was tough at first we, we, had some obstacles in our way. Um, my son lost his paternal grandmother at the end of my program. He lost his paternal grandmother and we're all very close to her. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The value of family included the emotional connection beyond her immediate family of her parents and extended into her children's grandparents. She described the loss of an extended family member, a grandmother to her son, as an obstacle. The use of "we" in having an obstacle is an understanding of the family as a unit and an impact in a collective framework. The individual is identified within a greater context and not distinguished. Family identifies the self in relation to others and is an important feature in how challenges are perceived within Yuliya's educational experiences.

### **Teaching Styles**

Yuliya's education and framework of learning was referenced in the form of interactions with her instructors. The discouragement she received within the learning experience was from the form of teaching style rather than the instructors themselves. Yuliya explained:

My experience in completing this program last semester had some tough teachers I was a little discouraged due to those teachers but it wasn't the teachers themselves I would say it was the teaching style that they had it was kind of, um, different from what I have experience for my small business program and from what I was used to was engagement and be a the interaction the activity in action I had with small business program. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The engagement, interaction, and activity from her Small Business Program was compared to the Human Resource Program. The learning experience is important to Yuliya as it facilitates learning for her. When it is absent, it becomes a greater challenge and learn the material. She explains this process within the comparison of both programs:

And it's the complete opposite of my first, so I'm glad that I decided to continue and not give up because this time it has been a much more positive experience as far as my teachers and their teaching styles. I mean it has just helped me so next semester I hope, if I don't get similar to this. If there's a mix match you know, to keep me focus sort of speak. I mean because I'm a visual learner, I like interaction so when I lack that in a classroom setting it's hard for me to grasp concepts with the information so it's just more for me to have to do to get through. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The desire for interaction, visual interest, and engagement within the classroom experience is

expressed as a trait within Yuliya's preferred method of learning. She is explicit within her reflections of the qualities of the learning experience within classrooms that has facilitated her learning. The lack of these qualities has made it more challenging to learn the material.

## **Cancer**

Yuliya identified a health concern regarding her cancer. It was a recent resurgence of a diagnosis that had happened prior during her prior Small Business Program. She identified it as a minor condition initially of which was quickly resolved, but she was very concerned about the reappearance prior to the interview none the less. Yuliya explained the first diagnosis near the end of her first program in passing:

And then I had a cervical cancer scare and had to go in and have some surgery for that and all this time, I'm still in school and staying positive and just trying to the look of the big picture. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya refers to the "big picture" as a means to not focus on the details and maintain attention on her goal to complete school as a force of positive motivation. The second time she mentioned the resurgence of cancer, she didn't frame it within an optimistic context. Yuliya stated her condition within the term:

Um, Some of my main challenges. None so far besides just the first semester teaching issue I recently just last week, excuse me, found out I have an issue again with the cervical cancer so I'm trying not to dwell on that. My Dr. seems very positive and optimistic about the situation so I'm trying to follow her lead and that. I actually have the surgery scheduled for the day after thanksgiving this year to hopefully rectify that situation. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The expression in her second comment referred to the doctor as a person of support and an influencing factor in maintaining a positive attitude about her situation. The mental stress and physical impact of cancer impairs the ability to focus on educational completion, but this was happening close to a holiday and she would find out the results shortly after. As a socially responsible researcher, I later inquired about her condition by following up on her health over an e-mail. She responded that "all is

well” and scheduled the second interview within the same email.

## **Employment**

The need to work was implicit in the need to support her children while attending school. The interrelated nature of education and employment made completing her education a challenge. The completion of her first associate’s degree was important to locate a job and increase her economic standing. Yuliya experienced a loss of employment that initially led her to pursue her GED. The challenges in finding employment without a high school diploma led to the decision to pursue a GED and a post-secondary education. Yuliya explains the employment need to continue her education as she recalled:

I had lost my job that I had been working for about three years, so I was pretty comfortable you know and they laid me off and it was a big upset. And I tried to get back out there but I was having an issue cause my education and skills, so I needed some college. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Lower paying jobs are often the most available for individuals with lower levels of education, and are often the more expendable during times of layoffs or downsizing. Once searching for a new job, it became a challenge to obtain a sufficient wage to provide for her family. Yuliya accepted a lower wage job to help make ends meet and is seeking to use her past degree and completion of her second degree to attain a better paying job. The time necessary for a job that is needed to satisfy the financial and personal needs of Yuliya and her family increases the stressors of pursuing an education. Yuliya identified this within a comment:

Um, I’ve been looking for a different job so it’s kind of been challenging as far as managing school and my current job and everything else. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Finding better employment, while working and going to school is challenging for Yuliya. She has goals to have a better job that is defined with increased pay. The intent of the pay is to provide for her children which is a common theme throughout her narrative. Yuliya has echoed the concept of

education as a vehicle to advance her economic status when she later explained:

My employment goals has you know, I wanna find a good job in resource management so I can get some hands on experience using what I've learned in school and I need some good pay. I actually work with a couple of companies over the summer that would love to have me once I complete my associate's degree next semester. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya's past job provided limited job security and the pursuit of education is to directly impact the sense of job security and providing for her family. She expects to earn an increased wage and job satisfaction than her past and current jobs. The educational and economic systems are highly intertwined and because they are directly supportive of one another, it constructs a challenge to provide the adequate amount of time to each considering lower wage jobs require additional time to meet livable wages.

### **Living & Social Conditions/Broken Home**

Yuliya identified the challenges of her living conditions as highly correlated to the stereotypes of her racial group membership. She started the description of her social hardships by identifying the negative characteristics within her living conditions. These characteristics were explained in relation to her children, their upbringing, and her perseverance through their achievements. She described her family living conditions primarily through her son:

He's you know, pulled out of himself and recognize what he needs to do this is what I'm going to do this is what I'm doing. And I couldn't be more proud of him he's not a teen parent he has no criminal background he has a driver's license um, he is, he works every day he's a great young man coming from a broken home. As long as he has been my child I've been on government assistance food stamps medical and currently on section eight program, um, so it is possible to come from a broken home and succeed.

Upon further inquiry on the term "broken home," Yuliya was able to explain the term in greater detail and provide a greater context. She identified the social and living condition of her racial group in relation to the larger community of Midwestern City. She also maintained the use of her boy within the example of her challenging work as a "single mother." Yuliya described the impact and perceptions of

others about her community when she added:

Well, I'm a single parent I get no child support from either my, five and two, two daughter's fathers and my son. I had him when I was a teenager. Um, but I just do it by myself and I don't know if that's the correct term but I've heard it used in the education system. I wouldn't consider myself in a broken home but I've heard that term. Um, but just meaning single parent, you know, African-American we have such a disadvantage, especially within this community. Um, that most young men in my son's situation meaning single parent government assisted family are out here selling drugs or having children or dropping out. And my son is the complete opposite, and so I just want to, you know, refer to him, because he's such a positive image, you know, in comparison to what most young men of color are going through in Midwestern City [pseudonym used], Midwestern State [pseudonym used]. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The description of the environments added to the social work needed to maintain a positive and constructive image of herself through her family and their achievements. She used her upbringing as a gauge to adjust and modify her relationship and interaction with her own children. Yuliya's challenges during her youth were more of the stereotype that she was looking to avoid with her children to end the cycle of poverty.

I recognize things that didn't work and my family the dynamic that kind of push me in the direction I went into as far as dropping a high school and getting pregnant as a teenager until I've done some things different in my own family meaning my children that kind of our the opposite I guess I would say because I have a teenager was 17 without a child will be graduating high school early. (Interview #2, 12/12/15)

Yuliya identifies the stress of being a parent within a stigmatized group as requiring an active attentiveness to the social stigma in addition to performing well at college. Yuliya also elaborates on the need to go beyond the surface of an action and listen to people to examine the source of the problem. The social stigma of what she has tried to overcome with raising her children has required a great deal of work on her behalf. She explained:

Not enough people care to know why it is the way it is in our economy, society, or um, racial background. A lot of society just things it's drugs or behavior but underneath that there's a problem. I just want to express um, it's usually something that can be fixed, you know, if someone just took the time to listen or ask what the problem is. Instead of going off of what they see is the action. Um, has the cause of whatever's going on. (Interview #2, 12/12/15)

The challenge of childrearing is not recognized within models that provide additional resources

to single mothers and those that exist, don't recognize the additional stressors and needs of stigmatized racial groups and cultural attitudes. The cultural attitudes may be within a family or from others regarding ones racial/ethnic group memberships. Yuliya identifies her racial identity and cultural upbringing as important factors in the challenges of her academic pursuits.

### **Persistence**

The persistence of Yuliya is identified within: the desire for control over her life, provide for her children, involvement within supportive environments, and the resources she received. The combination of this network of positive experiences facilitated the development of Yuliya's education from the GED to the completion of an associate's degree at Midwestern City Technical College.

### **Security/Control**

Yuliya identified the loss of her job as an important factor in her decision to obtain an associate's degree. She later elaborates on her pursuits as a desire to become more independent economically and socially. The need to rely on an agency for employment and be identified as expendable is classified as a loss of security/control. She elaborated on this concept when she stated:

And I want to own my own business, I do not want to continue to go through people robbing me of my security. I'd rather have control over that, um, myself so the small business program basically opened that door for me. So I can see what that world provided I guess, owning my own business and seeing all goes into that and my children's future um, at that time I started my own business program my son was a sophomore in high school going into his junior year and then my daughters were elementary students. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya's desire to own a business is to increase her economic security so that she may provide for her children's future. She identifies a need to acquire additional knowledge of the various aspects of business to reduce the level of insecurity of her future employees. She explained how this would work to identify if someone was intentionally doing financial harm to her through her future business.

So going into the human resource management program that I am currently in, kinda came from wanting to know more about the background of running a small business. So, to get started. And my philosophy for that is, I wanna know how to do what I'm paying someone to do or will

pay someone to do. Ah, with all the scams, and scheming, and embezzlement, and everything going on these days; I just wanna have that knowledge to, you know, basically run my own business. First, without having to pay someone, and then when I do pay them, make sure they aren't stealing from me. It just gives me more experience in that I can start off with the resource management field and then from life, you know life experience, learn more and get more experience outside of my schooling. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya identifies the desire to own her business as a long term goal and has a short term goal in working for an employer within Human Resources. She has a future plan that is in development and requires transitions.

My short term goal for it after I complete my program is to find a job and a nice career in my field um, which would be human resources management. I'm currently supervisor at my current job and that gives me some um, experience within small business and certification, but then ultimately I want to run my own business. So that's my long-term goal, I'm kinda on the fence of what kind of business um, I've been working closely with partner of mine on an online retail business and that is been going pretty um, so, I've been kind of leaning toward something along that for the lives of my first job but I'm taking it slow. I get so much of my plate right now I'm just trying to make sure that will be for me once I start out but I definitely need to start out and get some money made. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya's decisions are also being rewarded by her employment opportunities. She is receiving job offers as soon as she completes her Human Resources Program. This is a motivational outcome that has encouraged her expectations and plans to work for an employer and gain experience prior to owning her own business.

### **Children**

Yuliya's children were a source of motivation to pursue her education and empowerment to persist. She made 18 references to her children over the course of her narrative. The explicit connections were identified in the initial reason for her pursuit of a post-secondary education. Since she had discontinued high school because of her pregnancy, it required that she complete a General Educational Development GED certificate to apply for an associate's degree. She described a conversation with her mother that framed her concern for her children's future as connected to her decision to continue her education. Yuliya recalled:

I had already had two children by the time I enrolled in my GED program and I was pregnant with my third child and I had a conversation with my parents mainly my mother and she pretty much gave me some good advice for the future. You know, for my children's future. My son was seven at the time. I had a three year old daughter, almost three, and I was pregnant. And, it was really their future that led me to the GED program. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya's children were mentioned multiple times as a motivational factor in different contexts.

Her children were referred to as examples of her philosophical approach to education and a career.

One example is with her son which graduated last December and his future plans. Yuliya identifies the need to make personal and realistic goals:

My son is now a senior in high school he will be graduating early in December. I'm so proud of him. He has plans to enroll into UTI in California um, for small engine, um, for an engine technician and then he wants to, they have an 18 month program there and be certified. Then he wants to go to UTI in Florida and learn to do marine engines and four so forth. So he has his plan in order. Um, he has had a little stumble in ninth grade but since then he has done better and he has recognized it in himself what he wants to do and how education is important to him instead of me just telling him you better do this you better do that you know what I mean, I guess from my direction or whatever. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The narrative of persistence is exemplified within her children's accomplishments and her desire to provide a better "future" for them. The need to have her children recognize it for themselves is important in understanding the personal meaning and determination required to be invested and intentional. She also uses her persistence as the desire to construct a counter narrative to the negative stereotype of a "broken home" identified within her challenges. The success of her children are in celebration of her abilities and influence to construct a positive self-image.

### **Teaching Style**

The learning environment is identified in both challenges and persistence. The lack or presence of teaching style and qualities of the interaction between student and teacher have placed her comments within both categories. The type of environment that facilitates her educational development is described within the following section of her narrative:

My experiences in completing the GED program were pretty cool, GED Prep [pseudonym used]

the program I went through, everybody was friendly supportive and they wanted the best for me and they push me to do my best and I did. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The desire for the learning experience to include social support and encouragement was not limited to the GED prep program, but also within her program experience. Yuliya valued the interactions between her and her instructors. She elaborated on her experiences within her Small Business Program when she stated:

I don't know if it would be similar in any way except the teachers have been very supportive. Um, and encouraging, um, and that goes a long way with me. I'm a people person so I like to interact with people and even the teachers that I was having an issue with their teaching style, they were even positive and encouraging and supportive in making sure um, I do the best that I can, um, in their classes. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya prefers an educational environment where the teacher's teaching style is supportive, encouraging, interactive, and positive. The lack of "engagement" as problematic in the learning process as identified within the previous challenging statements. She includes the terms "visual learner" within the interaction of a classroom. The challenge experience revealed details about the desired classroom and learning experience.

And it's the complete opposite of my first, so I'm glad that I decided to continue and not give up because this time it has been a much more positive experience as far as my teachers and their teaching styles. I mean it has just helped me so next semester I hope, if I don't get similar to this. If there's a mix match you know, to keep me focus sort of speak. I mean because I'm a visual learner, I like interaction so when I lack that in a classroom setting it's hard for me to grasp concepts with the information so it's just more for me to have to do to get through. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The ability to grasp concepts with the information is related to being a visual learner and the interaction within the classroom setting. The term interaction is described within the previous quote where Yuliya explains the positive support and encouragement of teachers. The feedback is important to Yuliya within the learning experience.

## **Resources**

The use of campus resources are identified by Yuliya to assist her with her academic and

guidance forms of support. The academic related services are typically provided by the Student Academic Center [pseudonym used] and are typically for English and math assistance, but at times, program courses are provided a tutor if multiple students request assistance. Yuliya identifies the use of this specific campus resource within her story.

But nonetheless, Midwestern City Technical College [pseudonym used] has some great resources to go to in those situations, the student development, Student Academic Center [pseudonym used] is a great place, they have tutors and stuff that I utilize my first semester. So, that helped a lot. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The use of guidance resources were also described to facilitate her academic and career development. Yuliya described her knowledge of the resources on campus that facilitate the focus of an educational program to a career goal. She explained using resources as a strategy she used and as giving advice for others.

Have some idea of what you wanna do beyond the GED and I think that would, that would be the best way to start with a positive thought process behind which want to do. And just use resources, use the many resources they have available. At Midwestern City Technical College [pseudonym used] we have some great resources to help students you know to get started in their program, get some direction or maybe what they want to do if they are confused, just that there a lot of resources here that you could utilize to do well and succeed in the programs here at Midwestern City Technical College [pseudonym used]. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The use of academic resources were the primary focus of the tools used to persist at Midwestern City Technical College. The direct academic services through tutoring are also supported by the career guidance within student services to help “confused” or students “to get started in their program.” The ability to advocate for the self and seek resources aided the academic pursuit of Yuliya.

### **Advice**

Yuliya identifies three concepts of advice. She identifies the importance to complete a post-secondary education, stay focused, and being vocal within one’s educational experience to persist.

Yuliya summarized her advice towards the end of the narrative the links all components of her advice.

She stated:

You know, As long as you have that guidance and that focus and support its more than possible. It's more than possible. You just have to want to do it. You can have everybody telling you you're the greatest and you can do this, but if it's not what you're feeling, then you're not going to do it. so have some confidence find which are good at you know and work towards that, education you will not go very far without it, education is something no one can take from you, you know like a, a skill you know people to work with their hands they'll always going to know how to do that in education in general and in the book term is the same way no one can take from you what you learn like a job you know what I mean, you will always have your education and you can go anywhere you want to with it, so get it, and it's a must. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The learning experience within Yuliya's narrative has had a recursive element of her children and advice. The two elements may also be found together. The following three main categories of advice may be found within previous categories of Yuliya's narrative and aren't mutually exclusive to these categories either.

### **Complete Education**

The completion of education is an important value for Yuliya that she has imparted onto her children in previous examples. During the narrative she was explicit to identify this as advice to students, and made it clear as such by including it within her opening statement.

Some advice I would give to other students thinking about discontinuing high school, don't. Um, you only hurt yourself in the long run by doing that, um, education is key, you can't go far without it, no matter what you think. You have to have that education, that's something no one can take from you know, it provides security. So, you will have more of a chance to sustain a career in a different field or a field you would like to do, just by continuing your education, so persevere, stay focused, and don't give up. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The use of the term security is expressed as a value by Yuliya and used here as a means to continue one's education. The possession of education as something that can't be taken away is also something that is within the worldview of Yuliya that is important in understanding the framework of imparting this advice to others with a similar racial/ethnic/cultural background. The need to stay focused is connected to completing education as a goal and given its own category. Much of what Yuliya has stated about completing her education is linked to other categories within her narrative.

## Stay Focused

The ability to stay focused is related to completing education as a goal, but beyond that extending the goal to include long term and short term goals. Early within the advice Yuliya identifies the need to think about the use of goals in a larger set of goals. She explained this during her advice to GED students.

Some advice that I would give to students completing the GED program would be, just have a plan. Especially if you're a younger student, you know. Like say that you just recently dropped out of high school as opposed to an adult that wanted to come back into a program. Just have some sort of a plan. Things may change as you get into school but if you go in with a plan you're more likely to succeed. And by plan, I mean know that you want to complete your GED and then, what do you wanna do after that. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The plan identified within her narrative is later explained as connected to motivation and the intention of education. Yuliya identifies the need to place a value to the ability to complete education to maintain motivation. She explains it within her advice:

Some advice I would give students working on their GED, just stay focused know what you want to do, you know, know that is your current goal, you know to complete your GED, and then think about what you do after that so that you have some motivation to complete your GED and persevere you know life hits you with challenges every day so do your best to try to handle those the best you can and stay focused, focused, focused, focused. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The short term goals of the everyday leads to the greater goal of completing the GED and need to think beyond the GED into larger personal and career goals. The focus is a narrowing of ones attention to the goal transforms the challenges from doubt to that of detours. Yuliya explains this differently as she stated:

Just stay focused and that's what I teach my children you have to stay focused, you know, as long as there are expectations placed on you that are attainable. Then it's in your hands basically to do the best that you can do, you know. And I know I have known I am capable all this time it's just a lack of guidance through you know the younger years going into high school and into college. Life experience kind of takes over if you don't have that focus and guidance to make sure you stay on track and I'd definitely try to teach my children to stay on track. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The ability to stay on track is maintaining a focus on the goal, and the goal is made realistic and attainable. The goal requires a desire to become emotionally invested and has a long term goal that is desired and a motivational force. The logic used by Yuliya is to focus the attention of students and relate what is being done into both short and long term markers to gauge staying on “track.”

### **Be Vocal**

The need to be vocal is identified by Yuliya to express concerns and being an active participant within the learning process. This differs from seeking resources, because it is a factor of engagement with others and dialogic in nature. Yuliya provided an example when she stated:

And be vocal you know if something is not what you like, say that; if it is, say that. You know, you wanna make sure you express your needs and concerns as well, you don't just have to take direction, you know, if you're confused ask questions, you know, be vocal about what you want and what you don't know and things like that. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The need to be a self-advocate is important to Yuliya in owning ones educational experience. The need to represent concerns and needs within the classroom is to not take direction and be a passive learner. This category is more personally expressive than staying focused as it includes the need to share with others.

### **Freirean Interpretation**

Black and Latin@ communities experience a higher incidence of poverty, unemployment, lower wages, and attrition. These unequal conditions have historical origins, but are explained by the interconnected nature between economic and educational systems that actively maintain and facilitate inequality. These systems influence and organize behavior, ways of knowing, ways of understanding, and making meaning that is culturally contextualized. These systems provide a reward and penalty system that places a hierarchy of cultural values. These values are found within the organizational practices, policies, and procedures. The more congruent a student is with the structures values, the easier it is to navigate. The opposite is also true. The less congruent they are, the more likely it will be

that they will be ignored or penalized. The current systems of operating makes assumptions on the cultural expectations and behaviors of others. The ability of a student with a nontraditional educational experience, history, worldview, or culture will have an increasingly greater challenge navigating a system. This is evident in the level of challenges experienced by diverse populations within the academic and economic systems. Many of the challenges from marginalized communities are identified as a lack of resources and fulfillment of basic needs.

The ability for an individual to be fully present and learn requires the satisfaction of the basic needs of the individual (Maslow, 1943; 1964; 1970). These needs are directly related to the learner's cultural understanding of the world and their place within the world. Paulo Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) identified the need to address the individuals unique needs using dialogue. The structural ways of interacting that impact the social dynamics of institutions also influence the ability to meet basic needs. The basic needs are identified within Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970) and provide a framework of understanding abstract notions of needs which may be culturally interpreted to the context of the individual.

Yuliya provides some details of how this relationship of basic needs with organizational structures facilitate and mitigate her academic achievement. After reviewing the transcripts and replayed the audio tapes and performing a thematic analysis, the data was interpreted with a Freirean framework into the three categories: collaboration through dialogue, dealing with difference in diversity, or altruistic concern for others. Within these categories, a student experienced a sense of exclusion and would have led to the discontinuation of college, if it weren't for interventions that kept their interest in completing an associate's degree.

### **Collaboration through Dialogue**

The educational experience between a student and teacher requires an exchange of ideas,

concepts, and information that must be communicated in ways that are meaningful to both teacher and student. The inclusion of additional students, such as that of a classroom, then adds an additional layer that includes the social ways of understanding and meaning that isn't addressed within current retention and persistence models of learning, but is indirectly recognized in Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970). The satisfaction of needs requires the communication of needs to be continually assessed within the learning process. The pedagogical framework of Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) identifies the current oppressive pedagogical practices, and explicitly identifies the need to construct a classroom that is a community of learners. This operates from a set of values that emphasize collaboration, inclusion, and diversity from the teacher with students and students between each other.

The need to be socially included and build a sense of a learning community is important to Freire, this ideology was also echoed explicitly by Yuliya within her narrative. The need to be expressive was identified by the term "vocal." Yuliya stated,

And be vocal you know if something is not what you like, say that; if it is, say that. You know, you wanna make sure you express your needs and concerns as well. You don't just have to take direction, you know. If you're confused ask questions, you know. Be vocal about what you want and what you don't know, and things like that. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya identifies the value of expressing yourself through the term "vocal" and is a piece of advice that she finds important for others in her situation to use. This advice, unfortunately, places the responsibility onto the student. The instructor isn't perceived as obligated to facilitate this within the current academic system, although it is identified as an important part of her advice for students. The need for inclusive environments is identified by Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) to include a holistic approach of the student, because the experiences carry into the learning environment in the shape of perceptions. These perceptions shape perception of self and others, and may impair learning indirectly.

The need for a positive and inclusive community within the classroom is not directly identified by Yuliya, but she does identify the need for a positive construct of self and community to be

successful. Yuliya explains the current social dynamics that exist within Midwestern City that exists and is negative towards her racial group.

“And my son is the complete opposite, and so I just want to, you know, refer to him, because he’s such a positive image, you know, in comparison to what most young men of color are going through in Midwestern City [pseudonym used]., Midwestern State [pseudonym used]. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The institution is recognized within this comment to facilitate a negative self-image of her family structure when it labels her family a “broken home.” She also identifies the “disadvantage” of her racial identification as “African-American.” The classroom is viewed by Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) as an opportunity to reshape the self-image of Yuliya and act as an opportunity for changing the social perceptions of others regarding Yuliya’s racial group. Freire explains the process of working with differences in greater detail within his dealing with diversity within the classroom.

### **Dealing with Difference in Diversity**

The awareness of self and others is an important feature within the learning process. The exchange of ideas, concepts, and information are culturally contextualized and culturally communicated between teacher and student, and between students with one another. Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) identifies the need to construct a classroom that suspends judgement, and recognizes the influences of life experiences on perceptions, understanding, and meaning making. This pedagogical attitude within the classroom alters the consciousness of all involved, the teacher and students are understood to be culturally contextualized and requires active listening and engagement within the process of learning.

Yuliya explained that many external factors impact the ability to be fully present within the learning process. She expressed a need for others to understand the challenges within the situational circumstances of her racial group membership. She doesn’t recognize the importance of the teacher or class to understand that circumstances of the student, and places the responsibility directly on the

students she advises to make choices in the now for the prospect of a better future. The theory by Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970) identifies the needs for basic needs to be satisfied, but Yuliya explains that basic needs must be unmet to succeed. She explained:

So much, there's so much, other things going on in their lives you know. They, they're worried about eating, their worried about clothing, you know what I mean. So education is kinda put in the back, you know, they just do it because they have to; as opposed to wanting to, and knowing that their future counts on it. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The need to understand that people experience life differently is the same need to understand that everyone can't be judged under the same standard of expectations. Freire is explicit in making the connection between social and academic systems of operation within the facilitation of oppression. He has stated, "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (Freire, 1985, p.122). The need to be inclusive and deal with diversity in the classroom is to build understanding and deconstruct the application of stereotypes.

Yuliya identifies the stereotypes of her community through the use of her son in comparison. She uses the conditions within the Midwestern City community to express clarification on the term "broken home." This clarification was prompted by me since I hadn't heard that term. This was her response was:

Just meaning single parent, you know, African-American we have such a disadvantage, especially within this community. Um, that most young men in my son's situation meaning single parent government assisted family are out here selling drugs, or having children, or dropping out. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

The living and social conditions impact the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of the individual within them. Yuliya identifies the context in which her group membership has social influences that are unique and require additional and consistent support to counteract. She gives an example using her son, in which she stated:

So he has his plan in order. Um, he has had a little stumble in ninth grade but since then he has done better and he has recognized it in himself what he wants to do and how education is

important to him instead of me just telling him you better do this you better do that you know what I mean, I guess from my direction or whatever. (Interview #1, 11/15/14)

Yuliya identifies her persistent actions to counter the negative cultural influences when she stated “he has recognized it in himself” as opposed to “me just telling him.” The need for understanding the cultural influences as different within the diversity of communities allows for understanding the difference approaches necessary for the educational advancement of all students. The concept of context is important in the suspension of judgement and mistreatment of students with students. The social implications of classmates can’t be ignored within a classroom. The microcosm of the classroom may perpetuate the out of classroom stereotypes and maintain cycles of poverty.

### **Altruistic Concern for Others**

The educational experience requires a valuing of the people within the classroom that is described by Freire as using fellowship and solidarity. The ability to construct fellowship and solidarity within a diverse classroom requires an understanding and recognition of the learning conditions that promote physical safety, feelings of belonging, and facilitate esteem as identified by Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970). These facets of the learning experience are included within this category because they are characteristics of exhibiting a legitimate concern for others. Freire identifies the need to engage students positively within a learning environment. He identifies the need for dialogue and cultural context of meanings within a classroom as elements that will facilitate a learning community and develop a sense of belonging through changing the ways of interacting. A community would develop a supportive environment and in turn develop confidence and personal, social, and academic growth within and between students.

Yuliya recognized the impact of a genuine concern from an institution about her academic performance and success during her experiences within the completion of her GED. She explained how it facilitated her learning experience as she described, “My experiences in completing the GED

program were pretty cool, GED Prep [pseudonym used], the program I went through, everybody was friendly and supportive and they wanted the best for me and they push me to do my best and I did”

(Interview #1, 11/15/14). The support was not described within her pursuit of her GED but her programs at Midwestern City Technical College (MCTC). She echoed the statements when she stated:

I don't know if it would be similar in any way except the teachers have been very supportive. Um, and encouraging, um, and that goes a long way with me. I'm a people person so I like to interact with people and even the teachers that I was having an issues with their teaching style, they were even positive and encouraging and supportive in making sure um, I do the best that I can in their classes. (Interview #1, 11/15/14).

Yuliya's pursuit of education is facilitated through the concept of positivity, support, and encouragement. She recognized within her narrative that she would continue at the technical college if it were possible to continue. She explained, “I don't think they have bachelor degree programs, I wish they did I just love the environment here it's so supportive, it really is” (Interview #1, 11/15/14). The feeling of support and encouragement within teacher interactions was explicitly identified as a motivator to perform well within coursework and persist.

## **Chapter 5: Mandisa**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter is about Mandisa and her experiences working towards an associate's degree after obtaining a GED. The story of Mandisa's educational experiences is multi-layered and will be broken into three approaches of interpretation and making meaning. The first is a generic framework of Mandisa's narrative to construct a base of understanding. The second is a thematic analysis of the narrative topics discussed within her story. The themes have been organized around the three types of questions that include: her challenges, ability to persist, and advice to others. The third and final interpretation is the meaning applied from a Freirean framework of understanding. This approach will provide meaning from the oppressive cultural, social, and organizational constructs that facilitated her challenges and were used within her persistence.

### **Mandisa's Introduction**

Mandisa self identifies as a female and a racial group member of Hispanic, Mexican American, and Chicana heritage. The two most salient identities recognized within the interview include being a mother and racial and cultural identity as a Hispanic/Mexican American/Chicana. She experienced half of her K-12 education within Southern State and the other half within Midwestern State, and obtained her GED and associated degree from Midwestern State. She attended Midwestern City Technical College and graduated the previous semester from a law enforcement related degree. She is enrolled within a four year university to continue her education within social services.

### ***Educational Life History***

Mandisa's family traveled to Midwestern State after her 5<sup>th</sup> grade year of elementary school from Southern State and moved directly to Midwestern City. She was placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes within Midwestern City although she wasn't considered ESL within Southern

State. Mandisa discontinued after completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade, although she was enrolled to attend 10<sup>th</sup>. She found employment with her parents as migrant workers. Mandisa found out about a GED program within Midwestern City Technical College that was aimed at assisting migrant workers complete their general education. It took about a year to complete due to inconsistent involvement within the GED program due to decreased involvement because of “personal stuff” (Interview #1, 12/14/2015).

Mandisa applied to her program one year after the completion of her GED. She took an assessment for course placement and required remediation. She started remediation over the summer to be prepared for program coursework. The math section was the only unsatisfied prerequisite for the required program math class, but was completed during the program during her final semester. She completed her Criminal Justice Associate’s degree within 2.5 years and is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Human Services.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The codes and themes that developed within Mandisa’s academic life history narrative were structured in part by the research questions. The questions framed the categories of interest to include: challenges, persistence, and advice to other students. As a result, Mandisa’s narrative structure had a similar organization. The codes derived are within similar organized structures of challenges, persistence, and advice to other students. The themes that were found between and within the codes were related to challenges, persistence, and advice and are discussed within the findings. The coding from the challenges include: educational environment, developmental education, and family and economic pressures. The topics around persistence were: employment, motivating environments, bilingual, and obligation, and her advice was: sacrifice, resources, and ask. The following is the context of the codes within her educational life story within the U.S. educational system.

## **Challenges**

Mandisa identified challenges within personal, economic, academic, and social categories within her educational attainment of a GED and associate's degree. The three systems often worked together to facilitate barriers and maintain her poverty leading to and after the completion of her associate's degree. She recognized the influence of poverty, educational pursuits, housing, food, and social stigmatization on her educational attainment and her educational attainment on her poverty, income, and employment. The following are the codes identified within her challenges: educational environment, developmental education, and family and economic pressures.

### **Educational Environment**

Mandisa identifies the educational environment as an important contributor in her academic performance. She combines the academic expectations and attitudes of institutions within her explanation of the educational environment that facilitated her academic withdraw from K-12. Mandisa explains her skills and abilities as initially strong. At Southern City she describes her academic skills as highly regarded by others and discussed her engagement in school with a greater intensity and appreciation. Mandisa used the example of a spelling bee when remarking about her academic performance prior to attending Midwestern City. The comments from her teacher and parents were used as testimonies about her academic potential and performance. She stated:

I won the spelling bee of the whole school kindergarten. The teacher told me I was the first student whoever wrote in his class. Like yeah, so I was a really good student, and my parents would always tell me like oh you're going to do something you're going to be become someone. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa then altered her story of prior success when she discussed her transition into Midwestern City. This environmental change was viewed as a catalyst in her performance. She explained that she was placed into a particular set of courses shortly after she arrived at Midwestern City in the sixth grade. It was the classification that led to her disengagement.

Okay, when I was in kindergarten up to fifth grade in Southern City [pseudonym used], Southern State [pseudonym used], I was a straight A student. The teachers would always tell me, like, I was a good writer and everything. Once I came in Midwestern State [pseudonym used], I was placed into ESL classes. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa's experience within the ESL classes were identified to be a negative experience in which she wasn't being appreciated for her abilities and was expected to perform at a lower standard than she was accustomed and felt less engaged and this eventually led to her desire to discontinue.

Mandisa explained this process as she stated:

Okay, so I was placed in ESL classes and it was a little challenging because I was like, taken out of classes. And I was with, I was with, other students that didn't know English. And once I was in high school, I was still in ESL classes here in Midwestern State [pseudonym used]. And I decided that I didn't wanna go to school anymore. Like, I wasn't being challenged or anything. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa also reflected on the comparison of her educational expectations when she was at Southern City compared to Midwestern City. She recalled:

Like, well, when I was in Southern City [pseudonym used], like in fifth grade, and I actually kinda did go to sixth grade and used, and we would do some type of Algebra. And up here in high school was, it was like nothing. Like, I wasn't being challenged in school, like academically. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The expectation of the educational environment was recognized to be associated with her racial and ethnic background. Mandisa was not explicit about mentioning a racial or ethnic discrimination, but did describe that behaviors of racial discrimination. She describes her placement within ESL classes within a larger racial/ethnic term as Latina, and later identifies specific behaviors of neglect towards a racially specific subgroup as Mexican American. Within the grouping of ESL students, she recognized a disparity between her knowledge and the treatment of her racial subgroup. Mandisa explained:

Also, um, there was other Latin@s like coming from different countries that just came here. Like more attention was given to them. Like if we were skipping class or whatever, and we were caught, it was, like they would receive all the support. Like, like advisors had their parents come in. And as for me, it was just, and I noticed this with other Mexican Americans

they were more, like they didn't even care. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The difference within the treatment of Latin@s from different countries was explained within the status of attention. Mandisa although could relate in some ways to immigrant Latin@s, was given less attention and guidance from institution.

Like a lot of attention was given to the, um, immigrants. And not to the ones that were, not to the ones like, that were like born here and going through the same things that the immigrants were going through. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa went into greater detail about her class experiences when she added the English fluency of her peers and her disengaged from the educational experience that imposed lesser expectations onto her. She recalled:

Again, I used to go to school and it was classes that it was just sitting down and listening to other people that just came to the country and were barely speaking English and I was just sitting there. It was, it was, I didn't like it. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The educational environment is an inclusive term that includes engagement and expectations. The decreased attention and placement in classes with students with lower English proficiency was described by Mandisa as highly correlated to racial and ethnic components of her identity. The cultural ways of knowing went beyond the language to include social interaction. The ways of interaction that facilitated feelings of belonging and learning were challenged within the attainment of her associate degree. Mandisa explains:

For example, like, if I didn't understand something and I would tell the teacher, you know, I didn't understand this. Well, just because it's you, like you're not. Like if, how did he say it. I had this teacher for 3 classes. If you're the only one, no. "I can not rephrase it because then everyone's going to want me to rephrase it." Like I understand it if it was an exam or something. But, like it's a paragraph or something that he stated and I stay after class. Like, well no because it's going to be, like, the rest are going to come, so. But, then I look around and I'm like, I'm the only one raising my hand. I don't understand, what you're saying. Like that was another challenge. (Interview #2, 1/20/2015)

The treatment or uncaring attitude of the institutions was identified within her narrative to facilitated feelings of disengagement and eventual discontinuation of high school. This experience was

replaced by a positive experience within the pursuit of her GED and later resurrected within her associate's degree. The perceived attitude of uncaring faculty provided additional academic challenges to Mandisa by unmet learning needs. She specified the lack of specialization by faculty to clarify or make meaning to adjust to her learning style or cultural ways of knowing.

### **Developmental Education**

During Mandisa's experiences in obtaining a GED and associate's degree, she identified challenges within her academic preparedness. The initial academic challenge was attributed to her mathematics. "The only challenge that I had about the GED, was the math portion. That was one of my challenges (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)." This was attributed the course selected and completed from high school. Mandisa explained:

It was the whole, well I dropped out of high school in ninth grade and basically didn't get any math throughout my middle school basically. So was like the Algebra and everything, it just challenging. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The math was identified as a topic of study needed for the GED, but once attention was applied and the certificate was attained, the next step became admissions into her desired program of Criminal Justice at Midwestern City Technical College. The preparation for her program required additional college preparatory classes. The math was identified as a deficiency and extended into her writing skills. Mandisa explains the need to prepare for her program coursework prior to starting the program:

So I took my placement exam [pseudonym used] and I did not meet the prerequisites for all of the classes. That was math, writing; and reading I did good. So I didn't even need it. Um, I had to finish those classes, developmental classes, before I even registered. So that same summer, um, I was working the third shift and I was also taking all these classes. And then, um, I barely made one of it, I barely passed one, because of my work schedule but I did and I started the program in the fall, it was like a month later. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Once admitted into the program and starting the program curriculum, she identified her academic challenges with her writing to continue. She started her program with an additional math course required prior to completing her program math class. Mandisa explained how the progression of

her math requirement didn't interfere with course progression, but was required to be satisfy the program degree requirements. She also identified the writing as the larger concern in her program.

Mandisa recalled:

Um, I guess my challenges in the college was the writing. Because, so even though I did really bad in math I took that math concepts. And it took, it was last semester that I took basic algebra, and now I'm taking my credit course, and I'm doing okay. So it's not bad at all. I think it was more the writing and the English part. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The extent of academic preparation was not only in the content knowledge but the cultural knowledge within the academic setting. Mandisa experienced a lack of academic knowledge within the cultural aspects of college. She explained:

Okay, so when I started the program, like midterms, I was crying. I went back to the Farmworker GED Prep Program [pseudonym used] and I was about to drop out of college. I couldn't, um, do the writing, well, I, I, yeah, the writing was different, college writing is different. But I remember going over there and telling her that I can not do it, um, she's one of the coordinators of the program, and her advice was you know that you gotta do what you gotta do. Take out the loans and go to the writing center, but just do it, like you can't just drop out. So I did, I took out the loans and, um, I started going to the writing center, and I didn't drop out of school. I past the class, and that was like my goal. Like to always go to the writing center for the least 30 minutes or whatever. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The educational preparation from the GED was insufficient to meet the needs of the rigor of college. Tutoring services were utilized to facilitate additional educational support. These resources were initially underutilized, but required additional social support from individuals in which positive educational experiences had already been established. The lack of emotional connection within the academic challenging courses required the search for advice and informal support from people instead of formal support from the classroom.

### **Family and Economic pressures**

The ability to complete high school was in part due to the influence of unmet economic needs and family values that prioritized the needs of the many above the individual. The ability to provide

for the family was seen in economic terms. These terms included the income of Mandisa's parents that was transient based on employment availability. Mandisa's parents were immigrant workers and had to relocate Mandisa and her sibling for job opportunities.

So I dropped out of high school at ninth grade. And since my parents are migrant workers, I was in and out of school to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I really didn't go to school at 10<sup>th</sup> grade, but I was enrolled. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa was expected to support the family unit and contribute economically to the household.

Mandisa stated the push to work from high school. She explained:

My family, okay, when I dropped out of school, they were more like motivating me to work. I don't know if, if that's important or not. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The financial need within the family unit placed education as less significant within her ability to contribute to the family. Mandisa began to work with her parents as migrant workers and earned a low wage. This economic support required a large time commitment to earn a livable wage. Mandisa over time had three children that required additional economic support within the family unit. She increased hours to support the added costs. The low wages from her jobs and trying to provide for her children was a challenge. She desired to increase her lifestyle and that of her children. She found the completion of her secondary education through the form of the GED as the possibility to do so.

We'll actually, my parents are migrant workers. When I dropped out of high school, I was a migrant worker. So, I was working with them and then one day I was seeing this Brochure. And they had the information on the GED, so I called it. Now I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back to school or, but I knew, I wanted, I wanted to go back to school. But I wasn't really, because I already had kids at this time, so I wasn't really. Like, I wasn't, how do you say it, I wasn't ready to go back to school because of my kids, my children. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa was conflicted with her decision to go back to school. She felt a parental obligation to provide economically for her children that was culturally driven by her parents' persistence to work.

Her family pressure and economic need were so intertwined that her parents saw supporting children as working and education as occupying valuable time that could be working for an increased income.

Mandisa explains this parental pressure when she started:

And then when I also did the GED, that was their motivation, like the advice from my parents. Like you need to work if you have kids, like you need to go to work. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

When asked about her kids and the need to work if you have kids statement, she elaborated her circumstance. Mandia explained that she was the sole financial provider for her children and responsible for them. Mandisa explained:

I did because I have three children and full custody of them, so it was hard, um, to try to be like a mom. [Sniffing] Okay I'm crying [tape paused]. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The pursuit of the GED had to meet the parental requirement to financial support her children and work around her employment schedule. She worked many hours over three different jobs so that she could fulfill the economic needs of the family and continue her education. She described her experience within the GED as a great challenge that almost didn't get completed.

Okay so with the GED, um, I finally registered and it took me a year to complete it because I was working three jobs at the time. Then, at the same time I was going through some personal, personal stuff. And finally it was, I believe it was May 25<sup>th</sup>, because that was the last day that you had to do your exam, because graduation was like in the next week. I, I just went in and did my math part and I passed it. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa's parents advised her to work and earn an income to support her three children, but the three jobs she maintained earned a low wage and was limited in employment opportunities without a high school diploma. After attaining the GED credential, it provided little economic relief. Her wage and employment advancements were unaffected. The idea to continue her education became the next objective so that she may potentially obtain a job with a higher income. This was a chance that would require additional sacrifices. She explained how her work after the GED interfered with the possibility of continuing her education. She used her typical work week to explain the stress on her and her family to make the decision to obtain an associate's degree. Mandisa explained:

Because I was working 12 hour shifts right when I was done with the GED. My children were at least, I'd have to say my oldest was five year old. And it was sad for me to come to work, to

come home. And not really be there, because my shifts were 12 hour shifts, seven days a week. And having you know, like having my parents watch them; it was hard for me, and it was hard for them too. So that made me say, okay you know what, this is it. Like, I need to go to school and it's gonna pay off later. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The decision to continue her education impacted the family unit and Mandisa. The interconnected nature of economic and family support was an immediate need that was seen as the benefits of the moment. The expectation to “pay off later” was one that required sacrifice from not only Mandisa but her family. Mandisa experienced a hard start at within her program but was able to receive a workstudy position that would alleviate the economic need with a higher wage. Mandisa explained this first semester transition as a hardship when she stated:

Okay, so then, like I was saying, I have children and stuff so it was kind of hard for me to, uh, go back to school. I mean in a program, because I had to work but then again I was offered a job in the college and that helped me a lot. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The increased economic benefits of the campus job provided a higher wage and was a convenience as it reduced travel time between work and school and increased the availability of time to study. The combination of family values and economic needs are considered highly related in that the economic contributions to the family was an expectation for a parent and considered above their perceived individual benefit education provided.

### **Persistence**

The persistence of Mandisa is explained as the emotional satisfaction obtained from reduced economic stress, positive social interactions, and feelings of belonging. The influential bodies within these interactions were from economic, social, and educational systems. The combination of interactions and resources were a network of positive experiences that facilitated the development of Mandisa's education from completing the GED to the completion of an associate's degree at Midwestern City Technical College (MCTC). Mandisa identified themes within: employment, motivational environment, bilingual, and sacrifice.

## **Employment**

The economic benefit of a job is important for Mandisa, but the location and type of job provides benefits within her narrative. The ability to reduce the amount of unproductive time such as travel, increases the time for efficiency. Mandisa explained the benefits of a student help job when she stated, “It help that I didn’t have to get, I didn’t have to work three jobs anymore to make ends meet” (Interview #1, 12/14/2015). The campus job paid a higher wage, and she was able to reduce hours, but it wasn’t sufficient to meet the needs of her family.

First, it was student help, which it wasn’t. I mean it was okay because they’re flexible hours and I was also receiving assistance so that helped me to make payments and in my bills gas and stuff. But I still had to pull out all of my loans to make ends meet. And, I was finally offered a job with the college as an actual, um, like a PSRP. So that helped me. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The ability to become a PSRP also known as a staff member at Midwestern City Technical College is an employment status that provides health insurance and additional fringe benefits that aren’t available to student help without additional fees and charges. The type of job is a factor within the decision of employment for Mandisa because it comes with added features that help her and her children with resources in addition to an increase in income.

## **Motivating Environment**

Mandisa demonstrated appreciation for the diversity within her GED experiences. She identified age to be an important factor in seeing herself capable of completing the GED. She explained how the diversity of student’s ages within the classroom was motivational and allowed her to see herself succeed. She explained:

Um a GED class actually has students of all ages, and, like seeing. Like being in a class with a person the age of my dad, and that was really motivating. It was, like he’s here, I’m here, we can do it. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa also elaborated on the inclusiveness of the classroom environment to include

behaviors. The engagement of the teachers was identified as motivational and provided a feeling of belonging. Mandisa stated:

The teachers were really nice, and the staff. They would always guide me and talk to me. For example, there was a time, it took me a year to complete, but there was a timely I took off 4 to 5 months because I had to work. And I mean they were really worried like, oh you need to comeback. And, while I was completing my GED I also got other, some of my friends, to go get their GED with me too. They graduated too. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The feeling of inclusiveness within an environment has an important component of diversity and sense of belonging in which Mandisa extended to “friends” and was able them to complete their GED also. The ability to feel like someone belongs and is able to complete a level of education is impacted by the visual representation of people that motivate Mandisa and the direct concern from the teacher.

### **Bilingual**

Language is important to Mandisa as it is a part of her family heritage and a part of her ability to understand and making meaning within the learning process. This format of learning was expressed early within her educational development. Mandisa attributes this to her formal educational training within Southern City.

I think it has a lot to do with my kindergarten up to fifth grade because my teachers were bilingual. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

When asked to elaborate bilingual education and if the classes were in both Spanish and English, she elaborated:

No, they were actually in English but if we had questions we could ask the teacher in Spanish whenever we felt comfortable. But yeah, the other books and everything was in English. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The ability to engage in Spanish and English provided the transition of thoughts and concepts within a format that facilitated understanding and made meaning for Mandisa. Unable to understand this experience, I inquired about the experience itself, she provided some detail yet was uncertain

herself how to explain it fully.

It's like when you read the paragraph, like you can kinda also read in Spanish. I mean you can read it in English, but you can also understand it in Spanish. Like I don't know how my brain functions. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The environment to use her bilingual skills was provided by her ability to complete the GED.

She explains how she was able to succeed based on her bilingual experiences between the learning experiences to prepare for the tests.

I studied here in Midwestern City Technical College [pseudonym used] and the Migrant Farmworker [pseudonym used] program. It helps migrant workers, and took the classes in Spanish but I took the exams in English. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The learning style of Mandisa's within her self-proclaimed bilingual learning style was acknowledged within her experiences in obtaining a GED from the migrant farmworker program. The ability to transition back in forth between English and Spanish provided and reaffirmed her cultural way of knowing and understanding within the program. She contributes the ability to complete her GED to her this cultural exchange in Spanish and English. Unfortunately, things changed when she had to take the classes from your Criminal Justice Program in English. Mandisa explains:

And my other experience was, like there was no more like if I had a question I can go up to the teacher and ask and Spanish it had to be in English now. That was another challenge it was experiencing, like no more Spanglish, it had to be English, English, English.

The expectation to only speak and write in English provided some challenges in understanding and making meaning for Mandisa. It was when she was able to learn in both Spanish and English that she completed her GED. The accomplishment of her GED, then led to the idea that further completion of education was a possibility. The positive interactions within her College Prep Program began to influence her self-efficacy and change her mindset to a motivational and constructive approach that facilitated her educational completion of an associate's degree.

### **Sacrifice**

Mandisa expressed the need to push herself to meet her academic goals. The two concepts of

goals and pushing herself were merged together within her explanation of her strategy of sacrifice to be successful. She used the story of her persistence within her advice to students and is a motif within her narrative. The use of an internal source of motivation within her goal setting is identified as important to persist.

Um, if, okay with this new GED, my advice to them is that, it's a positive change. Like it will help you more with college, and overcome your fears and you know, just show up to class and do your work. And make a sacrifice once in a while, I guess. Sleep late. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The concept of a sacrifice is connected to Mandisa pushing herself. She states "push myself" when she identifies having to sleep late to meet her academic goals. The example provided was regarding the sacrifice of sleep, a basic need to have enough time to study.

I mean, I push myself, like I had to sleep late. Like honestly, and sleeping at 2 in the morning, because I was pushing myself. Like, yeah. And I was embarrassed to ask people, what is a GPA and why does it matter. And when I finally asked my boyfriend and he was laughing, and he helped me. He was like okay, and he helped me. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The sacrifice of sleep was intended to increase the time available for studying and improve her GPA. Mandisa was employed during her schooling, a full-time student and was a caregiver to three children. A theme within this category was the lack of knowledge of academic terms like GPA and cultural attitudes regarding the terms. She accounted the first time she became aware of the term GPA and identified additional goals in which she pushed herself to attain. She recalled:

Okay, and I also, my first semester, I met new people and at the beginning of the new semester they asked me oh what was your GPA last semester. And honestly I didn't know what a GPA was. Like it was nobody ever talked to me about in high school are anything, and the GED like really, they really didn't about GPA or anything. So they tell me it was like a 3.5 for them or something, and my GPA, I believe was like a 2.7 something, I don't remember. So that was my next goal. That I was going to pick up my GPA next semester, because I wanted to be on the dean's list. And ever since I push myself, and I've been on the dean's list every semester now, I even made it into the honor society. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa set goals that were short term attainable goals that led to larger goals, like GPA to being on the dean's list. The overall concept of pushing herself was a sacrifice such as the reduction of

sleep used to increase study time. The academic performance of Mandisa are many little sacrifices leading to many goals that increased in concepts from the immediate with her GPA to being on the dean's list and honor society.

### **Advice**

Mandisa identifies three concepts within her advice. She identifies the importance to complete a post-secondary education, staying focused, and being vocal within one's educational experience to persist. Mandisa summarized her advice towards the end of the narrative the links all components of her advice. She stated:

I tell them, um, as long as, well I know that everybody has a different story. It's just if you really put yourself into it, you'll succeed. And it's really important not only for you but for children, because I recruit migrant workers. You know, and they love when we go out there actually, like you like, you worked in the farms and stuff and you can relate to them and they love that. And actually I got in a lot of students. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015).

### **Sacrifice**

The continuation of education is seen as an investment that requires a sacrifice of conveniences within Mandisa's worldview. She explains that the pursuit of education is a hardship that is worth the challenge. Mandisa provided advice to other students in her situation by stating:

Um, if, okay with this new GED, my advice to them is that, it's a positive change. Like it will help you more with college, and overcome your fears and you know, just show up to class and do your work. And make a sacrifice once in a while, I guess. Sleep late. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The need to prioritize education over basic needs such as sleep is identified as an important component is attaining degree completion. Mandisa is currently employed to support the academic advancement of migrant workers in the pursuit of a GED and this is one of her words of advice to her students that was incorporated into her narrative. She elaborates on the need for sacrifice to include selflessness, especially if you have children. The need to focus on the family is a strong value that extends beyond her parents and is echoed in her own behavior. Mandisa explains this advice when she

talks to migrant farmworkers and promotes the Migrant Farmworker Program:

Um, as long as, well I know that everybody has a different story. It's just if you really put yourself into it, you'll succeed. And it's really important not only for you, but children. Because I recruit migrant workers, you know, and they love when we go out there actually. Like you, like, you worked in the farms and stuff, and you can relate to them. And they love that. And actually I got in a lot of students. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa operates from a worldview that prioritizes a social obligation to provide to her family and racial/ethnic community. The sense of belonging is highly intertwined within a more collectivistic approach to identity and concepts of self. She is empowered by working with others within her racial and ethnic community and identifies the need to put the needs of the group over the needs of the individual. She attributes putting yourself into it and making sacrifice as being able to make the needs of the individual as secondary to a goal and in her case, her family.

## **Resources**

The use of campus resources was explicitly given as advice by Mandisa to other students in a similar circumstance. She described the impact of the writing center within her narrative of academic success and later reiterated that it is a useful resource to students to within their academic experience.

Don't be afraid to go to the writing center or any of the services the school provide it's because they actually do help you. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

The use of formal campus resources were not initially utilized by Mandisa within her narrative. It wasn't until the first semester of her program that Mandisa felt discouraged and sought tutoring. She also utilized informal assistance in the form of social support from the program she obtained her GED from. She provided within her narrative support for the use of writing center resources.

Okay, so when I started the program, like midterms, I was crying. I went back to the Farmworker GED Prep Program [pseudonym used] and I was about to drop out of college. I couldn't, um, do the writing, well, I, I, yeah, the writing was different, college writing is different. But I remember going over there and telling her that I can not do it, um, she's one of the coordinators of the program, and her advice was you know that you gotta do what you gotta do. Take out the loans and go to the writing center, but just do it, like you can't just drop out. So I did, I took out the loans and, um, I started going to the writing center, and I didn't drop out

of school. I past the class, and that was like my goal. Like to always go to the writing center for the least 30 minutes or whatever. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

Mandisa's advice was echoed in her narrative. She has advocated for the use of resources and has been a resource in supporting students from the Farmworker GED Prep Program where she now works. The main resource was academic support which correlates to the cultural ways of learning that differed within the school and required Mandisa to externally search for ways to learn the cultural ways of knowing and being within the educational setting.

### **Ask**

Mandisa identifies the need to ask as an important part of advice to students within a similar life circumstance and academic experience. The need to initiate a conversation with the teacher was an important aspect of successfully navigating her Criminal Justice Program. She explained:

And if you're not understanding something asked the teacher, don't just go and do the homework assuming that you know what the teacher wants you to do and not knowing really. Just don't be afraid to ask questions, talk to an advisor. (Interview #1, 12/14/2015)

This comment identifies that a student may not contribute within a classroom setting, because they may not be certain and "ask questions." This is further elaborated as a sense of discomfort by the student by the use of the term "fear" as a part of her advice. The feelings of uncertainty and fear would inhibit student involvement within a classroom and the personal challenges. Mandisa's advice is to students to advocate for themselves. She also provides the suggestion to talk to an advisor to receive additional support beyond the classroom if necessary.

### **Freirean Interpretation**

Black and Latin@ communities experience a higher incidence of poverty, unemployment, lower wages, and attrition. These unequal conditions have historical origins, but are explained by the interconnected nature between economic and educational systems that actively maintain and facilitate inequality. These systems influence and organize behavior, ways of knowing, ways of understanding,

and making meaning that is culturally contextualized. These systems provide a reward and penalty system that places a hierarchy of cultural values. These values are found within the organizational practices, policies, and procedures. The more congruent a student is with the structures values, the easier it is to navigate. The opposite is also true. The less congruent they are, the more likely it will be that they will be ignored or penalized. The current systems of operating makes assumptions on the cultural expectations and behaviors of others. The ability of a student with a nontraditional educational experience, history, worldview, or culture will have an increasingly greater challenge navigating a system. This is evident in the level of challenges experienced by diverse populations within the academic and economic systems. Many of the challenges from marginalized communities are identified as a lack of resources and fulfillment of basic needs.

The ability for an individual to be fully present and learn requires the satisfaction of the basic needs of the individual (Maslow, 1943, 1964, 1970). These needs are directly related to the learner's cultural understanding of the world and their place within the world. What is identified by Paulo Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) is the need to address the individual needs of students by using dialogue. The structural ways of interacting that impact the social dynamics of institutions also influence the ability to meet basic needs. The basic needs are identified within Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970) and provide a framework of understanding abstract notions of needs which may be culturally interpreted to the context of the individual.

Mandisa provides some details of how this relationship of basic needs with organizational structures facilitate and mitigate her academic achievement. After reviewing the transcripts and replayed the audio tapes and performing a thematic analysis, the data was interpreted with a Freirean framework into the three categories: collaboration through dialogue, dealing with difference in diversity, or altruistic concern for others. Within these categories, a student experienced a sense of

exclusion and would have led to the discontinuation of college, if it weren't for interventions that kept their interest in completing an associate's degree.

### **Collaboration through Dialogue**

The ability to communicate in a form that recognized both her Spanish and English ways of communicating with instructors was important to Mandisa. She had been successful within her educational experiences prior to attending Midwestern City's K-12 system when given the opportunity to speak using her Spanish to teachers. When she was required to speak in only English, this impacted her communication style, and when placed with other students that mainly knew Spanish, the level of engagement became lower. The decreased communication between instructor and student facilitated a lack of interest within her educational pursuits.

Mandisa attributes her educational success after her K-12 experience to her bilingual teachers within the Farmworker GED Prep Program. She was explicit to identify her teachers in K-12 as bilingual teachers, and when asked to elaborate, she explains her ability to ask a question in Spanish and be understood as important in recognizing her contribution. She clarifies that all of the materials in the class were in English. The only Spanish used was during her communication to the teacher and that she didn't understand why it helped, but that it was the way in which her brain worked.

The exchange of English and Spanish also existed within the Farmworker GED Prep Program that provided study materials in Spanish, while the final examination were taken in English. She had an integration of English and Spanish ways of knowing, learning, and making meaning that weren't always appreciated. Her ability to achieve the GED using Spanish and English allowed her to learn in ways she was comfortable and facilitated her confidence and ability to improve her English for her program.

The community built from the Farmworker GED Prep Program and her ability to speak and ask

questions in the ways most comfortable to her, increased her feelings of inclusion within the educational setting. This form of respect for her way of being and understanding within her educational experiences translated to her belonging within the educational system. It is within the initial experiences of the GED that allowed Mandisa to interact with school in a different way that was constructive and supportive that she became empowered and pursued her associate's degree.

### **Dealing with Difference in Diversity**

The ability for an institution to work with diverse populations impacted Mandisa's decisions to remain or depart from her schooling. The interactions identified as significant within the classroom and educational interactions included: language, culture, and age. The negative interactions from high school and the positive interactions from the Farmworker GED Prep Program influenced her understanding and meaning within college experiences.

The limited linguistic ways of knowing and communicating within her Midwestern City education limited her involvement within the classroom. She identified the cultural expectations within her schooling that were set lower for her as she transitioned into easier work intended for students with lower level English skills, called ESL classes. This led to the discontinuation of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, but it wasn't until a Farmworker GED Prep Program that acknowledged her form of learning and communicating, within an educational setting, that she was able to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion at school. The ability to target education to the linguistic needs of students like Mandisa and setting academic expectations for certificate completion proved to be successful and impactful to Mandisa. Her attainment of the GED led to the personal expectation to attain an associate's degree from Midwestern City Technical College.

The ability to see students of different ages within the Farmworker GED Prep Program provided Mandisa a sense of possibility. She was able to see that she wasn't the only one working towards

completing her education and was inspired. The inclusion of visual diversity within the classroom is one factor of other considerations that include the interaction between faculty and students. Mandisa expressed academic challenges that were based on her interaction with faculty. She was unable to elicit clarification from lectures by the instructor within her associate program and this led to seek assistance outside of the class. Luckily, it was mitigated by the positive experiences and external support from other faculty, students, and Farmworker GED Prep Program.

The cultural ways of knowing and collective family knowledge regarding post-secondary education were limited within Mandisa's family. She identified academic cultural practices that weren't familiar to her such as a G.P.A. that is connected to such things as being on the Dean's List and a part of the Honor Society. It was through interacting with other students and obtaining that cultural knowledge that are a part of the education system, that she was able to understand and interact in ways that would benefit her educational standing. The apprehension experienced by Mandisa about not knowing what a GPA is related to the feelings of judgement by others. The need to construct environments free of judgement and awareness of the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of others within the classroom setting would have anticipated these feelings and behaviors.

### **Altruistic Concern for Others**

A constructive, empowering, and supportive learning environment facilitated Mandisa's success within the Farmworker GED Prep Program and at Midwestern City Technical College. The feelings of concern for her well-being, future, and educational goals was an important factor for her to pursue, persist, and complete her education. The various forms of support provided confidence in Mandisa that she had value, room to grow, and was capable to complete her educational goals.

Mandisa provided examples of a contact person from the Farmworker GED Prep Program that instilled a sense of belonging that led to the completion of the GED. Mandisa considered not returning

as it conflicted with her work schedule and had little time available. The program coordinator facilitated her return, as Mandisa described how the program, “were really worried” when she stopped attending for a period of time. She also identified how instructors would assist her, “they would always guide me and talk to me.” The sense of solidarity and fellowship increased her sense of belonging (Maslow, 1943, 1964, 1970). This experience has since been paid forward as she has employment within the program and recruits other migrant farmworkers to complete the GED.

The experiences and feelings of neglect from Mandisa’s K-12 experiences facilitated her departure from school. It was evident within her narrative as the tape had to be stopped a total of four times, that it remained a highly emotional topic. She gathered her thoughts and feelings while apologizing for her feelings. I as the interviewer would acknowledge the tears and state it was an experience, I was sorry she had and that she has done so much since that she should be proud of. The need to recognize her as a participant, a person, and see her holistically also fell on me. The events of her past were very present in the interview and I would assume will always be.

Mandisa was marginalized by being unrecognized, unsupported, and undervalued within educational systems. It is essential to recognize that Mandisa has a history and current experiences that need to be addressed with instructors and institutions when providing services or within the learning process. Her modes of learning that construct her sense of self include her learning style, linguistics, prior knowledge, and prior experiences. The ability to care for a student requires attention be given to the student in their entirety and includes the collection of experiences, feelings, thoughts, and history.

## **Chapter 6: Aziza**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter is about Aziza and her experiences working towards an associate's degree after obtaining a GED. The story of Aziza's educational experiences is multi-layered and will be broken into three approaches of interpretation and making meaning. The first is a generic framework of Aziza's narrative to construct a base of understanding. The second is a thematic analysis of the narrative topics discussed within her story. The themes have been organized around the three types of questions that include: her challenges, ability to persist, and advice to others. The third and final interpretation is the meaning applied from a Freirean framework of understanding. This approach will provide meaning from the oppressive cultural, social, and organizational constructs that facilitated her challenges and were used within her persistence.

### **Aziza's Introduction**

Aziza self identifies as a Latina female and is in her early forties. The two most salient identities recognized within the interviews are being an immigrant and living in poverty. She was born in Columbia, but has been in the U.S. for over 17 years. Aziza graduated with a high school diploma from Columbia and moved to the U.S. to obtain employment and economically assist her family in Columbia. She pursued a Spanish version of the General Educational Development (GED) certificate and entered two programs at MCTC, the first was a medical translator technical diploma and the second was a human services associate's degree. She desires to improve her economic status and has a passion for helping children. Currently, she is enrolled within a four-year institution and intends to obtain a bachelor's degree in social services. The following are the themes of her educational life story in relation to her challenges, ability to persist, and advice to others within the U.S. educational system.

## **Thematic Analysis**

The codes and themes that developed within Aziza's academic life history narrative were structured in part by the research questions. The questions framed the categories of interest to include: challenges, persistence, and advice to other students. As a result, Aziza's narrative structure had a similar organization. The codes derived are within similar organized structures of challenges, persistence, and advice to other students. The themes that were found between and within the codes were related to challenges, persistence, and advice and are discussed within the findings. The coding from the challenges narrative included: economic, developmental education, and cultural interpretations. The topics around persistence are: resources, self-awareness, and obligation. Her advice was to complete a post-secondary education, set goals, know yourself, and remain positive. The following is the context of the codes within her educational life story within the U.S. educational system.

### **Challenges**

Aziza explicitly identified thematic challenges within personal, economic, academic, and social categories within her educational attainment of a GED and associate's degree. The three systems often worked together to facilitate barriers and maintain her poverty leading to and after the completion of her associate's degree. She recognized the influence of poverty, educational pursuits, housing, food, and social stigmatization on her educational attainment and her educational attainment on her poverty, income, and employment. Aziza's challenges within the pursuit of an associate's degree were coded within: economic, developmental education, and cultural interpretations.

### **Economic**

The pursuit of Aziza's education required economic support through employment to maintain the cost of living. She worked up to three low paying jobs to pay the mortgage on the house she

owned. The decision to pursue an education was to increase her economic standing. Unfortunately that decision had a negative impact in her ability to pay for utility bills, food, transportation, repair bills, and supporting family. The use of financial aid award was insufficient to support her basic needs and employment was necessary to supplement her economic needs. The following excerpts identify the impact of here economic need for employment and therefore on her academics.

The first economic problem identified within her narrative is during the pursuit of her GED. Aziza took a class to prepare for each of the five subject tests. The classwork had to function around her job schedule. She identifies the flexibility of her education around work as both a challenge and asset. She was confident she would pass since she had already completed a high school equivalent and was taking the tests in her native language, Spanish. She stated:

So I was working third shift and that was hard for me to go to school. So I wasn't going to early class. So I went in for the first test and I passed the test, so I went for more classes to complete the second test and I passed every test the first time I didn't have to repeat any tests. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The preparatory classes were used to refresh her content knowledge and framed as a positive experience, but she recognized the inability to attend all classes. She stated, "My experience was good, I wasn't able to go to class every time because at that time I was working 80 hours a week" (Interview #1, 1/14/2015). The need to work while in school was identified at each educational juncture within her narrative. Her need for employment was driven by an economic need to maintain her home and all expenses in having a home.

The successful completion of the GED empowered her to pursue a one year technical diploma within the Medical Interpreter Program. Due to unfortunate events, she was laid off and decided to continue her education since she would have some assistance to pursue it. The expectation was to obtain a short term program that may improve her economic status so she could return to work and improve her economic situation. She received a little economic support from unemployment and

FAFSA was used to pay for tuition, books, and minor expenses. Aziza recalled:

My challenges was in the beginnings that I didn't make the interpreter program. The government was helping me with unemployment because I was laid off from work. And on.[sniffing] They were helping me with a portion of the tuition for school but the challenges was, you know, plus the stress that I own a house, that I have to live with less income. The income I was making. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The economic aid from unemployment was insufficient and Aziza sought employment to increase satisfy her basic needs. Aziza's didn't have sufficient assistance to pay for her bills, housing, transportation, and repair bills. She identifies the need to sacrifice many of her basic needs while struggling with schooling and identified the impact of her economic situation on multiple facets of her life. The challenges were throughout both the technical diploma and associate's degree. She summarized her loss of material possessions, health, and basic needs as her English became fragmented and we had to stop the tape twice so she could gather her thoughts and emotions. She explained in a shaken voice:

Ah, because working part time, own a house, helping my family in Columbia too, because I was sending money to them. [sniffing] So I have to cash my 401K to be able to make my payments, and um, even I had a few times, I have to decide either I put gas in my car or go to school, or buy food. [crying] so, I didn't, I didn't have, [crying] am a few days of my heat in my house broke down, and that was part of my challenges going to school and frustrated because I have no heating at home. So, I call the repairman and I tell them it's freezing in my house and I have no money, and I don't know how to fix it. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The need to support herself through the completion of both of her post-secondary educational experiences was at the cost of her investments and assets. She placed all of her faith on the fact that her education would increase economic opportunities for her. She was able to endure the experience because she felt she would be rewarded, and stated this as advice to other students. Aziza had little economic power to her name during until her second year of the Human Services Program where she would find employment again, but it would be a blessing in disguise. She found a job to accommodate her schooling but found that her schooling, unpaid internship, and work began to take most of her time

and interfered with her sleep. She explained the impact of her daily routine during the second semester into the second year of her Human Services Program:

The first year that I start my associates. Probably the first semester I would say. I was still unemployed and after the first semester I had no more unemployment. So with all the challenges that I had absolutely no income, so uh, I had to work and find a job. Um, So, I end up finding a job where I worked 3:00 AM to 7:30 AM and then come home shower, go to school, because I was a full-time student. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The daily routine required employment for income and finding a job that was flexible with her educational hours, meant that she was able to support her cost of living but sacrificed the availability of time within her scheduled week. The amount of time required to go to school, do homework, work at a job, and do her unpaid internship would ultimately leave her with little time to care for her basic need of sleep. The extent in which she was able to catch up on her sleep led to some creative ways to make up the time for sleep. Aziza explained:

It was the same working those hours going to school fulltime and then go to the internship so I was sleeping just not enough hours because I had to work part time and go to school fulltime and go to internship. So sometimes in between classes I was sleeping in my car you know to have enough sleep. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The need to work was for economic reasons, but money wasn't the direct issue. It was what money could provide in services that meant the most to Aziza. During her last year of the Human Services Program, she experienced an unforeseen expense with her utilities. Aziza stated:

So, I didn't, I didn't have, um a few days of my heat in my house broke down, and that was part of my challenges going to school and frustrated because I have no heating at home" (Interview #1, 1/14/2015).

The economic challenges identified within Aziza's narrative were framed to identify the lack of resources and support in regards to her living and social conditions. The economic support needed to maintain her home, cost of food, transportation, and support her parents led to the impediment of her ability to satisfy basic needs. Aziza identified these outcomes of having insufficient economic assistance as the important factor in impeding her education. The need to pursue a job detracted from

time available for schooling, but was a necessity for to prioritize her basic needs which meant that some would go unfulfilled.

### **Developmental Education**

The General Education Development certificate didn't prepare Aziza for her admission into the Medical Interpreter Program and the prerequisites for the classes within the program. The choice to take the GED in Spanish didn't develop her English skills, but did provide access to a post-secondary education. Aziza explicitly recognized the need for additional academic preparation for admissions and identified a frustration on her lack of college readiness for coursework. Aziza explained:

At the beginning I felt like I couldn't do this because I didn't know English so I was learning the language of the same time that your learning to write papers for college, so, was a challenging part. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The readiness for the program is defined by her preparedness for admissions and placement scores that will lead to the required math and English for her Medical Interpreter Program. She found her academic work to be challenging since the Spanish GED was recognized to satisfy admissions, but not preparing her for program classes.

Um, I would say at the beginning I went to do my placement test [pseudonym used] and the scores they were terrible, terrible, that I just cried when I see it. They say that I have to do this, and this, and this before I can start credit classes and before I can complete a program. And so I saw my goal to complete a program was about 10 years away from me, and I say no. This is not possible. And then I did the compass test again, and I did a little bit better. And I tried one more time, the compass test, and the third time was a little better. So, so, after that I'd end up taking academic writing 4, 5, and 6, and taking pre-algebra. So I take one full semester of noncredit classes. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The preparation for academic work were within non-credit courses that were not financial aid eligible, but required to be taken to enroll in classes within the curriculum of the program. Once successfully completing the prerequisite courses, she began to prepare for her first academic semester within the program. The challenges with learning the English language in an academic setting for the first time was primarily based on her vocabulary. Aziza had previous lower paid jobs were in settings

where she was able to use her Spanish and didn't require a mastery of English. She recognizes the academic challenges during her first program with vocabulary during homework. She recalled:

And so I said OK, I will completed the technical diploma which was 16 credits at that time and that was a one year program because it was class after class. So that was challenging because there were simple words as canister, when I was in the Medical Translator Program, where I don't know what that means. And I check the dictionary and I think this is too simple, and I don't even know this word. So that was challenging to do homework. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

She also explains the frequent use of a dictionary during her educational experience in developing her English vocabulary. Aziza's need to refer to a dictionary was a resource but utilized a great deal of her time.

Reading, like I say most of the time I have to reach twice so I can understand. At the beginning when I read, I had the dictionary with me the whole time because probably half of the things I was reading I did not really understand what it meant. And now, I understand most of the words and there's a few words that I really don't understand what it means. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The need to reference a dictionary for vocabulary was not the only preparatory work needed to complete her classwork and homework. She would also perform preparatory research on a given topic prior to beginning an assignment. Aziza didn't have the cultural knowledge that is a part of the academic experience to understand the context in which the instructor required the assignment. Aziza explains this research when she said:

So sometimes I have to, if I have a topic, I also. I always go and read on the internet and read more about the topic, to have some idea about the topic before I start writing down and I start typing down. So that way, it give me, like an easy way, to, to know exactly how to develop my paper. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The background research on the topic was important to capture any cultural context that wasn't experienced by Aziza, considering her prior experiences were in another country. She found the use of resources to review her paper after writing a draft important in the process of writing. Aziza had her work reviewed by the writing center at Midwestern City Technical College. She notes the extent to which changes were necessary to improve her writing. She explained:

At the beginning that probably was, very, a lot of work for the people in the writing center. Because when I go with my paper, after they make all of the corrections, you can hardly see what I type, because everything I typed had corrections. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

Aziza identified the level of reading and writing skills to be lower than the desired level. The reading of material twice, use of a dictionary, and use of the writing center were all needed to supplement the class time learning. Aziza's education was impacted by the level of literacy within her English and computer skills.

Um, computer is one of my challenges because I'm left handed so I have difficulty using my two hands for typing so very, very, slow typer. Because and I was going to school in my own country and the computers had just started. (Interview #1, 1/14/201)

The use of technology within an academic setting has increased over the years, and was a challenge for Aziza, of whom hadn't had much experience in using computers, typing, or other computer aided or generated services. The academic preparation needed by Aziza involved various stages of the learning process that included additional time to: understand the vocabulary, understanding the cultural context of an assignment, typing skills to write papers, and need for a writing center to review her work. The time needed in this process was considerable. Her academic experience within both programs have had an expectation within language, culture and technology that required Aziza to spend more time to preparing and review her work. Time of which was limited and necessary for employment to earn a livable wage.

### **Cultural Interpretation**

Cultural interpretations were made within the educational experiences of the GED and the completion of associate's degree. The cultural interpretations varied from the culturally contextualized texts within tests and assignments to the interactions between her and other people. These challenges between her and others were the most severe within the pursuit of her Medical Interpreter Program. Aziza would interpret her actions within the narrative from the perspective of others regarding her

behavior. This approach stressed her need to be seen positively by others and avoidance and preference to not be seen negatively.

The first recognition of a cultural interpretation was within the text of the Spanish GED tests. Aziza identified the assessments to be a challenge to understand because the Spanish used within the GED had elements that didn't pertain much to a native Spanish speaking cultural background. She explains the word choices used within the exam caused a change in meanings and translation. She also recognized the diversity within the Spanish speaking cultural groups. Although this didn't impact her performance, Aziza was still able to pass the tests. She identified the impact of cultural elements within the assessments that would alter the understanding and meaning making within the text. Aziza recalled her experience:

Sometimes you know, I don't know if they not. Not everyone is like a native Spanish speaker, they can change a little, a few words. It probably is complicated to understand the meaning, you know, like if it is not exactly. Like, because the Spanish that they had in the GED is more like basic. Spanish like, for, forget the whole Spanish community, the language from my own country has a few words different, so that probably was what, was the big deal, but it wasn't very difficult. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The tests would be the only direct reference to cultural texts, but the most impactful to her were the cultural interactions with others. Aziza's experience within a classroom interaction left a lasting impression, she felt devalued with her cultured way of being. She explained an experience where she was required to read to the class for an assignment to translate Spanish to English and vice versa. She became very aware of her behavior and how her behavior was perceived by others from the experience. She would later reference it three times, which is a testament to how salient this was within her educational experience and desire to anticipate how she would be perceived by others. Aziza recalled:

My experience in the first program is something that really kind of bothers me. When I was in the medical interpreter program I had terrible reading and English, but I did have two classmates that I had to read. When I have to go in front and read in English to the class there were two classmates, Latinas, but they grew up here so they don't have accents. So their Spanish and English was perfect. So as soon as I start reading, they started laughing about my

accent; that my accent was terrible. [started to tear and sniffle] So I did get very embarrassed, that when I got home I feel like quitting this college, you know. I wanna drop classes and drop the program, because I embarrassed. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

She explains this interaction as a “worry” and a sense of being “embarrassed.” This language would extend to future interactions within the college. One such interaction would be the writing center as a resource for improving her writing skills that is offered at the college. She was self-conscious about her behavior and how it would be interpreted by the people at the writing center. This internal interpretation would become another barrier that stemmed from her cultural values to seek the assistance of another. Aziza gave an example of this internal dialogue when she remarked:

So, uh, to be honest, sometimes I feel, I would say. I feel embarrassed, [reference to writing center employees] going oh here she is again. I know they were very nice and willing to help me, but because of my culture or something, I feel embarrassed asking for so many favors. It doesn't matter if it was a part of the job and they were very nice helping me. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

Aziza would also put additional stress on herself to perform as an equivalent to the U.S. born students that completed high school in her program. She didn't want special treatment because of her cultural, linguistic, and educational circumstance. She also framed it as a fault, which implies blame and further emphasizes the desire to be perceived as an equal to others under the standards of the other students. Aziza stated within her narrative:

It's my opinion that I'm a GED student but it's not the teachers' fault, so I should be at the same level as the other students because they don't need any special with me because I'm from another language. I have to be able to be in the same language so it's not an excuse for me to say all look at her she just doesn't know the language so she turns in the paper this way.

The perception of being at a lower level in ability, knowledge or skill was seen through Aziza as something requiring blame that would have someone at “fault.” The cultural interpretation of her own behavior was in comparison to others and often seen as a negative within many of her experiences. Aziza's cultural attitude was to not impose, not ask for “favors.” The feeling of embarrassment was identified within her use of tutoring and presenting to a class. The cultural way of being that considers

the worth of others isn't addressed within her narrative by faculty in a timely manner or at all within the writing center. Cultural ways of being and knowing are derived from the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings elicited from interactions that produce meaning.

The lack of academic considerations to her cultural being was also extended to her employment search. Aziza included within her educational narrative additional experiences within finding employment after graduating from her associate's degree. She found searching for a job to be challenging and encountered perceptions of discrimination because of her cultural differences. Aziza stated:

I found that it was challenging still, uh, because I didn't have the experience and I also believe because of my accent, it is very heavy and that can block me for opportunities. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

Aziza had decided to continue her education to increase her options and stated she was pursuing a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution within social work. Her cultural identity as a Latina was unique within the dominant community of a predominantly White population at Midwestern City. This uniqueness was also represented with the population of Midwestern City Technical College. The experiences within the GED Prep Program was an instance where her identity was represented by others with a similar racial/ethnic heritage. She has identified challenges of her cultural ways of being and interacting that are not appreciated within the greater community, but has found it to be mitigated by individuals and resources.

### **Persistence**

The persistence of Aziza is identified within the utilization of resources available, self-reflection of experiences, and sense of cultural values of obligation to the resources she received. The combination of this network of positive experiences facilitated the development of Aziza's education from the GED to the completion of an associate's degree at Midwestern City Technical College.

## Resources

The use of economic resources varied and decreased the severity of the economic barrier. The financial assistance of supporting programs like an immigrant GED program, Free Application of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and unemployment were insufficient but provided additional economic resources to free time to go to school. Aziza described the ability to use all three financial resources and sacrifice her material assets to pay for all of her schooling as an achievement. Aziza explained, “So, at the end of when I complete my associate, I don’t owe money. So, I sold my jewelry to make it possible not to drop school and keep up with the payments” (Interview#1, 1/14/2015).

Aziza identified the financial assistance from the GED program to be small, at \$25 for each test, when she passed a section (Demographic Survey, 1/14/2015). The unemployment lasted for the one-year technical diploma, but ended at the start of her associate’s degree. The FAFSA benefits were modified according to the other aid she was receiving during her Medical Interpreter Program, like unemployment, but afterwards it increased and remained to be insufficient as identified within her economic challenges while attending Midwestern City Technical College.

The academic and cultural barriers were mitigated with use of the writing center and faculty support. The faculty were identified to not penalize Aziza for her grammar and support her cultural way of being after a negative social interaction. She stated, “So I told my teacher about it and later after classes the classmates apologize and I said it’s fine” (Interview#1, 1/14/2015). The social impact was described as “it’s fine” but was shortly described in greater detail as a very salient and emphasizes the importance of the instructor intervening on the student’s behavior. Aziza explained:

It’s, it’s only as a Latina that is learning the language it’s hard for me to leave that experience. That was kind of, um, I would say, like puts on, I don’t know, like when I go in front of students and I have to read in English, a kind of worry that happens the same thing, so that was that worry.

The instructor facilitated a sense of respect for Aziza and her importance in the classroom. The

apology from the two classmates acknowledged her cultural way of being. This acknowledgement of her ways of being was supplemented by the responses to her assignments. Aziza explains the instructor facilitating respect for her ideas over her technical execution of assignments. She described this when she said:

And, when I got my papers in the program, the teachers made some grammar corrections. The teachers here were very nice helping me, you know, very professional. I did make a few comments and say still have a few grammar issues, you know, and uh not a big thing and sometimes to correct the grammar. And they see the quality of my paper and how hard I work from a paper and they can see, the grammar issues. Most of the time they don't take off the points for the grammar because the paper is the pages they ask for and on the topic they are asking for, only the grammar. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

Aziza's technical writing skills were developed in and outside of the classroom. She utilized the Writing Center and tutoring as a campus resource. The use of these resources were identified early in her educational experience. Aziza stated the use of tutoring as developing "confidence" and explained:

It was every single paper that I did, and even for math I was going asking for help and math, pre-algebra. So that was they made it possible for me to go and gain confidence in that I can do this. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

Although Aziza's math skills didn't have as much preparation for college, her development in English required additional and specialized support. She used the Writing Center at the college and recognizes the development in her skills by the reduction of corrections.

And what I find very helpful was every single paper since I start MCTC [pseudonym used] I've been going to the writing center. I do my paper and the writing center and they do my corrections for me and my grammar. Uh, the beginning that probably was very, a lot of work, for the people in the writing center. Because when I go with my paper, after they make all of the corrections, you can hardly see what I type, because everything I typed had corrections. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

She explains the process of using the writing center in developing her writing skills through the frequency of visits. The desire to improve her papers was explained by having multiple people review her work to ensure a higher quality of writing. She described this as follows:

Okay, I complete a paper and I don't just don't go once and go here is my paper. I go to the writing center and I go to the development center because I believe that someone is probably missing something else that is missing there. So I always make sure that 2 or 3 different people check before I turn in my paper. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The intensity of her corrections and the frequency of using the writing center was recognized as characteristics that were a part of her use of campus resources. Aziza's educational experiences expanded beyond the classroom, interactions with instructors, and included the use of educational support service such as tutoring and the writing center. She attributes much of her "confidence" as reflections of her past performance and development within the process.

### **Self-Awareness**

Aziza attributes the progression of her education with the use of reflections. She discusses her past experiences with the knowledge of her personality, leaning style, and learning habits. She was able to complete a high school level of education in her country of origin and felt confident to take the GED in Spanish, as it was a familiar language to her with material she had prior knowledge about.

The experiences within GED had little reflection of her as a learner, but her Health Interpreter Program and Human Services Program would involve self-reflection. An example of Aziza's self-reflection was in her self-awareness to construct goals. She wasn't confident in constructing long-term goals, but was willing to make immediate goals. The insight she had on her personality was identified within her narrative as a means to achievement a technical diploma and an associate's degree. Aziza recalled the specific need for short-term goals when she stated:

I'm the kind of person that if I see my goal is to far away I lose motivation. So I say, I will start with a small goal, if I complete this small goal I will go to the next goal. This is my next goal because it's harder for me. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The "small goals" or short-term goals required an ability to reflect on the limits of her behavior and skill and would be used within the technical diploma. She stated her learning habits as needing a sense of urgency or immediacy to maintain focus. What was noted within her narrative was the

utilization of her processes. She focused to work within the framework of how she learned and produced results. Aziza stated:

And when I write my paper I use, I can start like two or three weeks before the paper is due but that hasn't worked for me what I know is during one week working under pressure more better for me as I like it progress and eight because I start early but my brain work better and flows better when I know that I have a short time and I have to it. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The knowledge of her learning abilities allowed Aziza to best utilize her time and resources while maneuvering around hardships within her educational experience. The knowledge of her strengths and weakness to get through a short-term goal would later be reflected on as achievements over the course of small victories which would lead to a large accomplishment. The reflection on prior success would be used as a means to empower her to persist in her future educational goals. Aziza reflected on her endurance and identified it as a sense of strength when she said:

And I complete the program in the program we were enrolled 20 people, and only six, seven people graduated from that program. Thirteen people dropped out because there was a lot of homework. So I feel proud that I was able to complete the program even though that was a lot of work. So after completing that I start my associates. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The reflection of her performance was a continuous theme within her narrative. The ability to complete a program when many of her student peers were unable, provided Aziza with a sense of accomplishment. Upon further reflection of her performance, she was empowered her to continue her education within the Human Services Program. Aziza explained:

If I was able to complete one program, I knew it. I know if I was able to complete one program I was able to do this one. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The gratification of completion and reflection of attainment provided a sense of empowerment to pursue additional levels of education. The use of resources and self-reflection throughout her educational experience was framed constructively and facilitated her persistence. Aziza also identified obligation as an important theme in her ability to persist.

## Obligation

Aziza's feeling of obligation to complete a level of schooling was identified in two parts. One was the social support from a GED recruiter within the Spanish GED Program that initiated her schooling, and the other is from the economic programs that provided financial assistance to her educational pursuits. Aziza recalled the impact of the GED recruiter when she stated:

First I would say, uh, it is thanks to one staff from the school where I completed the GED, because she encouraged me to complete the GED and Spanish and, um, also because I knew there was more opportunities for me by completing. And it was because of her encouragement for me to complete the GED. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The personal communication and relationship with the recruiter also shaped her interest in pursuing a post-secondary education. During this pursuit she was able to receive financial assistance in various forms to assist her in her pursuit. Although it wouldn't be sufficient, it would be a cultural sense of obligation to acknowledge her potential. Aziza recalled:

But because the government was paying for these classes that probably stop me from dropping these classes. Because this was an opportunity that the government was giving me that I don't even have opportunities in my own country. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The feeling of obligation although not explicit, was described within the behaviors to "stop from dropping." Aziza regarded the assistance she received both financial and social as contributing to her motivation. This sense of responsibility to a resource or person in her persistence is defined by obligation.

## Advice

The advice given by Aziza to other students within similar circumstances and situation was centered on completing education. Her advice echoes much of her educational life narrative. Examples may be seen within her personal experiences that support her idea of the strategies successfulness and provide context for understanding how it may benefit students. Mandisa identified strategies for the successful completion of education that included the need for realistic short term

goals leading to a major goal, knowing yourself, and remaining positive and constructive through adversity.

### **Complete Education**

Aziza presented advice within her narrative to continue in the development of a post-secondary education beyond a GED. She was told by others that education would benefit her and she explains within her narrative how it had improved her living conditions. She also explained to others that it would increase possibilities within her advice to others. She stated:

The advisor would give it to the students that it open the doors for more opportunities that is, um, I think at the exact moment when I was doing the GED. I did not know that that I could make it, my career course was easier because after I complete the GED. Two months later I got laid off from work so in that time when the recession time what can I do I have no education here and I need a job. There is no job opportunities in 2009 so thanks to this, that I completed the GED. I think about, OK, I can try to go get some more education because that was out of my way. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The use of education as a means to improve employability is recognized by Aziza as an important piece of advice that is within her narrative. The outcome of her story is an indirect advertisement to continue to the completion of an associate's degree. Aziza explained how it helped her:

And so that is, that was my experience with the associates. And, because of the associates I completed in a year and half ago, so I was hoping to go and find a job with this associates. And I also got my state licenses estate counselor. And as helping with this license and associate so I was able to find a job, after graduation. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The challenge to obtain a job after graduation is explained within the Cultural Interpretation section to include the discrimination based on her "accent" as a factor for not being selected for job opportunities. Though she experienced discrimination, she was still able to obtain employment. It was through pursuing, enduring, and attaining an associate's degree that she was able to increasing her educational attainment and increase her level of income.

## Goal Setting

The use of setting goals was important for Aziza as a reflective, motivational, and prioritizing tool. She explained that the knowing herself, prioritizing, and looking at your accomplishments is a way to maintain motivation. She described herself as:

I'm the kind of person that if I see my goal is to far away I loose motivation, so I say, I will start with a small goal. If I complete this small goal I will go to the next goal, this is my next goal. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The larger goal was overwhelming to Aziza. An example of thinking about larger goals and identifying it as not possible was during her developmental education experiences after taking the placement test. She had stated "And so I saw my goal to complete a program was about 10 years away from me, and I say no, this is not possible" (Interview #1, 1/14/2015). She decided on a technical diploma and after attaining it, she then focused on an associate's degree.

## Know Yourself

A theme and direct advice given from Aziza's within her narrative was the use of reflection within the educational process. She labeled it as "know herself" and stated it as a quality to succeed. She explained this concept in greater detail when she said:

I think you got to know yourself, got to know what is your weakness and your strengths. You know, sus portavesas, uh, I don't know how to pronounce this. Because Like I told you, you know, I try to get, I enroll in online classes. I, and I check the whole thing, but for, because I know myself I know it's going to be very challenging for me. Because you know, just post something quickly and I don't feel comfortable about posting something without knowing for sure the grammar is correct. So knowing yourself and knowing you can overcome these challenges. (Interview #2, 3/23/2015)

The use of technology was identified as a problematic area within her learning process, as she didn't like the permanent nature of submitting a response online without the ability to proofread or take some time to review her work. Knowing her abilities and assessing the situation to identify whether or not she may be successful was supplemented with the idea of placing smaller goals that were attainable

and ultimately lead to the main goal. She explained this process within goal setting to enforce the prioritization of decisions to support the pursuit of education.

### **Remain Positive**

Aziza explained the need to remain positive in addition to knowing yourself. The ability to connect knowing yourself and reflect on the positive accomplishments were important in her academic success. She integrated these concepts within an example where she stated:

But after I complete the medical interpreter I applied for the human services associate because I thought that I can do it. I can do that. If I was able to complete one program I knew it I know if I was able to complete one program I was able to do this one. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The ability to identify strengths and weaknesses are important within maintaining a positive disposition and is inclusive of reflection, prioritizing goals, and motivating yourself. The use of avoidance when possible is explicitly given within Aziza's narrative to avoid additional and unnecessary hardships. Aziza provide her own context as an example within her advice:

And if it's something that is going to make you feel, ah, feel like discouraged, you know, it's just better going another way. You know, like for me, online classes are offered everywhere, and I could take it, but I know is going to probably feel like if I fail. I would feel like, um, I would feel down, but face to face, because I know the way I learn, ah, I will know, I will succeed. (Interview #2, 3/23/2015)

Although avoidance is a useful tool, the ability to remove all negative interactions is acknowledged by Aziza as unrealistic. The experience of adversity is addressed in addition to the advice to avoid. Her suggestion was to be critical and constructive. Aziza stated that failure is a part of the learning experience and necessary for improvement. She stated:

Another advice should be, not be discouraged for, you know like for something. I mean, I never fail a class, I complete like 113 credits here and my GPA was 3.8, 3.84 I believe. But, that doesn't mean you can't fail a class at some point in your life. But, make sure that you don't put yourself down or feel down, but as an experience to see what went wrong and try to figure out ways to make that not happen again. (Interview #2, 3/23/2015)

Aziza identified the need to remain positive within her narrative. The structure of reflection, goal setting, and motivation were constantly interrelated within her story. Negative events are seen as a

learning experience. Examples of this form of thinking are within the reduction of corrections on her papers from the writing center. Initially it was difficult to see much of her typed work in comparison to the suggestions from the writing center, and her reflection of current papers have reduced corrections. The goal to attain a degree, reflection on the successful progress, and prioritization of resources, time, and energy on education was her overall narrative for success within school.

### **Freirean Interpretation**

Black and Latin@ communities experience a higher incidence of poverty, unemployment, lower wages, and attrition. These unequal conditions have historical origins, but are explained by the interconnected nature between economic and educational systems that actively maintain and facilitate inequality. These systems influence and organize behavior, ways of knowing, ways of understanding, and making meaning that is culturally contextualized. These systems provide a reward and penalty system that places a hierarchy of cultural values. These values are found within the organizational practices, policies, and procedures. The more congruent a student is with the structures values, the easier it is to navigate. The opposite is also true. The less congruent they are, the more likely it will be that they will be ignored or penalized. The current systems of operating makes assumptions on the cultural expectations and behaviors of others. The ability of a student with a nontraditional educational experience, history, worldview, or culture will have an increasingly greater challenge navigating a system. This is evident in the level of challenges experienced by diverse populations within the academic and economic systems. Many of the challenges from marginalized communities are identified as a lack of resources and fulfillment of basic needs.

The ability for an individual to be fully present and learn requires the satisfaction of the basic needs of the individual (Maslow, 1943, 1964, 1970). These needs are directly related to the learner's cultural understanding of the world and their place within the world. What is identified by Paulo Freire

(1985, 1998, 2000) is the need to address the individual needs of students by using dialogue. The structural ways of interacting that impact the social dynamics of institutions also influence the ability to meet basic needs. The basic needs are identified within Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970) and provide a framework of understanding abstract notions of needs which may be culturally interpreted to the context of the individual.

Aziza provides some details of how this relationship of basic needs with organizational structures facilitate and mitigate her academic achievement. After reviewing the transcripts and replayed the audio tapes and performing a thematic analysis, the data was interpreted with a Freirean framework into the three categories: collaboration through dialogue, dealing with difference in diversity, or altruistic concern for others. Within these categories, a student experienced a sense of exclusion and would have led to the discontinuation of college, if it weren't for interventions that kept their interest in completing an associate's degree.

### **Collaboration through Dialogue**

The ability of the college to understand Aziza's educational needs were assessed through formal and informal processes that include: financial aid, tutoring services, and classroom interactions. Many of Aziza's needs were highly integrated and would require understanding her role within the category of understanding financial aid, tutoring, and the classroom. The lack of dialogue or potential for alternative ways of knowing or understanding create barriers for marginalized individuals.

The calculation of financial need for Aziza is cultural bound with the dominant values of autonomy and independence. Aziza's values were highly communal and integrated with her family. Her basic need of belonging and contributing to her family was different from the assessment used in financial aid. She explained how she sent money to her mother throughout her educational experience and her financial aid wasn't sufficient to cover all of her expenses. These expenses have been

identified within her narrative to include: home ownership, repair costs, and family obligations. Aziza clarified her family obligation and perception of self through her family when she explained how she and her sister sent money home to Columbia. Her basic needs were secondary to the family unit, Aziza explained:

Yeah, because mainly, we have to send money for my parents, my mom's medicine. And so it doesn't matter my situation, what economic situation I have. I always make sure I have some money to send. (Interview #2, 3/23/2015)

Another form of dialogue that happened with Aziza was connected to her writing assignments which required the use of tutoring services. Aziza felt her assignments required multiple reviews from tutoring services and felt teachers were lenient on the grading of her assignments. The lack of dialogue from the instructor to address these perceptions facilitated the perpetuation of these feelings. The comments on her paper reduced over time and Aziza would reflect on her experiences to identify growth and progress on her educational goals and success. The feelings of a lower academic performance than native English speaking students was never directly addressed. The lack of addressing these feelings led to Aziza constructing her own reasons and internalize the actions of others. If dialogue that would have included her perceptions had been a part of the tutoring services while correcting her papers, she would have been able to address her feelings and performance.

Aziza's performance within the classroom also had a negative experience that was very impactful. She explained two students laughing at her accent while she had presented to the classroom. This incident was told over tears during the interview, where we had to stop the tape at her request. She explained her self-doubts by questioning her belonging within the educational setting. Aziza's approach to the instructor wouldn't have happened if her sense of obligation hadn't been a factor that had her attempt to address the problem with the teacher. She took it onto herself to connect with her instructor to discuss her discomfort and embarrassment within the classroom during an out of class

time. The openness of the instructor to listen was significant and the instructor acting as an advocate in the classroom left an impression on Aziza to persist. The dialogue is important, and was identified as an empowering moment. Unfortunately dialogue wasn't a part of the classroom and kept Aziza's feelings and the oppressive nature of others unknown and allowed to exist without being addressed immediately. The ability to address any miscommunication or oppressive attitudes would have reduced the negative feelings felt by Aziza over the two days length of time prior to approaching the instructor.

### **Dealing with Difference in Diversity**

The lack of dialogue within the classroom, tutoring, and assessment used in calculating her financial needs created challenges for Aziza. The assessment of her needs and the perceptions between Aziza and her tutors or teachers were never addressed. These interactions were culturally interpreted within the minds of faculty, tutoring, and Aziza which led to many forms of miscommunication, unresponsiveness, and response delays. These challenges were mitigated through Aziza's resourcefulness to prioritize, reallocate resources, and seek support.

The cultural understanding of Aziza's academic and economic needs are filtered through assessments, processes, and procedures that are organized in cultural values that differ from her own. She has a cultural sense of obligation that stems from an appreciation of resources that wasn't offered in her prior country of residence. She explained how she wouldn't receive financial aid to attend college and would seek assistance rather than discontinuing college because of that obligation. If she hadn't had that cultural appreciation for financial aid, even though it wasn't sufficient to meet her economic needs she may not have persisted. This cultural quality distinguishes her from other students and may be a factor in her persistence.

The teacher's interaction within the classroom to address the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of both students and their own was limited. Aziza expressed concerns about her English competency

and a negative cultural interaction between her with faculty, tutoring, and other students. This concern stemmed from her unique cultural differences that were never formally addressed within the classroom and student services. Dialogue is a process to increase the level of understanding and meaning. The ability to construct an inclusive environment requires not just dialogue but an understanding of the learning needs identified by Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970). The oppressive behavior of expecting and treating everyone the same is damaging to individuals with different ways of understanding, knowing, and being.

The greatest concern expressed within Aziza's narrative with the lack of satisfying her need to belong. Her intervention to address the feelings of students within the classroom wasn't recognized by the instructor as the structure of the classroom didn't offer the opportunity or support to express perceptions, feelings, or behaviors of others. Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) identified the need to include opportunities of a person's way of understanding, knowing, making meaning within the learning experience. He recognizes the construction of knowledge is formed by experience and the inclusion of experience must therefore be respected within the classroom. The diversity that exists within the human experience and lacking the methods to capture those differences constructs a system of oppression for those learning styles not already recognized and utilized.

### **Altruistic Concern for Others**

The need for an environment that facilitates the concern for others is identified by Paulo Freire (1985, 1998, 2000) as important within a non-oppressive pedagogical approach. An example of the positive approach is explained within Aziza's educational experiences within the GED. She experienced encouragement from a staff member within the GED Program that she felt grateful for receiving and attributes her success. Aziza stated:

First I would say, uh, it is thanks to one staff from the school where I completed the GED, because she encouraged me to complete the GED and Spanish and, um, also because I knew

there was more opportunities for me by completing. And it was because of her encouragement for me to complete the GED. (Interview #1, 1/14/2015)

The positive experiences were identified as encouraging, although Aziza also experienced instances in which fellowships and solidarity weren't present. She expressed feelings of embarrassment and consideration for dropping out of her technical studies program after a classroom event. The situation was described as a presentation to the class, where her accent was laughed at by two other girls. The instructor didn't acknowledge the behavior and continued onward with class activities and within the telling of this story brought Aziza to tears, which required the tape to stop recording.

The lack of constructing a sense of solidarity and fellowship at the start of class and lack of attentiveness within the class behavior between students facilitated the feeling of not belonging for Aziza. Addressing this issue afterwards could have been unnecessary if proactive measures were taken and direct and immediate intervening was done on the negative interactive behaviors between students. Fortunately, Aziza felt a sense of obligation, considering the government was paying for classes, to approach the instructor in an attempt to resolve the issue. The instructor addressed the issue and the two girls apologized and this was a moment where Aziza was able to feel valued within the classroom and remain in the program.

## **Chapter 7 – Findings, Conclusions and Implications**

### **Introduction**

This section will contain the outcomes of the research. The initial section will provide a review on the purpose of the study. The subsequent sections will identify the findings across all three participants within the study, identify conclusions, and implications on theory development, implications on practice, implications on public policy, and future research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Black and Latin@ have had the greatest attrition rates in obtaining a high school diploma, GED, and an associate's degree. The current models of understanding and making meaning of this phenomenon are limited in the scope of the problem and influence of social structures of oppression. The current production of knowledge and meaning made of attrition are produced with oppressive structures like quantitative data and models of understanding that don't include a student's voice within interpretation. The purpose of this study is to interact in ways that facilitate dialogic experiences to construct a shared meaning and co-construct new knowledge regarding the educational experiences of Black and Latin@ students.

The dialogical format chosen to interact with students will enable the co-construction of meaning and facilitate an inclusive environment for a student to share their educational experiences and narratives. This research will include the student's voice within the understanding and meaning making process of students from communities with high attrition rates. It will recognize the factors of influence that challenge degree attainment and student identified means of mitigating those challenges to complete an associate's degree. The attention on a student's perceptions will generate new ways of understanding and knowing the persistence of Black and Latin@ students. This information will be

valuable for future researchers to facilitate the academic achievement of Black and Latin@ students within this educational pathway

### **Findings**

The three participants provided an educational life history narrative that were based on the different ways of understanding and making meaning of experiences. The initial codes used to identify the challenges, persistence, and advice used direct wording from students with the intent to reflect the student voice and conceptual meaning. The familiarization with the data allowed me to construct themes derived from the connections within and between the codes. This process allowed for the development of overarching themes that have been included within this report. The construction of themes was influenced by the framework of Paulo Freire (1985, 1998, 2000). Attention was given to the sources of oppressive behavior within participant narratives. I was able to identify and define influential structures that challenged the academic performance of students and the qualities used to facilitate persistence. The advice from participants was consistent with the narratives within persistence and served as a reliability measure for appropriately identifying codes and themes.

### **Challenge Themes**

The thirteen individually identified challenging themes stated within participant narratives are able to be condensed and sourced from four distinct systems. The initial list of challenging themes was as follows: (1) economic; (2) developmental education; (3) cultural interpretation; (4) educational environment; (5) developmental education; (6) family & economic pressures; (7) family; (8) teaching styles; (9) cancer; (10) employment; (12) living & social conditions; and (13) broken home. These themes were then combined with into similar structural functions and nine distinct categories were identified that include: (1) family; (2) economic; (3) employment; (4) teaching Style; (5) educational environment (6) developmental education; (7) social & living conditions; (8) cancer; (9) cultural

interpretations. Upon reviewing these student interaction themes, I organized them based on categories of influence, and four distinct structures of influence. The four systems were: (1) educational; (2) economic; (3) social; and (4) personal.

### **Educational Challenges**

The institutional challenges included the following participant identified themes: (1) teaching style; (2) educational environment; (3) developmental education; and (4) cultural interpretation. All three participants presented a positive view within the experiences of obtaining a GED. The challenges began for Mandisa and Aziza within the transition into college as the placement assessment placed them into developmental classes. These classes provided negative views of a timely completion on their intended degree. All three experienced frustration of teaching styles that were not including Yuliya's social ways of knowing, Mandisa's bilingual learning style, or addressing Aziza's discrimination within the classroom. Some faculty were outright opposed to providing equitable services based on individual needs, such as the instructor identified within Mandisa's narrative that wasn't able to explain after class or clarify a statement within the exam. The cultural needs of participants were either absent or present after a traumatic events had occurred.

The type of education primarily experienced within the classroom was a unidirectional approach to learning that provided a limited interpretation or representation and wasn't open to accepting or facilitating student feedback. All participants identified interactions with faculty as a challenge in understanding or making meaning of the classroom material. Aziza had internalized her experiences as a cultural difference and personal linguistic deficit. She operated from the notion that she needed to be operating at the same linguistic and writing capacity of native English speakers and writers. Mandisa and Yuliya of whom were native English speakers, had a more external approach and sought faculty to adjust to their needs. They found faculty to be inflexible in recognizing different

forms of learning and adjusting their teaching styles to meet those needs. As a result all three participants sought out external forms of assistance in understanding the material of the classroom through tutoring.

Tutoring services were the primary out of class resource utilized for understanding the material. The experiences within receiving services varied amongst the participants. The highest frequency of tutoring use was explained within Aziza's narrative. She had attended tutoring services for each writing assignment and had returned with the same assignment up to three times. Her explanation was to make ensure it would be closer to the level of her peers born within the states. Although Aziza recognized the service was provided by paid tutors, she also felt an addition sense of imposing herself onto her tutor's time and was embarrassed. Mandisa was less expressive of her fear of using tutoring services. She did have some transference of her fear of using services within her advice to others. She suggested to others, "Don't be afraid to use the writing center." Yuliya was more comfortable using services and didn't identify the use as an intrusive experience for tutors nor a personal fear to use services.

### **Economic Challenges**

The economic challenges included the following participant identified themes: (1) family; (2) job; and (3) economic. All three participants presented financial challenges during both the experiences within attaining a GED and associate's degree. The challenges began for Mandisa and Aziza with low wage jobs that required additional working hours to attain a livable wage. Yuliya had lost her job and received unemployment benefits that assisted with housing and food, but was also insufficient. All participants were required to work in addition to receiving financial aid during their course work at Midwestern City Technical College. The cultural collective value within all participants instilled a strong sense of community that placed the needs of the family above the

individual. Examples include: Aziza sending money to her parents, Yuliya and Mandisa providing for their children and parents.

All three experienced a strong collective identity within their families. Aziza felt obligated to send money to her mother as she was ill, while Mandisa and Yuliya had three children each and were the sole providers for their respective children. The calculation of financial need was determined by federal guidelines and institutional calculations using student enrollment status. Financial assistance from the federal government is attained through the Free Application of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and was insufficient for all three participants. The current calculation of economic need is based on a rubric that doesn't represent the collective needs of the participants.

The economic limitations from financial aid and low wage jobs required a reprioritization of the hierarchy of basic needs (Maslow, 1943, 1964, 1970). Individual sacrifices were made by all participants to meet the collective needs of the family unit. Aziza explaining how she had slept in her car and didn't have heat in her home over winter so that she could send money home to her ill mother. Mandisa and Yuliya sacrificed time in raising of their children to provide time to school and work. Work was identified as necessary for paying bills and school was necessary to improve wages with future hopes to be able to provide for their children and spend time with them. Both Mandisa and Yuliya had support from their parents to provide childcare, but remain the primary provider for their children considering neither receives child support.

### **Social Challenges**

The influence of family, living conditions, and culture, play a significant role in constructing social challenges for all participants. Among these challenges are the discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards the racial and ethnic group membership of participants. Each participant reported forms of discrimination that were both inside and outside of the educational settings. Aziza and

Mandisa experienced discrimination within school and Yuliya and Aziza endured out of school discrimination.

Aziza expressed discrimination based on her accent within both her college experience and employment search. Aziza's college experience had an incidence where she was laughed at while in her associate's degree program. It wasn't until after the incident that she addressed her instructor for support. The instructor wasn't aware or concerned during the incident, but when addressed, did approach the students and they apologized. Aziza also disclosed an experience with a potential employer. She and another candidate had interviews and the job was offered to the other candidate. Aziza believes she was more qualified and the other candidate, although the other candidate was offered the position. Aziza attributed the employer's decision to select the other candidate to be based on Aziza's accent. The linguistic ways of communicating have caused grief for Aziza within both her attainment of education and employment opportunities.

Mandisa expressed discrimination within her K-12 education. She explained the institutional classification of her English skills placement within ESL (English as a Second Language) classes within her middle and high school experiences. Mandisa was a native English speaker and described the negative impact being labeled as ESL had with her relationship with teachers, staff, and administrators. She expressed feelings of potential when she talked about her education prior to being in Midwestern City and feelings of being unrecognized and academically disengaged at Midwestern City. These negative interactions within school and family pressure are why she explains she ultimately departed from K-12 and began to work. During her experiences at college, Mandisa explained feelings of insecurity about her limited knowledge of the culture within the education system. These terms and concepts included her GPA and significance on her academic performance and record.

Yuliya's narrative of discrimination was through greater social structures and concepts. The examples provided were of her own son and living in Midwestern City, where she identifies the racial living standards of black youth as negatively stereotyped. Yulia used her son as the exception to the negative attributes of a typical Midwestern City black youth and described being from a broken home. Yuliya explains the social conditions in which she raised her children. She explained it best within her statement, "As long as he has been my child I've been on government assistance food stamps medical and currently on section eight program, um, so it is possible to come from a broken home and succeed." The ability to persist through these social challenges to raise her child, obtain an associate's degree and work for economic support was seen as both a stressful situation and a testament to her ability to persist and achieve.

### **Personal Challenges**

The three participants also experienced incidents that were unique to them as individuals that include: cancer, death, and learning style/teaching style. These challenges occurred during their pursuit of an associate's degree at the college. Mandisa, Yuliya, and Aziza all identified unique forms of learning that were unmet and included the inability to understand or relate to the instruction and curriculum within the classroom. Yuliya had two mentioned incidents of cancer and a death of her child's paternal grandmother as additional hardships that were personal in nature. She was first diagnosed during her year in the program and the other diagnosis was only one week prior to the interview. The hardship from a serious health crisis like cancer is a circumstance that is unplanned and highly stressful.

### **Challenge Conclusion**

Challenges experienced by Black and Latin@ students are both historically inherited such as poverty, and currently recapitulated through exclusionary practices. These forms of discrimination are

highly interrelated within personal, social, economic, and education spheres of influence and expressed within the lives of Black and Latin@ students. The interconnected nature of the economic and academic systems are further complicated by the hierarchy of values and cultural attitudes institutionalized within the processes, procedures, and policies within them. The expectation of conformity into the dominant ways of being penalizes individuals from marginalized groups such as those of Black and Latin@ groups. This institutionalized discrimination operates from spheres of influence that act like a web or network of collectively facilitate or mitigate academic performance.

### **Persistence Themes**

The eleven persistence themes identified by participants are listed as follows: (1) security/control, (2) children, (3) employment, (4) resources, (5) jobs, (6) motivating environment, (7) bilingual, (8) sacrifice; (9)resources, (1) self-awareness, and (11) obligation. These themes are able to be combined with those of similar structural functions into six distinct categories. Those persistence categories include: (1) security/control, (2) Children/obligation, (3) resources, (4) jobs, (5) motivating environment/teaching style/bilingual, and (6) sacrifice/self-awareness. These categories although distinct, are not mutually exclusive and may be additionally organized into three larger structures of influence: (1) obligation, (2) hope, and (3) prioritization/control. These values facilitated persistence within all themes and are the larger structures utilized as tools for success by students through hardships within pursuing an associate's degree.

### **Obligation**

The feeling of obligation was a theme woven within the categories of themes. Letting someone down or unable to meet the expectations of someone or for someone was a factor in persistence of all three participants. The various sources of obligation varied between participants, but family was a topic used by all three. Yuliya, Mandisa, and Aziza all had expectations to provide for a better life for

self, parents, or children. Yuliya wanted a better life for her children and felt obligated to provide them security and stability that she didn't have. Mandisa found that she didn't have any time for her children because she was too busy working at low wage jobs and wanted to provide more for her children and contribute to her parents that were taking care of her children while she was at school.

Other forms of obligation were in the people that helped Mandisa and Aziza. Mandisa had discontinued the GED Prep Program and returned by the multiple solicitation of the program. Aziza had also recognized a faculty member that intervened within a sensitive topic consisting of her accent. She found the intervention on behalf of her feelings with the other students within the classroom as investment in her worth. Aziza also identified the financial benefit of having public funded education and explained that she wasn't able to receive such assistance in Columbia and felt obligated to the government for the financial assistance. The relationships were recognized by Aziza and Mandisa to impact the level of institutional commitment in their academic success and increased the sense of obligation to meet their expectations.

## **Hope**

Participants in this study often referred to the need to complete a level of education to change their financial and employment situation. This belief consisted of the idea that things could be better, and the perception was that college could provide an avenue to receive a better job, increased income, and economic security. The belief in a better future through education was a motivational tool. Two of the three explicitly identified within their advice to other students to stay in school, Yuliya and Aziza had mentioned the need to be educated and Mandisa indirectly identified she would recruit other GED students to complete their education. The goal of improving one's living conditions required the ability to see themselves within that reality. All three were unable to see it at first, Mandisa experienced negative experiences within K-12, Yuliya recounted the loss of her job as a realization that she wasn't

in control of her own life and education was something that couldn't be taken away. Aziza was unable to advance within her multiple jobs due to perceived discrimination within employment and felt a higher level of education would provide her with credibility. In all three, the end goal to complete a degree was to access to a higher quality of life and was a motivating factor.

### **Prioritization/Control**

All three participants exhibited a reflective quality in their decision making that was identified as advice to persist. The ability to stay focused, create small attainable goals, remaining positive, and make a sacrifice were comments that framed the need to prioritize educational attainment above personal needs and desires different ways. This ability to prioritize had an underlining sense of control to manipulate or make changes. All decisions are expected to be filtered with the regards of academic performance and the belief that participations could change things. Regardless of the choice, the idea of a sacrifice was something that was consistent in outcomes by all participants. A hardship was expected within the educational setting as well as unmet basic needs. This sacrifice was outside of their control but would also in turn act as an enforcement of the commitment to education. The increased level of investment would also enforce an increased sense of obligation. This obligation and commitment would then increase persistence and increase the persistence from one term to another term and facilitate an increase in grades, completing a challenging course, or completing the GED. These positive educational experience would then serve as a reinforcing idea that education is possible and that they were capable of completing their educational goals and had a sense of control.

### **Persistence Conclusion**

Obligation, hope and prioritization/control are all utilized in the persistence of hardships within the various spheres of student's lives that include: (1) security/control, (2) Children/obligation, (3) resources, (4) employment, (5) motivating environment/teaching style/bilingual, and (6) sacrifice/self-

awareness. Students sought hope that employment opportunities, increase in wages, job security, control over living conditions, and resources would increase with the attainment of an associate's degree. Students also felt the need to taking control of their living conditions and provide more for their children or family members. This expectation to put others above their own needs or desires provided a sense of obligation that fueled their resiliency and altered perceptions from discontinuing as a choice to an impossibility. Students also adjusted their priorities during their educational experiences. The reflective quality within participants allowed for continual personal assessment. The ability to be self-aware, recognize needs, prioritize needs, and adjust or allocate resources required the need for personal sacrifice for the needs of family.

### **Findings Conclusion**

The influential factors within the challenges and persistence of students are organized within four systems of influence: educational, economic, social, and personal. The narratives of students addressed the negative influences between each structure as a network of experiences that facilitated misunderstandings. The institutional processes, procedures, and practices that were experienced by students were interpreted as biased and discriminatory. The lack of dialogue and expression of concern from institutions facilitated the interpretation of an oppressive environment. The theoretical frameworks that are used to understand the idea of attrition or persistence is limited in the ways of understanding and making meaning that is relevant to marginalized students. The inadequate representation, understanding, and meaning within assessing educational, social, personal, or economic needs facilitates institutional bias and use of discriminatory practices, policies, and procedures. Dialogue is the source of obtaining up to date data that recognizes people holistically as a collection of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It also facilitates the development of relationship between student and institutions and may improve student persistence.

The participant narratives provided four systemic challenges within their pursuit of a GED and associate degree. The influence of these four structures on academic performance have been recognized by multiple philosophers and educators (Friere, 1985, 1998, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984; Bernstein, 2003; Maslow, 1943, 1964, 1970). The issue is highly complicated and mostly impacts people of color at a greater frequency. These issues are not being adequately addressed and are therefore unable to be easily overcome.

“Race in higher education is a complicated issue and a moving target. Perhaps for this reason, there has been no major breakthrough in resolving what was characterized over a decade ago as a ‘racial crisis’ in U.S. higher education. We are, however, beginning to understand better the modern forms of racial discrimination, how compositional shifts in the student body affect campus climate, how societal and psychological forces interplay to depress academic performance, and whether there are educational benefits associated with diversity, to name a few.” (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2005, p.533)

The lack of student representation within frameworks of understanding attrition and persistence implies the meanings constructed and understood from the frameworks are fixed within a particular set of cultural attitudes and time. The structured biases within the current understanding of educational systems facilitate inequity and inequality. As attitudes, behaviors, and culture changes, fixed frameworks become obsolete and ineffective. The need to address real time issues and adapt to current needs requires a change in the format of knowing and meaning making. Prior framework of constructing knowledge have limited representation of the human condition and are habitually outdated and in need of continual review.

Dialogue is an important means of making meaning that is important within the assessment of the current needs of students and institutions. The relationship between knowing and being are highly intertwined and by not acknowledging student academic needs perpetuates discrimination within the classroom. The ability to form relationships with others is as important factor in constructing inclusive environments and the ability to relate to the material within teaching is important within the classroom.

The lack of addressing my participants' form of learning decreased their trust and interest in understanding the teacher or material.

The insights from this study identify behaviors of oppression within structured ways of interacting, knowing, and meaning that exist within in and out of the college institution. People and institutions are a collection of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values. College has historically been unresponsive to diverse student needs and the need for dialogue is increasing as the diversity of students has increased. The ability to satisfy a diverse spectrum of cultural, social, and academic needs of students may only occur through dialogue. The current belief that education is without culture or values is limited in understanding and knowing of the human condition, and often ignores ways of understanding or making meaning as identified through participants. This research has expressed the need to go beyond the idea of only using general forms of knowing like forms, assessments, and survey to include the opportunity for dialogue. This study is not attempting to represent all Black and Latino students nor could it. It is a tool for understanding that takes into account the unique experiences of marginalized students to explain the need for dialogue and negative impact of institutional and classroom policy, practices, and procedures. The limitations of our perceptions filter our understanding and it is that bias that if unchecked and given power over others such as that of policy, is harmful to marginalized groups.

These forms of discrimination are highly interrelated within personal, social, economic, and education spheres of influence and expressed within the lives of Black and Latin@ students. The mutual relationship between educational and economic systems are becoming increasingly intertwined and impacting one another in ways that perpetuate poverty and make it increasingly difficult for economic mobility. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) recognizes the use of education in restructuring new

relationships between qualifications and jobs. Bourdieu (1984) explained the limitation of expecting education alone to facilitate social equality when he noted:

“When class fractions who previously made little use of the school system enter the race for academic qualifications, the effect is to force the groups whose reproduction was mainly or exclusively achieved through education to step up their investments so as to maintain the relative scarcity of their qualifications and, consequently, their position in the class structure. Academic qualifications and the school system which awards them thus become one of the key stakes in an interclass competition which generates general and continuous growth in the demand for education and an inflation of academic qualifications.” (p.133)

The structured forms of interacting with employers to earn a livable wage require educational goals with the intent to improve their current economic status. The negative social interactions within institutions and low wages penalizing students that discontinued secondary school facilitate the use of employers to facilitate hardships that require additional hours to meet economic needs and detract from time that may be used for educational pursuits. The resources necessary for a student to be successful in school require resources that include time and the ability to be fully present. The full presence necessary to learn is a holistic approach that requires the satisfaction of basic needs (Maslow, 1943, 1964, 1970). The assessment of those basic needs must be institutionalized within the processes, procedures, and policies in education that utilize a dialogic pedagogy (Freire, 1985, 1998, 2000). The primary areas identified within the narratives were within the interactions primarily from student services and the classroom.

The formation of knowledge, use of knowledge, and meaning of knowledge may be used in oppressive ways. Individualistic constructs produce knowledge that enables disparity within communities. The collective forms of understanding allow for representation and contextualization of knowledge and facilitate a shared meaning. The increased practice of narrative inquiry methods within the study of education, economics, and society is a step towards constructing new and shared meanings. Using dialogue within processes is an important practice to understand the social implications of

research and construction of meaning.

### **Dissertation Conclusions**

The narratives obtained from students have suggested informal interactions with faculty and staff play a more important role than presently specified within retention models like Tinto (1975, 1993) and Bean (1980, 1983). The findings identify the need for institutions to integrate students within the academic system both socially and academically in regards to the social, personal, economic, and educational well-being of students. The elements within Tinto's social integration that included clubs and other out of classroom involvement to integrate students into the academic setting was not recognized by participants. The most relevant components were directed to the classroom and tutoring services. These are direct educational services and less institutionally structured social services.

A holistic approach to understanding the needs of students is significant in responding to the various influential components of a student's learning ability. The separation of social and academic environments is a problem within most models. The term Socio-Academic integration has been used by Regina Deil-Amen (2011) to put forward a theory that a student's experience validates and ultimately integrates students within the classroom, faculty, staff, other students, group advising sessions, and learning communities. This understanding of integration is an approach that emphasizes the "institutional agents" to take a proactive role in reaching out to students rather than students to be proactive and initiate contact.

Faculty, staff, and student interactions played an influential role on Black and Latin@ experiences that facilitate persistence and considerations to discontinue. The most influential element was the instructor within all participant's narratives. The positive or negative influence of an instructor was determined by the confirmation of a student's value within the classroom and validation of self-worth. The environments in which a teacher increased a participants' sense of belonging and

competence had positive results in facilitating persistence. These experiences included the adjustment of grading scales, adjustment to learning styles of students, and considerations of student peer interactions. The behaviors that had students feeling excluded had included the limited cultural knowledge of an educational setting and institution, and limited representation of learning styles within instruction, and lack of responsiveness to student's emotional considerations within the classroom. The second most recognized influence on a student's experience was outside of the classroom and identified to be tutoring that facilitated an increase in feeling competent.

The understanding and meaning within attrition and persistence are not limited to one framework like Tinto (1975, 1993) or Bean (1980, 1983), but the combination of both. The understanding that recognizes an institution and student perspective is a more comprehensive approach that will better address the multiplicity of variable combinations and integrated nature of the learning experience. The increased incidence of social, economic, and academic challenges of Black and Latin@ students is socially unequal and complicates the equity of a student academic experience. The ability for an institution to adjust to the unique needs of students increases student persistence and is both an institutional and student focused model that recognizes the interactions between rather than a unidirectional approach of cause and effect from single approach frameworks.

### **Limitations**

This study is concentrated on the educational development of Black and Latin@ students with a GED and associate's degree from a two-year institution. The limitations of this research are its lack of supportive literature, inability to generalize, inability to reach saturation, unique racial setting, small sample size, and a lack of male representation. Due to these limitations, the information gather by this research should serve as an impetus to explore more areas of research development and societal enhancements for more inclusive environments.

The lack of supportive literature regarding Black and Latin@ experiences within a technical college after receiving a GED demonstrate the overall deficiency in the studies of retention and persistence for marginalized people. The inability to capture student voices within current institutional processes and frameworks for making meaning provides little support on how to change current ways of interacting and facilitating the academic advancement of Black and Latin@ students. Additional research in the area may provide greater support to increase dialogic interactions within institutions and frameworks of making meaning.

The research was limited within its ability to be generalized to all Black and Latin@ populations. It was intended to expand the narrow definition of understanding and meaning making for the attrition of Black and Latin@ students. The use of narrative inquiry makes the research more specialized and is congruent with the philosophy that students must be viewed holistically. This approach is reiterated with philosophers to explain the ability to include, understand, and make meaning of marginalized perspectives.

The inability to reach saturation was impacted by the small population sampling and involved the small racial diversity within the geographical region and the limitations imposed within the study that recognized a status relationship. My status at MCTC also impacted the amount of students eligible to participate as concerns were raised that would facilitate response bias within the study. These factors decreased the already limited number of potential participants and limited participation that prevented the attainment of saturation.

This study was conducted in a racial setting that was a predominantly White community, as identified within the [Contextual Interpretation](#). A large attrition rate and educational gap exists between White students and those of Black and Latin@ students within Midwestern City and is experienced in greater intensity than national levels. Black and Latin@ students are

disproportionately underrepresented within the community college and are also underrepresented within the completion of education at the community college. These demographic representations provide unique experiences of both Black and Latin@ as marginalized within both the educational and community setting.

The sample size within this research is also small and not representative of all GED recipients enrolled in MCTC. Females were overrepresented and no males were found within the time of the research search parameters to include within this research. Regardless of the findings from this study, it provided valuable information that will be useful for higher education administrators, faculty, and policy makers who are interested in increasing the educational attainment of marginalized populations within the GED and community colleges.

The lack of males within this study was a limitation of the study and an area of potential future research. The inclusion of males may produce additional considerations in understanding and making meaning of the academic challenges experienced by Latin@s and Black populations within higher education. The intersection of identities and social interactions is significant within the economic, social, personal, and educational systems. An additional limitation of this research is the unique racial dynamics within Midwestern City. The predominantly White and marginalized racial groups are

### **Implications**

The implications of this research have enforced the ideology that non-dialogic ways of interacting and meaning making produce inequity and facilitate disparity by constructing additional academic challenges for marginalized students with unique needs that are unmet. The use of dialogue in understanding academic challenges extends beyond the classroom and requires an institutional approach to the impact of: policy, practices, and procedures experienced by students with diverse values. Not recognizing these factors facilitates exclusion, assimilation, and constructs hierarchies in,

construct and reproduce oppression in which affect marginalized groups. These structures have been recognized by Freire (1985, 1998, 2000), but have been limited in structuring the application of these ideas. The following implications are suggestions on what should and can be done to reduce the production of biased knowledge and structures that perpetuate discrimination.

### **Implications for Theory Development**

The existence of the educational gap for Black and Latin@ populations exemplifies how current models of understanding and making meaning of attrition and persistence are insufficient and addressing the needs of marginalized students. Oppressive ideologies are covert and inherent within the process, procedures, and practices of current theory development that perpetuate disparity.

The implications of my research for theory are the needs to construct less directive forms of understanding that facilitate exclusion and restrict responses. The increased use of dialogic responses allows for mutual understanding and development of shared meaning that increases the applicability of theory to diverse groups. Current models operate from dominant forms of understanding and meaning and as such only represent, recognize, and support dominant groups. The desire to construct a framework that is representational of all students requires the ability to be adaptive and responsive to diverse experiences, ways of knowing, and ways of being.

### **Implications for Teaching**

Teachers and classmates are important figure within the learning process. All three participants had challenges with faculty in understanding the material and feeling undervalued. Two expressed the impact of fellow classmates on either feeling devalued or feeling empowered. A facilitator approach to teaching would allow the instructor to adjustment of instruction to meet the educational learning style, ways of knowing, and forms of understanding of all students. The challenges to persistence and retention were identified within the narratives of students that include: teaching style, classroom

management, role modeling behavior, and relating material.

Teachers may organize the structure of their teaching to facilitate the development of an inclusive environment of sharing and listening by increasing collaborative ways of understanding and meaning making that involve all students. The modification of traditional lectures to obtain feedback may increase a student's level of engagement. Although some disciplines or topics of study may differ in material, the inclusion of active learning methods increases collaborative ways of learning and making meaning. Examples of facilitating student interaction within classrooms include: principles of andragogy, active learning, flipping the classroom, and brain based learning.

Andragogy is based on a Knowles' theory of adult learning and emphasizes the needs of adult learners. It states adults learn best in problem-based, process—oriented environments that is relevant to students and permits students to design their own learning experiences. Case studies, role-playing, simulation activities, peer evaluation, and self-evaluation are all examples of Andragogy based learning examples.

Active learning is a method defined as "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). This approach includes a variety of teaching styles that include: cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and use of case methods. These methods also coincide with Freire by increasing the dialogic behaviors within a classroom and departing from a banking concept of learning that is a part of the traditional lecture structure. The level of comfort of the instructor in performing this format of teaching is important prior to implementing this strategy. The modeling of the behavior and expectations must be consistent otherwise credibility will decrease and students will maintain the previously learned oppressive behaviors.

A flipped classroom is an approach that involves using active learning strategies during in-class

time. This method moves content acquisition activities outside of the classroom. The traditional format of in-class lecture and out of class practice is considered *flipped* or *reversed*. The instructor is then allowing guided practice and intervening within the meaning making process. This also allows for greater peer interactions within the classroom setting.

Brain-based learning is the application to learning. The social element of brain is recognized within the learning process. People are recognized to not learn well or effectively in isolation as it does when in a group or with others. Principles of brain-based learning also facilitate peer interaction and emphasize the importance of physical movement. Considerations for the physical and emotional well-being of students is included within the construction of a safe learning environment.

A holistic approach to classroom management may influence a student's perception of competence and sense of belonging within the classroom. The narratives of all three participants identified either the behaviors of other students or the instructor as key figures within their academic challenges. Seeing the student as more than a brain, but a body of prior experience and knowledge, is allowing for other ways of knowing and learning to be present and in the moment for making meaning. Education with a holistic perspective is concerned with the development of every person's intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potentials (Maslow, 1943; 1964; 1970). Freire similarly explains the oppressive structure of hierarchies and exclusion within the classroom setting and the need to include the perceptions of students within the learning process. These concepts were confirmed by participants as they were able to overcome feelings of humiliation and incompetence when they were recognized by faculty within: social learning style (Yuliya), respect in personhood (Aziza), and faculty feedback (Mandisa).

A change towards respect and representation within the classroom starts with the instructor as the role model. The culture of a classroom is developed by the interactions between instructor and

students and teachers monitoring of student to student interaction. The construction of a clear set of educational, cultural, and social expectations at the beginning of the class with the instructor modeling the behaviors expected of the students and facilitating constructive behaviors between students. The lack of an inclusive expectation within the educational environment of participants within the study led to all participants experiencing challenges with either classmates or teachers. Aziza had experienced a sense of humiliation by classmates, Mandisa didn't understand the academic culture, and Yuilya and Mandisa had issues with faculty's inflexibility to adjust or rephrase material.

The ability to relate and motivate students to learn the material requires the adaption of material to the contexts of student's ways of knowing. Banks (1988) identified the relationship between motivation and self-efficacy as directly related to remaining persistent with goals and ultimately achieve success. The ability to construct a goal and determine the motivation needed to achieve the goal was essential. Participants identified the use of obligation and hope to motivate completion while reprioritizing to achieve their goals. This inclusion of a student's thoughts and feelings is critical because it recognizes that people learn and persist beyond cognitive factors. This holistic approach recognizes students as a being and not receptacles of knowledge.

### **Implications for Educational Public Policy**

Feedback is an important part of understanding and the making meaning process. The lack of feedback within educational institutions, perpetuate structures of bias within institutions. The reduction of people to numbers allows for the comparison of people without identifying marginalization within the outliers. The construct of hierarchies and dominance is there supported by decisions that use the comparison of numbers and figures to influence policy without attention to bias. The quantification of students further facilitates marginalization by the use of assessments, surveys, and forms that construct categories of understanding without room for negotiation or additional categories for consideration of

student variables. The limit in the representation of students, ideas, and experiences reduces the ability to relate to students. Education has undergone many historical changes to adapt to the needs of marginalized students after a critical mass was attained to shift dominant structures to be inclusive of targeted populations. This form of adapting marginalized groups into dominant forms of operating maintains structures of oppression. The construct of equality and providing the same experience or expectation to all students is discriminatory, as it doesn't recognize the diversity of the human experience. Ideas that recognize the need for equity are constructed on more relational views of needs and ways of knowing that facilitate the representation of marginalized students.

The processes, procedures, and policies within institutions condition students' ways of interacting with one another by modeling the behaviors in which they interact with students. Colleges and universities use models of operating that are derived from historical ways of operating within the economy, education, and culture. These structures are derived from historical oppressive ways of interacting that has developed social conditioning strategies to facilitate oppressive behavior and maintain a status quo. Freire (2000) identified ways of interacting that facilitate oppression, but the identification of institutionalized policies, processes, and procedures were never explicit.

### **Future Research**

The review of literature and the current research used within this study provided several "holes" that require the considerations of how data is collected, interpreted, and made meaningful. Future researchers may look to developing more interactive attrition and retention models that include a dialogue with students. Current models recognize student demographics or institutional characteristics and are very generic. These models often are structured from a theoretical approach that assigns meaning and significance to the situation. These models are limited in their application to all students and only work on a segment of the population; groups not recognized within them are excluded and

marginalized. New ways of making meaning must be constructed within new models that facilitate dialogue and produce results from the dialogue. It must be a dynamic structure that doesn't assign meaning or exclude anyone within the educational setting.

Future researchers must identify attrition and persistence within and between the contexts of an institution and a student. Institutions operate both with students and independently and vice versa. It is the cultural context of each that limits the range of understanding and meaning. The ability to include dialogue within the processes between student and institutions are an important interaction to reduce institutional biases and student misconceptions that exist from prior educational interactions. The assumptions of behavior for institutions on student demographics and students on institutional practices will often facilitate preconceived notions of the other and are often negative. The ways in which negative preconceptions of participants were overlooked was with positive interactions with individuals that engaged in dialogue and inspired a student's self-worth. The use of dialogue was present within those interactions to understand the concerns of students and provide specific encouragement related to circumstances. The lack of encouragement and dialogue within the institutions facilitated misunderstanding and presumptions on student experiences.

### **Reflections on Interpretive Influences**

Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity because it is believed to elicit good and rich data results (Creswell, 2002; Kleinsasser, 2000). The process of "critical self-reflection" of my biases and "theoretical dispositions" within the process of study has increased my own reflexivity as a researcher and is an important component in qualitative research (Kleinsasser, 2000, p.156). The conclusions and ideological approach are composed of the contributions of the influential philosophers such as: Freire (1985, 1998, 2000), Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970), Bourdieu (1984, 1986), and Bernstein (2003). These

individuals have been congruent with my own experiences, understanding, and meaning of the negative factors that influence academic performance within higher education.

I was interested and motivated to do this research as it was a step in the direction of facilitating social injustice within the education gap between White and Black/Latin@ students. It is my feeling, thoughts, and experiences that racial and cultural discrimination is interwoven within society and has been since 1619. The start of slavery where captive Africans were sold to British colonies in North America began in 1619 and continued till 1865, when the thirteenth amendment abolished slavery through the U.S. The start of recognizing Black as equals in society wouldn't be socially acceptable until 1968. The assassination of Martin Luther King led to a movement of over 100 black urban rebellions. The outrage included other racial groups such as Mexican Americans, where over 1,000 students "walked out" of school on March 3, 1968. Puerto Ricans on September 23, 1968 proclaimed Puerto Rico as the independent republic of Puerto Rico and tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans marched in Lares.

This history of racial exclusion for people of color has been federally support and the discriminatory practices have been expressed in the lack of federal services and support. Social security is an example where it was created in 1935 but excluded agricultural workers and domestic servants. These exclusions impacted predominately African American, Mexican, and Asian populations. This behavior of federal exclusion has included the federal housing programs during 1934 and 1962 that subsidized low-cost loans and provided \$120 billion in subsidized assistance to Whites. This was made possible by the underwriters of these loans that introduced a national appraisal system that tied property value of a loan and eligibility to race. All white communities received the highest ratings and benefited from low-cost, government backed loans, while people of color and mixed neighborhoods received the lowest ratings and denied loans. Less than 2 percent of government

assistance went to nonwhite families. This institutional practice of discrimination has existed for decades and has provided an advantage to White Americans over those of people of color. The legacy of preferential treatment of White people provided an inheritance of wealth that was intentionally directed away from people of color. This systemic preference has created a cycle of poverty for Black and Latin@ populations that is intergenerational and will require support that looks beyond the individual as source of assistance and places additional considerations to greater social structures.

As a researcher the ability to understand and make meaning of attrition and persistence requires the view, experience, and input from people of color. The lack of including voices and experience within current systems of operating, understanding, and making meaning construct a very narrow and limited view of a systemic problem. The need to evaluate systems includes the construct, supports, and perpetuation of racial and ethnic disparity within economic, social, educational, and political systems within the United States. I have worked with other students in the past, and found within my participants, similar narratives of working through great adversity to achieve an associate's degree. The ability of people of color to achieve a GED and an associate's degree is one that is complicated and influenced by factors not currently recognized in models of attrition or persistence.

The use of the philosophers: Freire (1985, 1998, 2000), Maslow (1943, 1964, 1970), Bourdieu (1984, 1986), and Bernstein (2003) have constructed a framework within my mind that recognizes the dynamic forces that construct, maintain, and perpetuate disparity. My attention on structures and my reflections within my paper are a product of my beliefs that the current dynamics are a combination of factors that are not easily isolated and only understood through dialogue and recognizing the interrelated nature between systems, history, and ideology. This paper allowed me to interact with participants in ways that facilitated mutual understanding and the construction of shared meaning.

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## Appendix

### A: Email Request

Dear <First Name, Last Name>,

This email message is an approved 2<sup>nd</sup> request by the Madison Area Technical College Institutional Review Board (IRB) to elicit participation within this research study from all students that obtained a GED. This request is pertaining to Black and Latin@ individuals, but it is being sent to all students to capture any potential racial/ethnic demographic errors within the system.

**The purpose of this study is:**

- To understand the experiences of Black and Latin@ identified students who have completed a GED and performed successfully in a technical studies program.

**The methods used to meet this purpose include:**

- Completion of a demographic survey.
- Voice recorded interviews ranging from a minimum of two hours and maximum of 6 hours.

**The risk involved:**

- No risk or minimal risk is expected
- If for any unforeseen reason there is any discomfort, embarrassment, or you feel questions are overstepping boundaries on your privacy, you may refuse to answer them or discontinue with the research.

**The privacy of the research includes:**

- Your right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or obligation and the information will not be used in the research.
- If you participate, the removal of identifiable data in the findings by changing names and summarizing responses into a general response to maintain privacy yet still provide an accurate account.
- Your review of the final findings to ensure an accurate reflection of your responses and intention.
- The recordings will be terminated after seven years or the completion of the research.
- There is limited access to the research, only Gilbert Villalpando and a supervising professor from UW-Madison will have access to the transcripts. All information you provide (including tapes) will be securely protected then destroyed after the use for research has expired or reached its seven year deadline.

**Questions about this research should be addressed to:**

Gilbert Villalpando, [gvillalpando@wisc.edu](mailto:gvillalpando@wisc.edu).

Ph.D student at UW-Madison

**B: Informed Consent Form****UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
Research Participant Information and Consent Form**

**Title of the Study:** GED to Technical College Academic Success

**Student Researcher:** Gilbert Villalpando (email: GVillalpando@wisc.edu)

**DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the successful completion of a technical studies degree after obtaining a General Education Development (GED) Certificate.

You have been asked to participate because you have been identified as a student who has a GED and has completed a technical studies program at Madison Area Technical College.

The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of Black and Latin@ students who have completed a GED and performed successfully in a technical studies program.

This study will include students who identify as Black, African American, Hispanic, Latin@, GED completer, and associate degree recipient.

The research is an interview that will take place at a location of your choice.

Audio tapes will be made of your participation. Only the researcher and advisor will hear the audio. The tapes will be kept for 7 years before they are destroyed.

**WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?**

If you decide to participate in this research you will be asked to complete a demographic survey and be recorded in interviews ranging from a minimum of 2 hours to a maximum of 6 hours.

You will be asked to complete a survey and 2 interviews.

Your participation for each interview will last approximately 1 hour minimum, the total is a minimum expectation of 2 hours.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?**

There are no anticipated risks, however, a breach of confidentiality is always possible. In order to mitigate the potential for a breach of confidentiality, data will be stored on a password protected server.

In addition, if any information is revealed that is sensitive, highly personal or identifiable, it will be deleted, and not included in any publications

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?**

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

**HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?**

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used. Only group characteristics will be published.

If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

**WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the student researcher, Gilbert Villalpando at GVillalpando@wisc.edu.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study it will have no effect on any services or treatment you are currently receiving.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_  
(please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Initials) I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.

## **C: Demographic Survey**

### **Characteristics**

How do you racially identify?

What is your age?

What is your sex?

### **K-12 History**

What state(s) did you receive your k-12 education?

What is the highest level of education achieved within K-12 before discontinuing?

What are your Parents/Caregivers highest levels of education?

Did you or your family receive any government assistance while in K-12? If so, please identify which.

How long of a time was between discontinuing high school and starting your GED?

### **GED History**

How long did it take to complete the GED?

What state did you complete your GED?

What date did you receive your GED?

Did you receive any government assistance while in the GED? If so, please identify which.

How long of a time was between the completion of the GED and starting a program?

### **Program History**

Did you receive any government assistance while in your associate degree program?

What program did you or are you about to complete?

If you have completed your program, how long did it take from start to completion of your program?

## **D: Interview Questions**

### **#) Main Question**

- **Potential Follow Up Question**

### **GED**

- 1) What difficulties did you experience while pursuing a GED?
  - What difficulties were unique to the GED that wasn't in high school?
  - What difficulties were similar to high school?
- 2) What helped you get through and complete the GED?
  - How were things different from high school?
  - What resources did you use?
- 3) What advice do you have for others working to complete a GED?

### **Associate's degree**

- 1) What difficulties did you experience while pursuing an associate's degree?
  - What difficulties were unique to the associate's degree that wasn't in a GED?
  - What difficulties were similar to the GED?
- 2) What helped you get through and complete the associate's degree?
  - How were things different from high school?
  - What resources did you use?
- 3) What advice do you have for others working to complete an associate's degree?