A STUDY EXPLORING THE PERCEIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN

WHO DROPPED OUT OF GED PREPARATION PROGRAMS

by

CORA ELLEN HOLT

B.S., Manhattan Christian College, 2001
M.S., Kansas State University, 2003

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2014

Abstract

Significant numbers of women drop out of GED preparation programs. This phenomenological study used interviews and demographic surveys to learn how 12 women perceived their experiences of dropping out of GED programs. Possible selves theory and McClusky's theory of margin provided the theoretical framework for this research. Possible selves theory examined how women's past, present, and future selves were considered in their experience of the phenomenon, while theory of margin was used to look at the network of challenges and supports present in their lives.

This study found that at the time the women dropped out of GED programs: (a) they no longer believed they could achieve their desired future selves, (b) past choices continued to adversely affect them, (c) their burdens far exceeded their resources, (d) they identified the status quo as their feared possible selves, and (e) they believed that having a tutor would have enabled them stay in GED classes.

The study recommends: (a) introducing theory of margin and possible selves to students as tools for taking stock and planning for educational success, (b) forming community volunteer tutoring networks, and (c) recording dropout numbers within GED programs to illustrate the need for additional funds. This population is marginalized because they become invisible to society and GED preparation programs when they stop attending.

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Acknowledgments

This dissertation could not have been completed without the help of Dr. Royce Ann Collins. Thank you for your patience, your guidance, your wisdom, and your sense of humor.

The women who volunteered for this study invited me into their homes and trusted me with their stories. I am forever in their debt.

Thank you to my wife, Dr. Alley Stoughton, for being kind and understanding and brilliant and supportive and for keeping the fridge stocked with beer. XX

Ellen Rottersmann, thank you. Oops, am I supposed to talk about my therapist?

Thank you to my family for their support: My mom Peggy, Sarah, Gero, Joshua, Jacob, James, Marcy, Simon Michael, Eleanor, Dylan, Ava, Cleo, Emma, Kathy Bleam, Bud, Vicki, and the cats.

Dedication

For Grandpa Harry Holt and Rufus.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Those who stay have been asked why others have left. Those who come to programs have been carefully researched to find out why others do not. We cannot learn much from research based on the wrong people. Assumed homogeneity in research has often only served to confuse an already complex set of issues. If future research would study dropouts more exclusively – both in the formative stages when they begin to consider quitting and at different points after they leave – we would be much better informed. (Quigley, 1997, p. 166)

In today's society, not having a high school diploma puts women at a considerable disadvantage, limiting employment opportunities and putting most postsecondary education out of reach (GED Testing Service, 2010b). In principle, the General Education Development (GED) program should be filling the gap created when women drop out of high school. However, significant numbers of women who drop out of high school also drop out of GED preparation programs without a credential (GED Testing Service, 2010b; Martin, 2010). This study explored this phenomenon.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background that frames the research study. Following this section will be the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the research approach, the researcher's perspective, and assumptions. It concludes with the proposed rationale, significance of the study and definition of terms.

Background

Disparity in Levels of Education Among Women

Levels of education among women have shifted dramatically over the last century. During the 1890s, a mere 4% of American women finished high school (Ferguson & Mears, 2005). Most young women in 1920 completed schooling at the eighth grade. However, in the mid 1920s high schools began springing up in virtually every town across America, and at that point secondary education for women began gaining momentum. By 1929, the high school graduation rate among women had grown to over 20% (Lindeman, 1926; NCES, 2009; Schultz, 1995). This rising trend continued steadily through the decades that followed, reaching a peak in 2007 with 87% of women achieving a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The standard educational track for the majority of women now includes graduating from high school, with more and more women continuing on to post-secondary education. Findings from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012c) show 28.3% of women have a bachelor's degree or higher. The National Science Foundation (2012) highlights an increasing number of women advancing toward terminal degrees. In the academic year 2010/2011 over 23,000 women earned doctoral degrees (National Science Foundation, 2012). Between academic years 2000/2001 and 2010/2011 the number of doctorates awarded to women in science and engineering increased from 20.9% to 25.4% (National Science Foundation, 2012). The ongoing gains in educational achievement enjoyed by women throughout higher education contrast sharply with the number of young women who continue to drop out of high school.

In New York City, the largest school district in the United States, the 4-year cohort graduation rate for young women in 2009-2010 stood at 74.6 % (NYC Dept. of Education, 2012). For the same period in Los Angeles, America's second largest school district, the 4-year

cohort graduation rate for females was 65.7% (California Department of Education Educational Demographic Office, 2012); for Chicago, the third largest school district, the graduation rate for young women in the 2009-2010 cohort totaled 66.2% (Chicago Public Schools, 2013).

"Every school day, more than 7,200 students fall through the cracks of America's public schools" (Swanson, 2010, p. 23). In 2012, the dropout number for high school students in the United States was 1.1 million and just under half of those students were female (Education Week, 2012). Future projections anticipate that the number of women who leave school before graduation will remain high (Patterson, 2010; Swanson, 2010). The 2012 American Community Survey reports that over 20 million women in the United States do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent; that number represents almost 16% of all adult women in the U.S., one in every seven (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012c). The number of women over the age of 18 without a high school diploma (or equivalent) increased by 1.5 million between the years 2004 and 2009, with currently an average of more than 1 in 5 female high school students dropping out (Swanson, 2010; US Census Bureau, 2006, 2010).

Although other strategies (Job Corps, correspondence, alternative schools) can be found, women seeking a high school equivalent typically opt for the General Educational Development (GED) Test (GED Testing Service, 2010a; Martin, 2010; Quigley, 1997). "The 'recognized equivalent' in most cases will be a GED credential" (Tyler, 2005, p. 55). Most women who drop out of high school would be considered prospective GED students, at least in part because of the wide availability of the GED in all fifty states (Martin, 2010). Without a GED, further educational opportunities for women are few, with a GED comes the possibility of a postsecondary education (Boudett, Murnane & Willett, 2000). Gaining a GED dismantles one of the barriers to higher learning, opening up opportunities that go some way toward lessening the

widening disparity in levels of education, employment, and income among women (Boudett et al., 2000; Quigley, 1997; Tyler, 2005).

For 2012, the unemployment rate for people 25 years and older with a bachelor's degree stood at 4.5%, 8.3% for high school graduates, and 12.4% for those without a high school diploma (see Table 1); the unemployment rate for all workers during 2012 averaged 6.8% (see Table 1). In January 2013, the unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma had risen to 14.1% (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), nearly double the overall unemployment rate of 7.6% (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

Table 1. 2012 Unemployment Rates and Median Weekly Earnings by Educational Attainment

Level of Unemployment %	Level of Education	Median Weekly Earnings
2.5%	Doctoral Degree	1,624
3.5%	Master's Degree	1,300
4.5%	Bachelor's Degree	1,066
6.2%	Associate's Degree	785
7.7%	Some College, No Degree	727
8.3%	High School Diploma / GED	622
12.4%	Less Than High School	471

Persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

In 2011, it was reported that women without a high school diploma had median earnings of $16,211 (United States Department of Commerce, 2012). For the same period, women with a high school diploma (including the GED) earned $26,309, followed by $35,468 for women with an associate's degree, and $49,281 for women with a bachelor's degree (United States Department of Commerce, 2012). Increasingly, "the likelihood that a person lands a job and the number of hours the person works depends on the level of education" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 87).

General Education Development Test

Created during World War II, the GED filled an educational gap for members of the Armed Forces who had joined up without first finishing high school (Martin, 2010; Tyler, 2005). Having a GED mitigated the disadvantage those soldiers may have experienced after their return to civilian life. In contrast to the years of classroom attendance required for a high school diploma, the GED did not require a big investment of time; the GED credential was (and continues to be) achieved by passing a battery of tests. Gaining the GED also made it possible for veterans to go to college under the benefits of the 1944 GI Bill (Tyler, 2005).

Despite being originally intended for use by military personnel, in 1947 "New York became the first state to allow school dropouts who were not veterans to seek the GED credential . . . Other states soon followed" (Tyler, 2005, p. 48). The Job Corps program, which provides no-cost education and vocational training to young people aged 16-24 (United States Department of Labor, 2013), was given permission to allow their trainees to take the GED in 1965 (Quigley, 1997). Ironically, as of July 2013, despite the origins of the GED being rooted firmly with military personnel, the Armed Forces are not currently accepting people with a GED for enlistment without also having a minimum of 15 semester hours of college credit from a regionally accredited institution.

Although the process varies somewhat from state to state, Murnane, Willett and Tyler (2000) report that all GED adult education centers give a series of pre-enrollment educational assessment tests. The process is similar for GED programs provided within correctional facilities and Job Corps. For example, in Kansas, this means a "complete diagnostic assessment of learners' skills to permit classification of their educational functional level" (University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning: Division of Adult Studies, 2004, p. 176). The resulting

scores determine program placement. Students with higher scores enroll in the GED classes. Students with lower scores generally enroll in Adult Basic Ed (ABE) or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Periodic re-testing determines when students have made enough educational gains to move up a learning level (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems, 2006; Kansas Board of Regents, 2010b).

In many areas a fast track option exists, allowing students with particularly high assessment scores to enroll in a program designed to prepare them for the GED tests in a matter of weeks (Ozarks Technical Community College, 2013; Virginia Department of Education, 2013; Western Piedmont Community College, 2013). GED examinees self-reported the total number of hours spent preparing for the tests; the median number reported for fast track students was 30 hours (Murnane & Tyler, 2000).

The GED Testing Service (GTS), a program of the American Council on Education (ACE), carries the responsibility for the content of the GED tests, as well as oversight of the stringent conditions required during the actual testing (Tyler, 2005). Available in all 50 states, the GED test is normally administered over two consecutive days, amounting to a total testing time of just less than eight hours. GED candidates always take the tests in person, never via correspondence. In March 2011, the corporation Pearson VUE issued a press release and announced that they would partner with the GED Testing to Service to act "as its technology partner for the implementation of testing on computer" at official test sites (Pearson VUE, 2011, p. 1). The current version of the GED, known as the 2002 Series, was designed to reflect the importance of developing an aptitude for problem solving and critical thinking (ACE, 2011). The GED Testing Service (2011) announced a transformation of the GED, planned to take effect beginning January 2014. The proposed changes include new tests that are more closely aligned

with Common Core State Standards, an increased variety of learning resources, and an increased emphasis on assisting GED recipients to prepare for the transition into post secondary education (GED Testing Service, 2011).

At present, the GED consists of five tests, measuring ability in five subject areas: Math, Reading, Science, Social Studies, and Writing (ACE, 2011). A national standard score for passing the tests was established in 1997; before that date "the [minimum] passing standard required to obtain a GED varied across states" (Tyler, 2005, p. 66). All the tests use multiple-choice format, with the exception of writing, which has two sections: the first section contains multiple-choice questions while the second section involves writing an essay. A number of accommodations available for students with documented disabilities include audio testing and tests written in Braille. Under some circumstances the GED tests can be provided in French and Spanish.

Theoretical Framework

McClusky presented theory of margin as "one approach to understanding the dynamics of adult learning" (McClusky, 1970, p. 82). He developed theory of margin as a tool for measuring the pressures of an individual's life (load) against the resources available to deal with the pressures (power) (Hiemstra 1993, 2002; Lorge, McClusky, Jensen & Hallenbeck, 1963; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Hiemstra (1993) described the function of margin as "finding ways to help adults maintain a productive posture in meeting the requirements of living" (p. 41). Load consists of the aggregate of such constituents as family responsibilities, work, economic pressures, housing, health, and goals, while power contains a combination of assets, skills and resources available to offset the load. Comparing the degrees of load and power results

in the margin. At its most simple, margin can be represented mathematically as load over power (load/power=margin) Lorge et al., 1963; McClusky, 1964, 1970).

McClusky's theory seeks to measure potential for adapting to change, and/or for absorbing additional responsibility, without reaching breaking point (Lorge et al., 1963). For example, any number over 1.00 indicates far too much load is being carried; there is no buffer. A margin of 1.00 shows that the load and power are of equal weight, which leaves no spare resources "with which to cushion emergencies or to invest in life expansion" (Lorge et al., 1963, p. 17), while a margin of 0.70 conveys that there are resources available in the event of a change of circumstances. This theory also helps measure a person's safety net, or it can sound a warning when no net exists.

The versatility of theory of margin can be seen in its use as a research framework in a variety of disciplines: medicine (Kalynych, 2010; Stevenson, 1982), organizational psychology (Madsen, John, Miller & Warren, 2004), and education (Ellis, 2008; Walker, 1996), to name but a few. Lorge et al. (1963) was clear that McClusky's theory had a place in adult education. "In the light of our theory therefore, a necessary condition for learning is access to and/or the activation of a Margin of Power that may be available for application to the processes which the learning situation requires" (Hiemstra, 1993, p. 42). When women wishing to participate in GED programs come up against barriers to education, being without any margin to offset these challenges further hinders their efforts. "Environments that are weighted too heavily in the direction of challenge without adequate support are toxic" (Kegan, 1994, p. 42).

Theory of margin has the capacity to expand insight and provide clarity. It gives a framework for focusing on specific factors. "In terms of contributions to our understanding of adult learning, for most adults a grasp of what McClusky developed is an epiphany in terms of

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their own life circumstances" (Hiemstra, 1993, p. 42). The insight provided by this epiphany has the potential to assist women in evaluating their positions. The utility of theory of margin is its potential to aid women in planning the changes necessary to achieve a margin that will allow them to be successful in their educational endeavors, thereby lessening the adversity brought about by scholastic deficits.

In addition to the McClusky's theory of margin, this study was framed using the possible selves theory. Psychologists Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced possible selves theory in connection with research investigating the extent to which self-knowledge guides and influences future behavior and choices. Possible selves "are defined as conceptions of the self in future states" (Leondari, Syngollitou, Kiosseoglou, 1998, p. 153), encouraging self-examination and providing self-awareness that functions to motivate individuals to set future goals and to develop specific strategies to meet those goals (Barreto, 2009). Future selves comprise two components: the self one desires to become, and the self one is fearful of becoming. Although possible selves are distinct from past self and present self, they are "intimately connected to them" (Leondari et al., 1998, p. 153).

Past self represents who the individual used to be, and influences the present and future self. For example, previous school experiences affect a person's current view of education. Those experiences also act to shape feelings about future academic involvement. Similarly, failing to meet typically expected milestones (not graduating from high school, lack of career success) alters the perception of what is achievable, both now and in the future (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996).

Women who drop out of high school contend not only with the consequences of being undereducated; they also face the challenge of making meaning of their past in such a way that

something constructive can rise from their prior experiences, thus allowing them to move forward toward the hoped for possible self and away from the dreaded possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). "Individuals make meaning of their experiences and use that meaning as an impetus to change themselves and their circumstances" (Barreto & Frazier, 2012, p. 1787). The desired result of the application of possible selves is a realistic, goal-driven plan that incorporates coping strategies for dealing with possible setbacks.

Devising a plan to achieve the desired possible self must also provide strategies for dealing with setbacks in order to adequately assist undereducated women "to attain education-focused possible selves in the face of the real obstacles of time, energy, and resources they face" (Lee & Oyserman, 2007, p. 46). The balance necessary to achieve possible selves may be more elusive for low-income women because of additional obstacles associated with poverty (Lee & Oyserman, 2007).

Possible selves involves making meaning of past self, assessing the present self, and formulating a plan for moving toward the desired self and away from the feared self (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

> To the extent that individuals value and desire the positive or hoped-for possible selves, they adjust their behavior to increase their chances of realizing those selves. To the extent that individuals are repelled by the negative or feared possible selves, they devise behavioral patterns that decrease their chances of realizing those feared selves. In other words, the choices that people make in the present are based on their desire to develop toward the person they hope to become and away from the person they fear becoming. (Leondari, 2007, p. 18)

Possible selves and theory of margin complement each other and provide a useful framework for assessing current resources and identifying potential shortfalls, thereby aiding and supporting the development of an attainable positive future self. These two theories frame this study, which investigated the experiences of women who dropped out of the GED preparation courses.

Problem Statement

The GED Testing Service first included gender as a variable in their 2002 annual reporting. That year, 41.8% of women who took the GED tests passed (GED Testing Service, 2004); in 2012 that number was again 41.8% (GED Testing Service, 2013b). In 2012, from among the more than 20,000,000 women in the United States without a high school credential, 301,342 (1.5%) took the GED test and 141,927 (0.7%) passed the GED test (GED Testing Service, 2013b).

Inclusion in the national GED report requires students to have tested in at least one subject area during that year's reporting period (GED Testing Service, 2013a), but the report does not provide information on overall enrollment in GED preparation classes. The GED Testing Service develops and distributes official GED testing materials, but they have no involvement in the provision of GED preparation programs (GED Testing Service, 2013b). Students access the necessary adult education instruction through programs provided independently by individual states (GED Testing Service, 2012b).

States are required to produce detailed annual performance reports for all "state-administered federally funded Adult Education programs" (National Reporting System, 2013a). Among the information gathered in these outcome based reports are data for adult learners seeking a GED credential. For these reports, adult students are not counted as learners until they

have participated in at least 12 hours of classroom instruction (Colorado Department of Education, 2013; Kansas Board of Regents Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2009). As a former instructor for a rural GED program in Kansas, the researcher worked with five female students who dropped out before reaching 12 hours of attendance. Although not included in the enrollment statistics, those five women accounted for a loss of nearly 40% of the potential students for that semester. Although GED program dropout data are not widely recorded, when these numbers are available they show similar levels of dropout.

During the years 1995-1998 in Boston, Massachusetts, "62% of the women dropped out of the ALP [adult learner program] before completing their GED" (Rivera, 2008, p. 114). In a study prepared for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, GED program dropout rates of 50% were documented (Kelly, 1997). While discussing an on-site GED program, Human Resource Development Quarterly reported, "of the 151 former students, 39 were classified as program finishers. The remainder (112) dropped out of the programs" (Vann & Hinton, 1994, p. 147).

As discussed earlier, adult education programs use pre-enrollment testing to determine the level of educational placement for each student (University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning: Division of Adult Studies, 2004, p. 176), and women in GED preparation programs have levels of literacy that put them on a par with students in secondary education (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems, 2006). Women in GED programs typically face a time investment of only months, with many states offering fast-track programs that can be finished in weeks rather than months (Ozarks Technical Community College, 2013; Virginia Department of Education, 2013; Western Piedmont Community College, 2013). The problem arises when women don't finish at all.

Although having a GED does not guarantee socio-economic benefits, women are often at an economic loss without it. In 2010, the rate of employment for women with a secondary school credential was 20% higher than for women who dropped out (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Women can be required to obtain a GED as a condition of remaining on public assistance (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, 2011; GED Testing Service, 2012a; Texas Education Agency, 2013). Increasingly, employers expect a high school diploma or its equivalent for minimum wage positions (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011; GED Testing Service, 2012b; Taylor et al., 2011; Tyler, 2004).

For women who do not have a high school diploma, dropping out of the GED program can have far-reaching consequences because "as a high school education becomes the minimum educational standard, those who drop out are more likely to become members of an educational underclass, from which adult education may be the only hope of escape" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 9). Women who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent "face far greater hardships on average than their graduating peers… decisions not to finish school also hold implications for local labor markets, the national economy, and society at large" (Swanson, 2010, p. 22), and will have difficulty sustaining a living with increasing numbers of women destined to live in poverty.

More women drop out of high school each year than complete the GED, resulting in an ever-increasing number of women who do not have a high school credential (GED testing service, 2013). For example, the number of women who successfully tested in 2012 was just under 170,000 (GED Testing Service, 2013b), whereas the number of women dropping out of high school in that year was more than three times greater.

The lack of a GED acts as an effective gatekeeper, preventing women from accessing educational opportunities. Failure to obtain a GED all but eliminates a woman's post-secondary

educational options, and the lack of a GED rules out eligibility for federal student financial aid

(Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1999; Boudett et al., 2000; United States Department of Education,

2013). "For a relatively high percentage of noncontinuing students, the reasons for leaving a

program are simply not known" (Dirkx & Jha, 1994, p. 279). Up to this point, little research has

been done with women who drop out of GED preparation programs; consequently little is known

about this phenomenon.

Purpose Statement

This study explored the phenomenon of women who enrolled in a GED preparation

program, but dropped out before taking the GED test. This research gathered the narratives of a

sample of women and considered their reasons for withdrawing through the lenses of possible

selves theory and theory of margin. Possible selves theory explored how women viewed their

possible selves at the time they withdrew. Theory of margin was used to look at women's

situations at the time they dropped out to learn which aspects of power and load they felt had

contributed to dropping out.

Research Question

How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs

before taking the GED test?

Sub-Questions

- How did women describe their hoped-for future selves at the time they withdrew
  from the GED preparation classes?

- How did women describe their feared selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- According to theory of margin, how did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?

Population

The population consisted of women who lived in Jamaica Plain, MA, and had previously enrolled in a preparation program for the GED, but who left before taking the GED tests. The total number of women contained within this population was not known because the data necessary for making an assessment have not been collected. State reports did not include adult education participants who attended less than 12 hours of instruction, and national reports issued by the GED Testing Service (through the American Council on Education) included only data for people who tested in at least one subject area during that particular year (GED Testing Service, 2010).

After discussing this project with local community and adult education centers, there appeared to be numerous women available to interview. While none of the centers would go on record as to the number of dropouts, one center mentioned about 20% of women withdrew from the classes prior to taking the test. The director of one GED testing center stated that there was no shortage of women who had left preparation programs and assured the researcher that there was no issue in finding women matching the selection criteria:

- To ensure their experience base could be recalled with clarity, the women had participated in a GED program within the past 5 years.

- The women were not currently participating in a GED program.

- The women had not taken the GED test or any other high school equivalency exam.

- The women were at least 18 years old.

Research Design

This study made use of phenomenological inquiry in an effort to encourage women to describe their lives "as they make sense to them" (Babbie, 2001, p. 282). It sought to "describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51), and endeavored to answer the question "what is the essence of experience of the phenomenon for these people?" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Qualitative methodology was an appropriate approach for this study because it allowed women the opportunity to provide their own narratives and descriptions of complex events and situations. The emotional impact of their circumstances would not have been effectively conveyed through quantitative methods. Payne (2005) wrote that talking to subjects "and listening to them talk about their concrete experiences is to learn from the experts" (p. 163). Because of its flexibility, qualitative methodology made possible the disclosure of unexpected insights, and allowed for the discovery of interconnected factors and characteristics. Within this study, it permitted the examination of multiple layers of an individual's life. Through qualitative methodology it was possible to observe life variables as they overlapped and intersected, in recognition that each variable had the potential for increased significance due to its relationship to other variables. "Qualitative researchers assume there are aspects of reality that cannot be quantified. More particularly, they believe it is both possible and important to discover and understand how people make sense of what happens in their lives" (Locke, Spiriduso, & Silverman, 2000, p. 97). Qualitative research allowed the examination of the characteristics of a woman's life, as individual factors and also in conjunction with other

characteristics. Qualitative research allowed room for ambiguity and contradictions, necessary because both were factors of the lived experience.

A pilot study was conducted with two participants who met the selection criteria. Based on their feedback and responses, the interview questions were adjusted.

Participants were selected from a group of women who had dropped out of a GED program within the last five years and were identified through adult learning and community centers. Participants came from the Boston, MA area. In-depth interviews provided the primary method of data collection, supplemented by a demographic questionnaire. With the permission of the Kansas State Institutional Review Board, the researcher conducted taped interviews with 12 participants, which were then transcribed verbatim. HyperRESEARCH qualitative data analysis software assisted in the coding of the data. Data were then coded by hand to search for additional themes.

Significance

This study stemmed from the researcher's desire to know the circumstances and lived experiences of women who failed to test for the GED, in order to understand how they interpreted events and made meaning of the phenomenon.

> It is just as important to know why adults do not participate as why they do. Indeed, since it is usually the people who 'need' education most- the poorly educated – who fail to participate, understanding the barriers to participation has been a subject of special interest to researchers and policymakers. Unfortunately, it is usually even harder to find out why people do not do something than why they do. (Cross, 1981, p. 97)

This study sought to begin to address the gap in published research involving women who left the GED program before achieving a credential. "If future research would study

dropouts more exclusively – both in the formative stages when they begin to consider quitting and at different points after they leave – we would be much better informed" (Quigley, 1997, p. 166). As stated earlier, post-secondary education is an important factor in rising out of poverty, but without a GED this group of women could not gain access to post secondary education or federal financial aid (United States Department of Education, 2013).

This research provided the opportunity to hear directly from women about their experiences of attempting to further their education while they simultaneously struggled with imbalances between demands of life and the resources available to meet those demands.

> Knowing why adults participate in formal adult education does not tell us why many do not. In fact, one of the field's biggest mysteries is why more adults, especially those who might benefit the most, are not involved in adult education. (Merriam et. al, 2007, p. 65)

Finally, this research added to the existing body of knowledge by providing an opportunity for women to speak about their experiences of adult education in the context of their lives as a whole, at the place where all the elements intersected.

Researcher Background

The researcher had an interest in this area because of her past experience working with adult learners. The researcher volunteered for several years in the adult education program in Manhattan, KS, and also volunteered in the literacy program at the Riley County Correctional Facility. She later taught in the GED program in Wamego, KS.

Assumptions

This study had the following assumptions:

1. Experience as a teacher/volunteer in GED/ABE programs provided the researcher with a basic understanding of adult education programs.

2. Participants understood the questions and provided answers that reflected the reality of their lives.

3. Obtaining a graduate equivalent diploma had potential benefits for the participants.

Limitations

This study had the following limitations:

1. Participants were chosen because of their availability and willingness to be interviewed.

2. The sample was geographically restricted to Boston, MA.

3. The information gathered via interview questions was dependent on the willingness of the respondent to reveal personal details and their ability to express stories and experiences.

4. Researcher bias presented the possibility of a limitation. The effort to "establish the truth of things" was not immune from the frame of reference and bias of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57).

Definition of Terms

ABE. Adult Basic Education refers to education focused on adult learners currently functioning below an eighth grade level (United States Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education Services, 2014).

Barriers. "Factors that inhibit or prevent people from participating in activities such as adult education are sometimes referred to as barriers, constraints, deterrents, impediments, or obstacles" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998, p. 1).

Feared Selves. " The [future] selves we are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954).

Future Selves. "Represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954).

GED Tests. The General Education Development Tests measure the major academic skills and concepts associated with four years of regular high school instruction. They provide an opportunity for persons who have not graduated from high school to earn a high school equivalency diploma. The GED Tests measure competency in five subject areas: Language Arts-Writing, Social Studies, Science, Language Arts-Reading, and Mathematics (KBOR, 2010a).

Literacy. "An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" from the National Literacy Act of 1991 (Quigley, 1997, p. 14).

Load. "Load is divided into two groups of interacting elements: external load consists of tasks involved in the usual requirements of living such as those connected with family, work, civic obligations, and the like; and internal load consisting of those life expectancies set by the

individual for herself "(Lorge et al., 1963, p. 15). Internal load includes aspirations, desires, self-concept, goals, and future expectations.

Margin. "Margin is the relationship of Load to Power. In simplest terms Margin is surplus power. It is the Power available to a person over and beyond that required to handle his Load" (McClusky, 1970, p. 82).

Postsecondary Education. "The provision of a formal instructional program whose curriculum is designed primarily for students who are beyond the compulsory age for high school. This includes programs whose purpose is academic, vocational, and continuing professional education, and excludes vocational and adult basic education programs" (Hussar & Bailey, 2007, p. 143).

Power. "Power consists of a combination of such interacting factors as physical, social, mental, and economic abilities together with acquired skills and the like which may contribute to the effective performance of life tasks" (Lorge et. al, 1963, p. 16).

Summary

Well over half a million women drop out of high school each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Currently, 20 million women in the US do not have a high school diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2012a). As the officially recognized second chance for a high school credential, the GED has become increasingly necessary as more and more employers demand this of their workers. The GED opens up vast numbers of educational opportunities, including eligibility for federal financial aid.

Little is known about why women enroll in GED preparation programs but fail to continue to the point of testing, and consequently do not show up in official statistics. This chapter was an overview of the qualitative study designed to explore the lived experiences of

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women who dropped out of the GED preparation programs. Discussion included the background, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, research design, significant research background assumptions, limitations, and definitions of key terminology related to the study. The next chapter contains a review of the literature informing this study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived experiences of women who withdrew from GED preparation programs prior to taking the GED test. This review of the literature begins with an examination of aspects of the General Educational Development Test, including its history as the high school alternative, its utility with regard to employment and income, and its role in accessing post-secondary education. Perspectives on adult participation in learning are examined. Next, McClusky's theory of margin is considered, along with research that incorporated theory of margin. Finally, possible selves theory is reviewed within the perspective of adult education, including recent studies in adult education utilizing possible selves as a framework. Dropout rates in GED programs are not reported, which gave rise to the perception that the retention rate of women students in GED programs is poor. Discovering how this experience affects their future potential re-engagement in the GED process is important.

The General Educational Development Test (GED)

GED as the High School Alternative

The General Educational Development Test (GED) was initiated in 1942 as a means of bestowing an educational status comparable to high school graduation on soldiers returning from wartime service (Martin, 2010; Tyler, 2005). Having the GED made it possible to take advantage of college opportunities via the GI Bill and provided those looking for employment equal footing in the job market (GED Testing Service, 2010a; Murnane & Tyler, 2000). By 1952, the general public was allowed to take the GED because of its widespread acceptance as a diploma equivalent by employers as well as by state and local governments (Georges, 2001).

No longer simply an educational pathway for soldiers, the GED "has evolved markedly so that today the credential is the primary second chance route to high school certification for school dropouts in the United States" (Tyler, Murnane, & Willett, 2000, p. 432). The GED credential ranked first as the most widely accepted alternate qualification for those who did not complete high school for both male and female dropouts (Georges, 2001; Heckman, JingJing, & Rubinstein, 2000; Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2010; Murnane, et al., 2000; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003; Swanson, 2010; Tyler et al., 2000; Tyler, 2004). As well as providing a method of obtaining a high school equivalent credential, Maralani (2011) viewed the GED as serving "an important social function as well. It gives individuals without a secondary degree a way to ameliorate the stigma of being a dropout at any time in their adult lives" (p. 1059). In McClendon's (2011) assessment, the benefits of obtaining the GED extended from the individual into society:

> Adult education is also an investment in the future of our nation, as research shows that better educated parents raise better-educated, more successful children, who are less likely to end up in poverty or prison. There are also indirect benefits to education that go beyond the individual and accrue to society as a whole. The view that education is key to individual economic security is supported by the recent unemployment numbers. (p. 3)

However, Rivera (2008) argued that the wide acceptance of the GED masked the real possibility that high schools used GEDs as a means of shedding poorly performing students. While acknowledging the necessity for some type of alternative credential, Levitan, Mangum, Mangum, and Sum (2003) questioned whether the GED was simply a cheap replica, disproportionate in value to a high school diploma. Additional researchers (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Sandlin, 2005; Tyler, 2004) expressed dim views of the value of the GED, did

not equate the credential with high school completion, and denounced it as having no discernable positive effects.

> Given the preponderance of evidence against beneficial effects of GED certification for the average GED recipient, it is surprising that the GED program has grown so dramatically in the past 50 years…A primary cause is the growth of government programs that promote the GED as a quick fix for addressing the high school dropout problem…American social statistics are distorted by assuming that GEDs are equivalent to ordinary high school diplomas…the GED *creates* problems…and as a group, GEDs fail to perform at the level of high school graduates. (Heckman et al., 2010, p. 5)

This section presents the origin and purpose of the GED and detailed the wide-ranging and differing perspectives regarding the utility of the GED and its comparable value to a traditional high school diploma. The following section examined the impact of the GED on employment and wages.

Effect of the GED on Employment and Earnings

The GED is widely available and generally accepted as the second-chance high school credential (Boudett et al., 2000), and most adult education programs set the GED as the ultimate goal. This is especially the case for programs funded through government agencies, where the emphasis tends to focus on increasing the employability and earning potential of low-income adults (Murnane & Tyler, 2000). However, despite its prevalence, "there is little consensus about the economic benefits of taking and passing this test " (Georges, 2001, p. 49).

In the labor market, GED recipients compete directly with traditional high school graduates in situations where prospective employers had specifically required a high school diploma or equivalent, and analysis shows differing opinions of the value of the GED compared

to a high school diploma in those circumstances (Murnane, et al., 2000; Georges, 2001). Two distinct perspectives on the effectiveness of the GED in raising employment potential and improving earnings have emerged (Rumberger & Lamb, 2003), "some scholars have suggested that the GED does not provide the same economic rewards as a regular high school diploma, while other scholars argue that GED holders fare better in the labor market than other dropout groups" (p. 357).

Multiple studies (Boesel et al., 1999; Georges, 2001; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Murnane et al., 2000; Tyler, 2004) demonstrated that, compared to a typical high school graduate, a person with the GED remained less likely to obtain employment and, even after securing employment, she/he would continue to earn lower wages than high school graduates. Heckman, Humphries, LaFontaine and Rodriguez (2011) reported that obtaining a GED results in minimal economic benefits and does not improve employment prospects.

In contrast, other studies (GED Testing Service, 2011; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003; Siverls, 1998; Snider, 2010) conclude that earning a GED credential improves the potential for employment and higher earnings. In particular, Rumberger and Lamb's (2003) investigation found "the payoff for earning a GED is even higher for women…female dropouts who did not return to school [GED] earned 25% lower wages than male dropouts" (p. 363).

In many instances, researchers (Sandlin, 2004, 2005; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010) found the results to be mixed. Equally true for men and women, "GED recipients on average earn more than uncertified high school dropouts and less than high school graduates" (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010, p. 256). For a distinct group of dropouts – those who left school with comparatively low literacy levels- obtaining a GED has a positive impact on employment opportunities and future incomes, but it did not have a similar effect on the outcomes of those

who had left school with higher literacy levels (Maralani, 2011; Murnane et al., 2000; Tyler, 2004). Within studies (Boudett, et al., 2000; Martin, 2010) that showed a positive correlation between obtaining the GED and subsequent employment and economic gains, the gains were not substantial and did not result in a significant economic improvement; "sobering is the fact that the mean earnings of the GED holders are very low" (Tyler, 2004, p. 596).

Similarly, although dropouts with low skills have been shown to experience higher wages after getting the GED, earnings were meager to begin with and the increases in incomes "while quite large in percentage terms, are modest by the scale of what it takes to raise a family in the United States" (Murnane & Tyler, 2000, p. 64). With regard to the GED as a vehicle by which a family could rise out of poverty, "the economic gains tend to be small and are not nearly sufficient to pull poor people out of poverty" (Sandlin, 2005, p. 23). The next section discusses the effect of the GED on poverty and in gaining access to post-secondary education.

GED, Poverty, and Post-Secondary Education

The majority of the women who drop out of high school tend to be from lower-income families, with many living beneath the poverty line (Levitan et al., 2003; Murnane & Tyler, 2000). Correlations between lack of education and poverty can be found throughout the literature (Rivera, 2008; Swanson, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2012b). "GED recipients come from more disadvantaged backgrounds and these characteristics are associated with lower educational attainment" (Maralani, 2011, p. 1062). Stephens (2010) found that "the greater majority of GED students fall within or below the poverty line" (p. 6). Historically, people with a high school equivalency credential (instead of a high school diploma) are more likely have come from lower-income families (Murnane & Tyler, 2000), and an estimated 60% of homeless women with children do not have a high school diploma or GED credential (Georges, 2001).

Women experience poverty in significant numbers (see Table 2). In 2011 the poverty threshold for a single person was $10,890 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013); each additional person in a household raised the threshold by $3,820. Single women are more widely affected by poverty than women with partners (see Table 3), and "households headed by women are more likely to experience poverty than households headed by men. Eradicating poverty and improving education are inextricably connected" (Capra, 2009, p. 75).

Table 2. U.S. Adult Female Poverty Levels, by Race / Ethnic Origin 2011

Race / Ethnic Origin	Population	Poverty Level	
American Indian and Alaska Native	1,244,553	352,635	(28.3%)
Asian	6,928,090	852,908	(12.3%)
Black or African American	16,650,195	4,385,930	(26.3%)
Hispanic Origin	18,622,381	4,551,589	(24.4%)
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	400,410	48,959	(12.2%)
Two or More Races	2,178,546	418,257	(19.2%)
White	100,251,718	12,842,105	(12.8%)

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2012

Data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012b) starkly illustrated the link between level of education and economic status, reporting that in households headed by women without a high school credential, 54.5% lived below the poverty threshold in 2011. This compared to 37.4% for families headed by women with a high school credential, 26.7% for families headed by women with some college, and 10.8% for families headed by women with at least a

bachelor's degree (see Table 3). Women not living beneath the poverty line at the time they drop

out of high school risk sliding into poverty.

> The percentage of women reporting income below the poverty line varies by levels of
>
> education. The poverty gap between women with a GED certificate and high school
>
> graduates has grown since the late 1980s… women with a GED certificate have a
>
> significantly higher probability of entry into poverty than high school graduates.
>
> (Georges, 2001, p. 58)

Multiple studies (Capra, 2009; Georges, 2001; Levitan et al., 2003) identified education as the

single most important factor in averting (or ameliorating) economic hardship. "Poverty

prevention is more dependent on education than on any other factor, as is escape from

poverty…for those who already are in poverty, education is an essential component of any

means of escape" (Levitan et al., 2003, p. 274).

Table 3. Female-Headed Families, No Spouse Present - 2011

Total Families by Educational Attainment
[Number Below Poverty Threshold]   [Percent Below Poverty Threshold]

Race / Ethnic Origin	Total	No High School Credential	High School Credential*	Some College	4-Year Degree or Higher
American Indian and Alaska Native	215,328 *[99,437]* *[46.1%]*	49,839 *[31,887]* *[63.9%]*	68,210 *[33,668]* *[49.4%]*	83,981 *[30,778]* *[36.6%]*	13,298 *[3,104]* *[23.3]*
Asian	530,609 *[101,412]* *[19.1%]*	84,244 *[27,935]* *[33.2%]*	106,585 *[25,756]* *[24.2%]*	133,611 *[23,630]* *[17.7%]*	206,169 *[24,091]* *[11.7%]*
Black or African American	4,338,148 *[1,692,944]* *[39.0%]*	716,630 *[459,512]* *[64.1%]*	1,478,229 *[704,505]* *[47.7%]*	1,473,143 *[459,228]* *[31.2%]*	670,146 *[69,699]* *[10.4%]*
Hispanic Origin	3,089,813 *[1,271,731]* *[41.1%]*	1,117,195 *[643,720]* *[57.6%]*	841,953 *[350,011]* *[41.6%]*	831,496 *[223,650]* *[26.9%]*	299,169 *[54,350]* *[18.2%]*
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	48,427 *[7,558]* *[15.6%]*	10,083 *[4,183]* *[41.5%]*	16,846 *[2,988]* *[17.7%]*	15,208 *[387]* *[2.5%]*	6,290 **[0]* *[0]*
Two or More Races	328,727 *[135,592]* *[41.2%]*	50,875 *[39,394]* *[77.4%]*	75,487 *[37,351]* *[49.5%]*	163,514 *[51,772]* *[31.7]*	38,851 *[7,076]* *[18.2%]*
White	10,216,380 *[2,857,250]* *[27.9%]*	1,782,924 *[869,910]* *[48.8%]*	3,032,555 *[948,910]* *[31.3%]*	3,436,291 *[851,537]* *[24.8%]*	1,964,610 *[186,893]* *[9.5%]*
Total	18,767,434 *[6,165,923]* *[32.8%]*	3,809,790 *[2,076,541]* *[54.5%]*	5,619,865 *[2,103,189]* *[37.4%]*	6,137,244 *[1,640,982]* *[26.7%]*	3,192,243 *[345,213]* *[10.8%]*

Note. ** Zero households were recorded
Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2012

Acquiring the GED credential breaks down a barrier to accessing post-secondary education (Boudett et al., 2000; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003) because admission into most vocational schools, colleges, and universities requires a high school credential or equivalent. Having the GED qualifies women to apply for Pell Grants, student loans, and scholarships (Garner, 2006; Georges, 2001; United States Department of Education, 2013).

GED holders may use the credential to gain access to, and funding for, post-secondary education…most degree-granting post-secondary education programs require applicants to possess a high school diploma or a GED. Also, Pell grants and guaranteed federal

student loans for post-secondary education require applicants to 'demonstrate an ability to benefit' from the funding. Dropout applicants for these monies can satisfy this requirement if they possess a GED. (Tyler, 2004, p. 581)

Acquiring a post-secondary credential has the potential to improve economic conditions for women, assisting them in acquiring the needed tools to remain out of poverty, or to escape from it (Georges, 2001; National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, 2007). "GED holders who fail to continue on to postsecondary education are left with very low earnings. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, the world got much worse for anyone with less than some years of college" (Tacelli, 2004, p. 17). Investigations seeking permanent solutions to poverty among undereducated women identified post-secondary education as a key factor, "a long-term reduction in poverty among women may require greater emphasis on investment in a two- or four-year college degree, beyond either a high school diploma or the GED certificate" (Georges, 2001, p. 57). Opportunities for well-paid employment "cannot be seized if women in poverty do not have the basic minimum educational investment—a college education after receiving a high school diploma" (Georges, 2001, p. 59).

Female college graduates experienced a substantial increase in earnings compared with women of the same age group who had only completed secondary school (McMahon, 2009). "The long-term payoff for finishing college is about $1.1 million in future dollars. Over time, the upward trend involving the increase in the real earnings of both male and female 4-year college graduates was steady and persistent" (McMahon, 2009, p. 84). Many researchers (Boudett et al., 2000; Capra, 2009; Georges, 2001, Heckman, Lochner, & Todd, 2008; Levitan et al., 2003) found a positive return on investment for GED holders who complete post-secondary education (vocational, trade, associate degree, or bachelor degree), with emphasis on finishing a degree;

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there is considerable contrast between "low returns to college attendance and high returns to completion" (Heckman et al., 2008, p. 23). For women who drop out of high school, the GED dismantles a barrier to higher education and provides a first step toward economic security for themselves and their families (McClendon, 2011).

GED Statistics

When the U.S. Census Bureau (2012b) reported the total number of high school diplomas awarded in 2011, it combined the number of GED recipients with the number of students who graduated from high school with a standard diploma. While being technically correct in some instances because more than 50% of states provide a generic high school diploma-type credential for GED recipients (GED Testing Service, 2012), merging the data effectively blurs the contrast between students who have successfully navigated high school and those who have not. Murnane & Tyler (2000) found that "one-seventh of the young Americans who report on government surveys that they are high school graduates are actually GED recipients who obtained the credential after dropping out of school" (p. 64), while Heckman et al. (2010) reported when "using Year 2000 census data, removing GEDs lowers overall graduation rates by 7.4%" (p. 58). Thornburgh (2006) commented that the Census also "severely underreports [high school] dropout numbers, in part because it doesn't include transients or prisoners, populations with a high proportion of dropouts" (p. 32). The U.S. Census Bureau (2006) did not include in their reports the number of incarcerated people who were dropouts; however, the Census Bureau did report the number of prisoners who had passed the GED while incarcerated, and those figures were included in the Bureau's representation of the number of high school diplomas awarded. Data reporting inconsistencies prompted Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) to question the validity of Census Bureau data.

Although the method of collecting and reporting data had long been in place, in 2012 the Census Bureau acknowledged the debate that focused on the comparative economic and academic value of the GED and high school credentials and reported on changes implemented "to collect data on GEDs separately from diplomas to allow data users to look at and assess these different types of credentials" (U.S. Census Bureau Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division, 2012, p. 2). The primary surveys used by the Census Bureau to collect demographic data - the American Community Survey, the Survey of Income and Program Participation, and the Current Population Survey – now include questions that offer the choice between regular high school diploma and the GED or other alternative (United States Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 2011). Although the published data from the Census Bureau continues to merge these groups, individualized data are available from the Census Bureau website (United States Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, 2011).

Annual performance reports produced independently by the GED Testing Service (2012a) provide demographic information about GED students who pass the tests as well as students who test in at least one of the content areas. Only during the past decade were specific numbers for women reported. Data are presented in state-by-state tables, as well as collectively. The annual reports rely on data provided by individual states, with each state controlling how preparation programs are configured (GED Testing Service, 2010). States can individually determine "the eligibility requirements for taking the test, can increase the eligibility requirements for taking the test, can increase the minimum passing requirements, and can vary prerequisites for completing a high school credential" (U.S. Census Bureau Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division, 2012, p. 14). To illustrate the effects of this autonomy, in

comparing the requirements for Kansas and Massachusetts, participants in Kansas were required to pass official practice tests before taking the official GED tests, while those in Massachusetts were not (GED Testing Service, 2012). Official practice test scores required in Kansas ranked among the highest in the nation, in fact Kansas students had been required to achieve higher minimum scores on practice tests than on the GED itself (GED Testing Service, 2010). Students in Massachusetts were not required to take practice tests. As noted above, states also have discretion to raise minimum passing scores for the official GED tests, and GED passing scores set in Kansas exceeded the minimum; Massachusetts did not increase required test scores. A participant who passed the GED in Massachusetts with minimum scores would not have passed the identical test in Kansas (GED Testing Service, 2012a).

Official practice test requirements impact state GED pass rate percentages. In 2011, the pass rate in Kansas was 94.8%, with 2,975 students passing the GED; this number represented 1% of the target population (GED Testing Service, 2012a). In comparison, the 2011 pass rate in Massachusetts was 65.3%, with 7,160 students passing the GED; as in Kansas, this number represented 1% of the target population (GED Testing Service, 2012a). In examining the data over forty years, despite the high percentage of test passers reported in Kansas, the total number of people passing the test has decreased by more than half (see Figure 1). While the reported percentage of test passers in Massachusetts was much lower, the total number of test passers in Massachusetts has remained constant (see Figure 1). The practice test acted as a filter and resulted in fewer people being allowed to take the GED than would have otherwise been eligible. "Jurisdictions that prescreen candidates by requiring them to pass the official GED practice tests generally have higher GED test pass rates" (GED Testing Service, 2012, p. 4). The lack of

standardization of testing prerequisites and differences in required test scores limits the

usefulness of both year-to-year and state-to-state comparisons.

Figure 1. GED test passers for Kansas and Massachusetts, 10-year increments. Data Source: GED Testing Service Annual Reports.

GED Test Passers 1979 - 2009
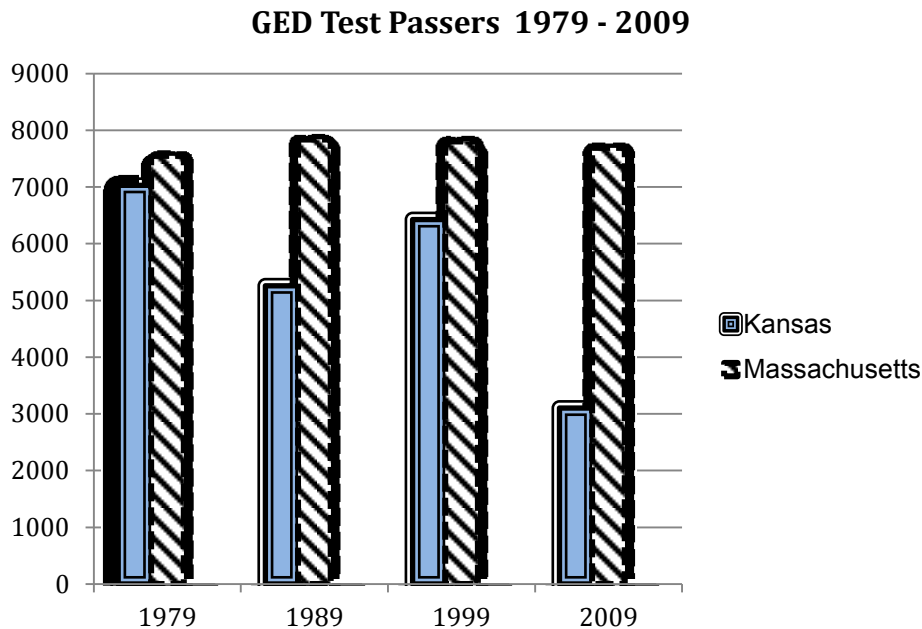
State reports do not include the number of dropouts from GED preparation programs.

Consequently, data reporting the number of women who leave programs before testing is

unavailable.

In this section discussion of the GED, the overall test preparation, the economic effects of

not successfully completing the GED program, and some reporting requirements for GED

programs were addressed. There is a paucity of studies that have been carried out specifically

with women who had dropped out of the GED program. The women in these GED programs are

adult learners. The next section addresses the literature in adult education which focuses on

participation in education.

Perspectives on Participation in Adult Education

Lindeman (1926) considered adult education a channel through which vitality and meaning would enter the lives of adults; "Adult education presumes that the creative spark may be kept alive throughout life, and moreover, that it may be rekindled in those adults who are willing to devote a portion of their energies to the process of becoming intelligent" (p. 55). Although a professor, Lindeman himself had experienced very little formal learning until he attended college. He disagreed strongly with widely held views of his day regarding education, especially the notion that valuable learning could only come about by navigation through a formally academic environment. "No one needs adult education so much as the college graduate for it is he who makes the most doubtful assumptions concerning the function of learning" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 5).

Lindeman (1926) advocated the model of lifelong learning he had experienced with working-class people in Europe, and highlighted four principles of "this new venture called *adult education*" (p. 5): adult education is a life-long process; adult education is largely non-vocational; adult education should have a situation-approach; and, the learner's experience is the highest resource. "Adult learners are precisely those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid, uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized institutions of learning…Formal educational discipline cannot be accepted as the criterion for ability to learn" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 19). Lindeman embraced the ideal of learning as a necessary component of healthy living, and believed all adults should actively participate in adult education.

In a study of adults who actively participated in adult education, Houle (1961) discerned three distinct types of learners: "goal-oriented are those who use education as a means of

accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives…activity-oriented are those who take part because they find in the circumstances of the learning a meaning which has no necessary connection with the content or the announced purposes of the activity…learning-oriented seek knowledge for its own sake" (p. 16). The categories were based on the learners' conceptions of their learning experience and their motivation for participation. Houle's study had been highly lauded and was widely cited; it "is elegant and makes subjective sense...offers a useful framework for thinking about multiple motives for adult learning" (Cross, 1981, p. 83).

Miller (1967), also, looking at multiple perspectives of adult learning, incorporated two theories – Lewin's (1947) force field analysis and Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs – into a framework for studying participation in adult education. Lewin's force field theory stated participation and motivation were predicated upon the balance between positive and negative influences, and the utility Miller (1967) derived from this was that it provided "a useful tool for identifying the important variables in participative behavior and for estimating what changes we would have to make in those forces if we are to change the present equilibrium" (p. 2). Miller used Maslow's theory to further illustrate that unmet basic survival and safety needs precluded participation in adult education. Miller (1967) called for "a search for significant relationships instead of static categories" and put forward that, if we do not take a more holistic view of learners and their environments, "we are condemned forever to repeating status surveys and refining our empirical categories to the point of meaninglessness" (p. 3). This study contained an early application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to adult education; since then, "Maslow's views have been integrated into much of adult learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 283). Miller (1967) concluded that because education did not occur in a vacuum, the conflicts and demands experienced in adulthood must be included in any equation that attempted to address barriers to

participation. "Miller is one of the few adult educators to tackle directly the problem of explaining why socioeconomic states and participation in adult education are inevitably related" (Cross, 1981, p. 112).

Like Miller, Cross (1981) viewed the issue of adult participation as complex, and believed that "the answer to the question of why adults participate in learning activities will probably never be answered by any simple formula" (p. 97). She held the view that participation in adult education resulted partly in reaction to the chain of events and past experiences in a learner's life; "participation in a learning activity, whether organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment" (Cross, 1981, p. 125). Cross's theory was an amalgam of sorts; in building the chain-of-response model (COR), she identified common elements in other learning theories and incorporated pieces of them into COR. Cross (1981) wrote that the utility of COR was "not so much to explain and predict adult participation…as it is to organize thinking and research" (p. 131). Cross discussed three classifications of barriers to participation (situational, institutional, dispositional), and highlighted the necessity of seeking the answers to questions about participation from the participants (and non-participants) themselves.

In a later analysis of non-participation in adult basic education (ABE), Beder (1990) reasoned there were three possible explanations why adults did not participate and did not attend classes: "they lack sufficient motivation to attend; they are motivated, but are in some way deterred; or they are simply unaware that ABE exists" (p. 207). Beder (1990) pointed out that although much investigation had been carried out with people enrolled in ABE programs, comparatively little study had been attempted with eligible people who did *not* participate. In

later research on issues of adult literacy, Beder (1991) recommended that further studies needed to "focus on adult non-participation using in-depth interviews" (p. 158), and concluded:

> It is ultimately more useful to conceive adult illiteracy as being a social construction maintained by social forces than it is to view illiteracy as being a collection of individual deficits spawned by personal failure. Let us stop blaming the victims and place the responsibility for illiteracy where it deserves to be- with all of us. (p. 161)

Beder (1991) thought an accurate understanding of non-participation in learning programs would not be reached without a new way of conceptualizing the phenomenon.

Searching for reasons for non-participation, Quigley and Uhland (2000) examined the attrition of students in ABE programs, and described the rate of dropout as "one of the most enigmatic, most exasperating, and overall most depressing issues in the entire field of adult literacy" (p. 54), with figures in the most severe instances reflecting a 74% drop out in the first 3 weeks. Quigley found the voice of the learner conspicuously and consistently absent from discussions around improving programs and practice. "The issue is not whether individuals have needs nor whether they should be met but how those needs are socially and politically constituted and understood, how they are articulated and whose voice is heard" (Quigley, 1997, p. 193, quoting Keddie). Quigley (1997) reasoned that those who do not participate in adult education are an important source of knowledge for future program and policy development, and suggested that relying on past understandings would not help solve the current crisis of non-participation. "To gain a fresh perspective, we need a vision founded on something other than the old metanarratives" (Quigley, 1997, p. 192).

Quigley (1998) recommended adult educators move beyond relying solely on participation theories in order to "find a way to understand what our learners actually

experience" prior to dropping out of ABE programs (p. 5). In discussing the needs of learners Quigley was adamant that the voices of learners needed to be heard, and this could be especially useful as a reliable method of investigating and cataloging barriers to participation. This method, however, presented questions of boundaries; "It is unclear how much we should know, or need to know, about our learners" (Quigley, 1997, p. 108).

In examining experiences of adult learners with low literacy, Payne's (2005) study reflected 25 years of work in education. Much of that research involved work with people who existed on scant resources, often in extreme poverty. Her work illuminated the effects of generational and situational poverty on all aspects of life, in particular how poverty affected participation in education.

> The circle of life for a family at the bottom of the economic ladder is intense and stressful. Cars and public transportation are unreliable and insufficient, low-wage jobs come and go, housing is crowded and very costly…for people in poverty, the arithmetic of life doesn't work. All elements in this mental model of poverty are interlocking: when the car won't start it sets off a chain reaction of missed appointments, being late to work, losing jobs, and searching for the next place to live…Vulnerability for people in poverty is concrete…When one's attention is focused on the unfolding crisis of the day, people in poverty fall into what Paulo Freire calls the tyranny of the moment…The need to act overwhelms any willingness people have to learn. (Payne, 2005, p. 164)

Payne's (2005) study cataloged the profusion of problems faced by those living in poverty, and she found that the problems were so constant and intense that coping with them required all available mental and physical energy. With resources constantly in deficit, there was nothing left to devote to education. Adults who could have potentially benefited from attending

adult education classes were unable to do so because their struggle for safety and survival prevented their participation.

During a ten-year study conducted in an adult education and literacy program for women, Rivera (2008) chronicled ways in which the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, otherwise know as welfare reform, had affected participation. The majority of the women included in the study had previously been homeless, living in shelters or on the street. Most were responsible for young children, and all had dropped out of high school. Before welfare reform, women who had left school early could choose to attend adult education programs and remain on benefits indefinitely. However, Rivera found that changes brought about through welfare reform became barriers to participation in ABE. "Many of the women were pressured to enroll in welfare-to-work training programs; they dropped out of adult literacy education to work in service-sector jobs at minimum wage" (p.9), resulting in questions about the legitimacy of framing adult literacy education "within the context of social welfare reform…what is the logic behind 'work-first' welfare reform?" (p. 9). Because of the threat of benefit sanctions and limits on the number of months of welfare eligibility, Rivera found that the motivation to learn and the desire to participate in adult education classes were not enough to keep women in ABE programs.

In sync with Rivera's research, Appleby (2008b) found social service and welfare systems "frequently control people's everyday experiences, disempowering them as learners" (p. 47). Her investigations into adult education participation also led her to conclude that often women did not attend adult education classes because of unmet safety and survival needs. Living with immediate needs made it difficult for them "to see the relevance and end result of learning in relation to current circumstances" (Appleby, 2008b, p. 8).

Advocating against assumed homogeneity in learners, Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge and Tusting (2007) made observations similar to earlier observations made by Quigley; "although we talk of groups of people as 'learners' or 'students' it is important to recognize that these groups are made up of individuals with different backgrounds, different current circumstances and different hopes for the future" (p. 162). Also akin to an earlier observation by Quigley, Appleby (2008a) wrote:

> We do not need to know everything about our learners, and there may be many things they do not want us to know, but we must recognize that there are aspects of each person's life, which, on the one hand, could be drawn upon to enhance learning, or, on the other, may act as substantial barriers to learning. (p. 11).

Since Lindeman first discussed the meaning of adult education, there had been 90 years of research by educationalists and others who sought reasons why adults participated in learning. Despite decades of research, few studies directly approached women GED learners to discover their reasons for non-participation. In summing up the literature, Quigley (1997) wrote

> though our field has developed a voluminous stock of descriptive research, experiential anecdotes, and how-to-manuals, we have an extremely limited body of theoretical and philosophical articles exploring some of the underlying assumptions, values, beliefs about adult literacy and illiteracy, and the relationship between illiteracy and other 'social problems'. (p. 93)

Theory of Margin

In 1958, professors from the Adult Education Association of the USA asked several prominent psychologists to prepare papers on specific facets of learning in adulthood: how did the strengths and weaknesses in an adult's life affect the learning experience, how did adult learners cope with the challenges and problems in their lives, and, what elements could be identified as necessary components of a successful and satisfying adult learning environment (Lorge et al., 1963). The resultant papers, presented at the University of Wisconsin in 1959, introduced adult educators to Howard McClusky's contribution, theory of margin (see Figure 2).

Using McClusky's model, load comprised the perceived demands of life that dissipated energy, while power made up the perceived resources available to meet and offset those demands (Roberts & Fitzpatrick, 1994). Although McClusky (1964) did not produce a numerical scale for measuring margin, he indicated that, if load and power had been given numerical values, whenever " the ratio is close to 1.00 and for a long time remains there, an adult may be close to a point of breakdown; if, however, it [the ratio] remains within a range of say 0.50 to 0.80 he would have a margin to meet the emergencies of life" (p. 17). As the ratio of load to power increased, vulnerability increased. "Margin refers to keeping one's capacity to deal with life a little in excess of the problems" (Cross, 1981, p. 245).

Figure 2. McClusky's Theory of Margin
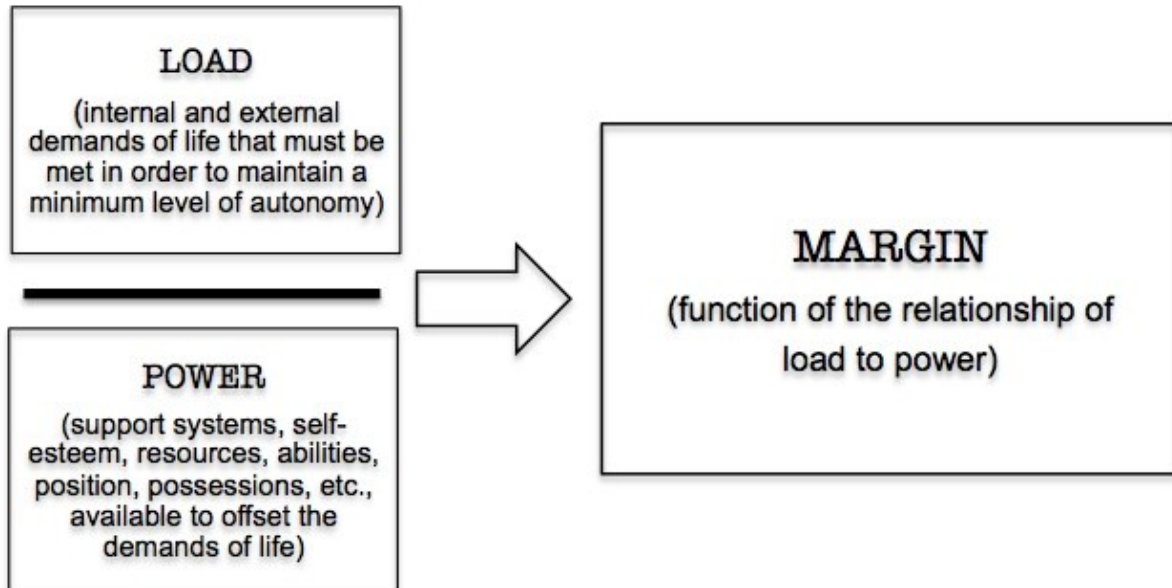
Initially developed in response to research in gerontology around changes associated with aging, margin provided a framework to monitor how change affected independence and perspective at different stages of life. Through the calculation of resources and demands of life, theory of margin provided a method of assessing the effects brought about by change and allowed for an analysis of circumstances based on positive and negative factors (Roberts & Fitzpatrick, 1994). McClusky later recommended the margin model to adult educators as a "means to understand the dynamics of adult learning" (Hanpachern, 1997, p. 21) and to enable adult students to better understand their current situation with a view to finding room for education (Hanpachern, Morgan, & Griego, 1998).

Factors could appear in both load and power concurrently (Roberts & Fitzpatrick, 1994). As an example, family provided emotional support and a sense of purpose, but also imposed an economic burden and emotional distress in the case of illness or problems with

childcare/eldercare. Employment that brought a sense of satisfaction and economic support brought with it the challenge of finding and maintaining affordable and reliable transportation. For parents working weekends, spending less time with family and the necessity of obtaining weekend childcare offset the advantage of extra income. Whatever challenges presented themselves, an essential component of margin required identifying problems, naming them, taking inventory of the specific strengths and resources already at hand, and becoming cognizant of those additional strengths and resources still lacking (Newman, 2008).

The internal and external factors included within margin changed and evolved with time and circumstance. A factor previously considered a challenge could later become a resource, and vice versa. As an example, when a student initially returned to school the demands involved could greatly strain a student's resources. However, via educational progress, the burden and strain of attending school would gradually lessen and education would eventually morph into a resource, and eventually become a factor of power.

McClusky (1964) determined that to get something out of adult education "the adult must be able to put the big, booming world together in some (to him) plausible configuration" (p. 160), and such a configuration required enough surplus Power to give the student breathing space in which to learn. What determined the amount of breathing space was the relationship between load and power.

> In simplest terms Margin is surplus Power. It is the Power available to a person over and beyond that required to handle his Load…When Load continually matches or exceeds Power and if both are fixed and/or out of control, or irreversible, the situation becomes highly vulnerable and susceptible to breakdown…If a person is able to lay hold of a reserve (Margin) of Power, he is better equipped to meet unforeseen emergencies [and] is

more likely to learn, etc.…But the key to the meaning of Margin lies not only in the sub-concepts of Load and Power but even more in the relationship between them. For example, the amount of Power a person possesses will obviously have a strong bearing on the level and range of his performance…but the strategic factor is the surplus revealed by the Load Power ratio…In the light of our theory therefore, a necessary condition for learning is access to and/or the activation of a Margin of Power that may be available for application to the processes to which the learning situation requires. (McClusky, 1970, p. 83)

Hiemstra (1993) identified McClusky's theory of margin as a practical, useful, but underutilized framework for studying adult learning; "in terms of contributions to our understanding of adult learning, for most adults a grasp of what McClusky developed is an epiphany in terms of their own life circumstances…instructors should help learners discover aspects of the theory of margin" (p. 43). The following is an overview of research studies using theory of margin.

Many of the first studies to utilize margin occurred in the field of healthcare. Using theory of margin as the framework, Stevenson (1982) investigated how life altered as the result of living in an institution. Stevenson gathered data in order to assess the changes in load and power experienced by elderly adults following placement into nursing homes. After analysis and comparison with data obtained from elderly adults living independently, the conclusions helped form the basis for developing nursing policies and preventative interventions with older adults. Stevenson's work using margin became the benchmark for later studies in a wide range of disciplines.

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Building on Stevenson's research, Roberts and Fitzpatrick (1994) studied the means of helping elderly persons retain a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency during periods of hospitalization. Margin was employed to discover ways to "improve the balance between the demands from the environment and the resources available to meet those needs" (Roberts & Fitzpatrick, 1994, p. 573). Margin provided a focus for organizing life experiences as those experiences evolved.

Harrison (2004) used theory of margin to examine the experiences of women who re-entered nursing school, while Kalynych (2010) applied margin in life theory to the attrition and retention of medical school residents engaged in emergency medicine. Finding merit in its application, Harrison and Kalynych both recommended furthering incorporating theory of margin into strategies for the continued assessment of students during their medical training.

Saraswathiamma (2010) focused on issues of retention and attrition in a profession considered non-traditional for women. The study sought an explanation for the mass exodus of women from the field of engineering, in part through an examination of the adaptive measures identified by female engineers who remained in the profession and the experiences of the women for whom the pressures became too overwhelming. After utilizing the margin model, Saraswathiamma (2010) concluded

> these women need to be assessed through this model in order to find a remedy for their issues. Once the model is made, it is easy to see whether power or load is balanced, or what factors contribute to the additional load that women will not be able to bear. The process is similar to a burnout assessment. (p. 93)

Madsen et al. (2004) employed margin to investigate the relationship between the degree of an employee's readiness for change and margin in life. Citing the management of change as a

vital part of controlling organizational development, Madsen et al. (2004) sought to develop methods by which employee "fears, resistance, and anxieties about changes" could be identified and worked through, thus increasing overall readiness for change (p. 761). The study resulted in a clearer understanding of what was necessary to implement change interventions and facilitate smoother organizational transitions.

McClusky's model was often used to reflect the struggle faced by adult students as they attempted to create enough of a margin to allow for academic participation and success. Weiman (1987) explored the relationship between margin, academic achievement, and attrition rates of older adult students in a computing science graduate program. Midlife career changes and increased access to higher education meant greater numbers of older adult students had become engaged in post-secondary learning, and Weiman documented how the challenges of adult life compounded the stress of graduate school. Pearish (2006) was interested in the experiences of adult students enrolled in community college who had been identified as having multiple responsibilities outside of school. Margin was used to identify how increased awareness of load led, in some cases, to a more economic utilization of power. Focused on factors of persistence in non-traditional students, Walker (1996) found theory of margin useful in "assisting students to assess their current situation and use this knowledge in making a decision to start a demanding educational venture" (p. 7). Tolbert-Bynum (2007) looked at how non-traditional adult college students balanced the internal and external elements of their lives. Non-traditional students often had employment and family responsibilities that were quite different and more demanding than those of traditional students.

Adult basic education participation was the focus of Vautrot's (2004) study with functionally illiterate adults in the Appalachian mountain region of Miller Basin. One local

education program experienced a zero enrollment, and Vautrot sought to find reasons for this phenomenon. Using theory of margin as the framework, interviews were carried out with adults who would have been eligible for enrollment in the adult education programs in an attempt to discover barriers to their participation.

Vautrot (2004) determined that the illiterate residents of Miller Basin did not, on the whole, feel stigmatized by their inability to read or write and thus were not likely to attend adult basic education classes. On the whole, they did not feel ostracized by their family, friends, or community, and overall they expressed an acceptance of their lifestyle. As a result of this, Vautrot (2004) concluded:

> adult education programs may benefit from focusing on specific areas in which participants experienced problems on a daily basis as a result of being illiterate. Instead of promoting attainment of literacy, in general, classes could be presented in a forum more specific to problems that individuals have expressed as affecting their daily lives. Surveys could be conducted to determine the needs and desires of individuals rather than making that assumption beforehand. (p. 133)

When looking at the experiences of graduate students engaged in distance learning, Ellis (2008) used theory of margin to focus on "how learning interacts with an adult's life situation" (p.40). The degree of satisfaction with the distance learning experience generally was also considered. Ellis (2008) used the theory to determine that, given the load/power ratio and narrow margin of many of the students, a distance education had been the only logical route to a graduate degree.

In the preceding studies, McClusky's theory of margin provided a framework for the evaluation of self-awareness and measured the ability to maneuver through change. The model

provided a method of organizing data to ensure that the negative and positive factors of a person's life could be identified and analyzed, with balance and a positive margin being the goal. Researchers found that a significant advantage of using McClusky's theory was its focus on finding ways of lessening the effect of negative factors even when resources were not available to totally eliminate them. In order to make use of theory of margin, potential barriers to participation had to be identified; negative factors had been shown to have the potential of becoming barriers to adult education participation. Barrier to participation in adult education was understood to be an obstacle that prevented or limited access, hindered development, or impeded growth and progress. Although previous studies had attempted to identify barriers to participation in adult education and had found margin a useful tool, none of the studies had been carried out specifically with women who had dropped out of the GED program.

Possible Selves Theory

Possible selves represent an individual's perception of what he/she might become in the future. Within possible selves theory, future selves fall into two distinct categories: the desired/hoped-for self, and the feared/dreaded self (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Robinson, Davis, & Meara, 2003). Desired possible selves focus on attainment and accomplishment, providing goals to work toward, while feared possible selves focus on avoiding a dreaded future self (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Cross & Markus, 1991; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Positive possible selves provide motivation to achieve a future desired state, and influence the amount of effort and persistence put toward a task (Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998). Negative possible selves can also provide motivation through conveying a clear visualization of what life would be like if the positive self was not achieved (Barreto & Frazier, 2012). Multiple variations of possible selves coexist and influence everyday life (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986); "my view

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of myself today is enormously influenced by my belief of what will happen to me in the future" (Erikson, 2007, p. 348).

An individual makes sense of his/her life through assessing past and present experiences (Frazier & Hooker, 2006). "Making sense is always a learning process" (Bamber & Teff, 2000, p. 62), and insights learned through self-assessment carry the potential to become turning points, fueling growth and encouraging change via the construction of new possible selves (Frazier & Hooker, 2006). Barreto (2009) referred to turning points as epiphanies, identifying them as significant forces with the power to become transformational, spurring an individual on to achieve goals and become his/her desired self. Possible selves are the pathways that link where a person is now to where they want to be (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989).

Achievement of the desired self requires more than an abstract concept of a happy future, and "a general desire to do well must be given specific self-relevant form" (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992, p. 121). Possible selves harness an individual's aspirations, dreams, hopes, and fears, channeling them into a well-considered and plausible blueprint for achieving the desired future self (Robinson et al., 2003). This provides a system for thinking about oneself in three tenses (past, current, and future), furnishing a framework for analyzing the past self, assessing the present self, and planning the necessary steps toward the desired future self (Barreto & Frazier, 2012).

Past selves are depictions of the self from the past, potentially influential to present self (Leondari et al., 1998). The process of constructing goals that touch on past failures can act as triggers, reactivating feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and dread (Rossiter, 2009). For many women who drop out of school, returning to education requires navigating through the past, an environment already associated with failure and unachieved goals (Ozaki, 2009). The close

analysis of past obstacles and unmet expectations, although painful, may provide an opportunity to learn how and why those factors still exert power (King & Hicks, 2007).

Expected milestones (graduating from high school, gainful employment) commonly appear as desired possible selves (Barreto & Frazier, 2012) and function as distinct markers for measuring progress, acting as the standard for gauging how well an individual meets expectations. The event of achieving a milestone denotes success, but the failure to succeed in achieving milestones results in non-events (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996). Milestones and events typically pictured as a normal part of life become life changing by their absence (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996). Empty spaces left by non-events become sources of "suffering because nothing is happening, rather than because of what is happening" (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996, p. 1). Non-events from the past frequently continue to appear within the specifics of feared selves (Frazier & Hooker, 2006): not finishing school, not having children, not finding a long-term partner, not being successful in a chosen career. Incorporated within an individual's feared self, past non-events continue into the future as "the threat of unfulfilled potential" (Cross & Markus, 1991, p. 234). Past selves reflect what a person believes she/he might have been, including lost opportunities.

Lost opportunities, non-events, and other instances of not meeting expectations have the capacity to weigh people down and anchor them in the past, unable to move forward (Rossiter, 2007). Failure to meet past expectations alters one's perception of present self and skews belief in future possible selves, while a history of success provides hope and confidence for continuing success in future endeavors (Rossiter, 2009); in this way, past self shapes both present and future selves (King & Hicks, 2007).

Present self blends a person's current circumstances and past experiences with his/her hopes and fears for the future. Possible selves function to heighten self-awareness by providing a snapshot of 'now' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). "Self-awareness, a common goal of adult education…includes awareness of gaps between who one is and who one wants to be…This in turn means people can manage risks better, engage in planful foresight, and become increasingly adaptable" (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007, p. 70). Possible selves are highly individualized and crafted in the present, but develop within the influence of past experiences and future visualizations (Cross & Markus, 1991). "The repertoire of possible selves held by an individual at a given time is influenced by her or his past experiences, socio-cultural life context, and current situation" (Rossiter, 2009, p. 62), and possible selves evolve as belief in what is possible grows.

Future selves reflect both positive and negative images. Feared possible selves represent the negative and dreaded future states: fear of not getting an education, of raising children in poverty, of never being qualified for anything other than minimum wage employment, fear of remaining the same person in the same circumstances forever (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Although feared possible selves diminish with the achievement of the hoped-for possible self, "to the extent that individuals admit to something negative as a past self, they seem to believe that such a characteristic might also describe them in the future" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 959).

Multiple researchers have reported on the role dreaded self plays in motivation and personal development (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993; Robinson et. al., 2003). One line of reasoning holds that by reaching a balance between feared and desired future selves, motivation increases, and the determination to not become 'that person' encourages a solid focus on goal achievement (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and

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maintaining a level of discomfort instills a sense of urgency and works to galvanize efforts.

Frazier and Hooker (2006) found balance to be an important factor in motivation and possible

selves. "Feared possible selves…provide avoidance goals, which, when balanced with relevant

hoped-for selves, increase motivation" (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007, p. 61). The dread of

becoming 'that person' works to provide a clear visualization of the feared self and prompts the

avoidance or suppression of activities that would stand in the way of goal achievement (Ruvolo

& Markus, 1992).

Other researchers questioned the role of fear in motivation and the overall value of

balance. An exploration of motivational factors for rural low-income women found that feared

selves were noticeably less motivational than hoped-for selves and that balance had little impact

on outcomes (Robinson et al., 2003). In a study of delinquency and compliance patterns among

poor adolescents, balance was not reported as an important motivational factor (Oyserman &

Saltz, 1993). A generalized desire not to fail could be of benefit to some (Robinson et al., 2003),

but conflicting views of the role of feared possible selves as a factor in balance and motivation

remains unresolved.

Desired possible selves are shaped through the lens of what a person hopes for and

believes to be possible (Cross & Markus, 1991). Thinking positive thoughts and hoping for the

best work toward building a sense of optimism about the future, but the foundations for a desired

future self arise from a thorough and honest self-examination coupled with a *plan* (Ozaki, 2009).

"The more plans connect self-directed goals to specific strategies, the more likely they are to be

carried out" (Oyserman et al., 2004, p. 132). When grounded in accurate self-knowledge and a

realistic understanding of the challenges ahead, desired future selves serve as catalysts and

provide sources of motivation, stimulating an individual to set specific goals and develop a firm

course of action (Rossiter, 2007). "Possible selves can have a very concrete impact on how one initiates and structures his/her actions to realize positive possible selves or to prevent negative possible selves from coming true" (Leondari et al., 1998, p. 154). Well-developed future selves influence and guide present behavior, linking action to outcomes (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Lee & Oyserman, 2007; Rossiter, 2009) and setting goals intensifies aspirations.

> Specific clear goals have been shown to be more effective than vague or general intentions to perform well. Imagining one's own actions through the construction of elaborated possible selves achieving the desired goal is thought to facilitate directly the transition of goals into intention and instrumental action. It seems that the more specifically elaborated a goal is, in terms of diverse types of self-representations, the greater its hypothesized influence in energizing and organizing performance. Realizing a desired goal depends also on whether the individual is able to keep this possible self as a dominant or central element in the working self-concept. When an elaborated positive self is active it will organize and energize the individual's activities in pursuit of it. (Leondari, et al., 1998, p. 155)

> Erikson (2007) suggests that shaping current behavior to support future selves becomes easier as goals are met, because achieving goals increases the feeling of success and increases self confidence. Multiple studies (Leondari et al., 1998; Rossiter, 2009; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992) found that well-developed and easily perceived pictures of the future self boost goal-related behavior, and imagining the future goal as lived experience allows the individual to feel him/herself in the role, aiding in the construction of blueprints (Rossiter, 2007). The more one can envision being the desired possible self , then the more likely she/he is to achieve it (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992).

Despite high levels of motivation and the willingness to put forth effort necessary for success, women come up against obstacles difficult to overcome; "forces are at work that describe and define us in ways that undermine our ability to envision, imagine, and realize future possibilities in ourselves" (Fletcher, 2007, p. 75). Adult education offers women the chance to shed past labels and begin moving toward a positive future self. Possible Selves provides a mechanism for examining the influence of self-imagery on motivation, participation, and achievement of goals in adult education (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The future selves of GED students include goals of post-secondary education and employment (GED Testing Service, 2012b). Participation in adult education has been shown to increase self-awareness and provides a starting point for developing a fuller, more extensive understanding of future possibilities, and, as a result, a variety of imagined possible selves become part of the learner's consciousness (Rossiter, 2007).

> The idea of adult education as a vehicle for change in possible selves may be particularly relevant to women. Women are more frequent participants than men in adult education, and their numbers are rising more rapidly….adult education may be especially likely to provide an opportunity to reshape possible selves, expand horizons, and change long-held self-perceptions of ability and interest. (Lips, 2007, p. 57)

While adult education offers much-needed opportunities for undereducated women, obstacles abound. "Although women's educational possible selves clearly represent important and self-relevant goals, low-income mothers face a number of barriers, such as lack of adequate child care and transportation, that present challenges to educational pursuits" (Lee & Oyserman, 2007, p. 46). Women existing on welfare encounter additional hurdles that can be especially difficult to overcome (Lee & Oyserman, 2007). Adult education often becomes a catalyst for

change, and possible selves provide structure with specific strategies that work to create a sense of focus and direction (Robinson et al., 2003).

The following research studies demonstrate the utility of possible selves within the areas of occupational development and adult education. The research studies include looking at why so few Appalachian high school students go on to college (Chenoweth, 2005), a program in Hawaii designed to mentor at-risk college freshmen (Woodruff, 2006), and research into persistence and motivation involving female, single-parent, non-traditional students (Gibson, 2000).

Studies conducted by Ruvolo & Markus (1992) determined that holding mental images of success significantly influenced both performance and persistence and increased the likelihood of subjects subscribing to positive possible selves. The researchers found that levels of self-efficacy were reflected in the persistence and effort put toward an assigned task, and that "envisioning success activates images of the desired end-states, but also primes the plans, scripts, and strategies necessary for achieving success in various domains" (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992, p. 119). The development of hoped-for possible selves was enhanced through the employment of positive self-imagery.

Targeted at unemployed and underemployed women - of which an estimated 77% had not completed high school – Brake-Brushett (2001) employed possible selves theory to study the effects of a career counseling and guidance program sponsored and promoted by the Canadian government. The program cited the scarcity of qualified women in certain male-dominated fields in the hope of generating participants' interests. During the ten-session seminars, women explored future education and career possibilities in fields that included math, science, and engineering. At the close of the seminars, Brake-Brushett (2001) observed that the subjects did not generally exhibit heightened interest and most could not imagine their present selves

engaging in the level of education necessary to achieve future selves within such careers. "Some of the participants in this may have been influenced negatively by their economic circumstances, their early learning experiences, and by social attitudes…change in these areas is neither instantaneous nor easy to achieve" (Brake-Brushett, 2001, p. 151), and it was apparent that negative past experiences had diminished participants' beliefs in their own abilities to the extent that few felt able to even consider the presented career development options.

The exploration of possible selves in the area of career development bears particular relevance to the field of adult education because as Rossiter (2009) detailed, career issues are the most frequently given reason for adult nontraditional students' enrollment in postsecondary education. Rossiter (2009) found possible selves useful to use with adult nontraditional students because the concept of possible selves is easy to comprehend, and "people tend to enjoy speculating about their future selves" (p. 63). The study highlighted the potential for positive influence by educators on the development and expansion of student's possible selves, and recognized the relationship between educator and adult student to be of particular importance during periods of transition when students are on the threshold between present and future selves (Rossiter, 2009).

Through exploring the link between a region's economic prosperity and the level of education achieved by its residents, Chenoweth (2005) wanted to know why, on average, less than 30% of high school graduates from Appalachian high schools enrolled in higher education. Chenoweth (2005) examined the stigma inflicted by multiple cultural stereotypes - the myth of "Appalachian fatalism," traditions of rural culture - in order to determine the effects of such cultural factors on decision-making within the context of possible selves (p. 16). For Appalachian high school students, intricately woven social and cultural factors negatively

influenced the notion of themselves as college material, thereby obstructing the development of any future-self with college as a goal (Chenoweth, 2005).

In an examination of female economic autonomy and poverty, Robinson (2001) explored the possible selves of low-income women. Although "public assistance recipients are not the only poor women in America" (Robinson, 2001, p. 9), negative stereotypes associated with low income women and the prospect of a future on welfare fueled the feared possible selves of many of the women interviewed. With this in mind, Robinson sought to determine the likelihood and feasibility of women achieving the future selves they envisioned. Robinson's (2001) study suggested that, compared to women who were high school dropouts (and whose mothers were high school dropouts), women with high school diplomas (whose mothers also had diplomas) were far more likely to be able to envision achieving their desired possible selves, and having a mother who dropped out of high school made it far more likely that her children would also drop out. In discussing the relatively small number of feared selves put forward by many of the women, Robinson concluded this could have been a result of the "sense of 'how much worse can it get?', and giving in to the inevitable" (p. 77), with the motivation to construct a positive future self difficult to find amid such deep and abiding poverty.

Along with colleagues Davis and Meara, Robinson (2003) conducted a later study focused on low-income women, assessing the motivational properties of their occupational possible selves. Participants were from two distinct groups, half from adult basic education classes and half from college developmental classes designed for high school graduates or GED recipients. The two groups were asked identical questions to discover how particular factors affected their perceptions of their future occupational selves, for example, asking women if they knew someone in their desired area of employment, and then looking at the effect knowing that

person had on the participants' motivation and perceptions of future self. Apart from the college development group's "taking significantly more self-initiated actions to avoid their feared self" (Robinson et al., 2003, p. 162), differences between the two groups of women were found to be less than expected. The result that most surprised the researchers was that the participants "reported significantly fewer feared selves than hoped-for selves, but also believed it to be significantly less likely that they would avoid a most feared self than achieve a most-hoped for one" (p. 163). The feared selves, although comparatively small in number, had substantial leverage within participants' envisioned occupational future selves.

Gibson (2000) interviewed female, single parent, nontraditional college students using Possible Selves Theory to search for common factors involved in motivation and persistence. Gibson (2000) put forward that because the "most likely candidate in our society for Welfare is the single mother" (p. 25), when single parent mothers graduated from college all of society reaped the benefits. Noting the strong correlation between a parent's educational level and that of her child, Gibson made the point that women who graduated from college were statistically more likely to have children who incorporated college graduation into their future possible selves, and those children were far more likely to achieve the desired self and graduate from college.

Ozaki (2009) explored ways in which possible selves influenced decisions by former nontraditional, community college students to return to school. The term "stop out" described a college student who returned to school after a period of dropout. Community college retention figures revealed that nearly half of the students enrolled failed to complete. Ozaki (2009) sought to discover what role possible selves played in students' critical decision making, in particular the decisions that led to the transformation from dropout to stop out. Decisions about whether or not to attend were part of a student's hierarchy of priorities, and the list of priorities often

included having to help support a family, working long hours, and family demands. When students used possible selves to imagine incorporating college into their lives as a priority, they were more likely to return to school.

The University of Hawaii developed a college opportunities program for students who lacked minimum requirements for admission. The program provided remedial education, mentors, and intensive support for freshman students. In an attempt to discover why some college opportunities program participants succeeded while others failed, Woodruff (2006) looked at "how at-risk college students described and experienced their academic possible selves" (p. 43). Woodruff (2006) found one of the strongest influences came from family and friends. The uniqueness of the opportunity was cited by many students, "I'm the first person in my immediate family to have the chance to go to college, and I intend not to mess it up" (Woodruff, 2006, p. 61), while others saw college as a means to avoiding feared possible selves, " I motivate myself by telling myself that I can do it, don't end up like my dad…I don't want to go through what my parents went through" (p. 62). Students identified other factors of their academic possible selves as a strong sense of being in control, determination, patience, and optimism. This program provided the opportunity for a second chance, and, despite having had poor academic performances in high school, these students were able to "activate future mental representations that translated academic intentions into actions that enabled them to pass the program" (Woodruff, 2006, p. 87).

In summary, aforementioned studies demonstrate the usefulness of possible selves theory in developing a model for change built on an individual's vision of the person she/he desires to become and her/his sense of self-efficacy. The creation of realistic and plausible future selves calls for recognizing the inextricable link between past, present, and future selves; without taking

the past into consideration, moving successfully into the future becomes an even more difficult task. For adults returning to school, identifying obstacles that have hindered past educational progress allows for an assessment to determine whether the obstacles continue to pose a threat. Research using possible selves theory with adult students illustrates the ameliorative effect of planning in overcoming lingering obstacles, although issues such as widespread poverty and unemployment have been shown to be a severe challenge and far less likely to be minimized by the application of possible selves alone. An additional component of possible selves theory involves clearly defined goals. The development of goals facilitates creating a detailed blueprint, with specific steps that can be reevaluated and adjusted when necessary. The aforementioned studies show the importance of promoting change through self-awareness coupled with action, resulting in praxis. Although the studies presented in this section underscore the importance of educational opportunities and 'second chances' in the achievement of hoped-for possible selves with adult nontraditional students, similar research has not been conducted specifically with women who have dropped out of the GED program.

Conceptual Framework

This research focused on women adult learners in GED preparation courses who stopped participating, and thus never took the exam. The study looked at how they made meaning of that experience. The participants' experiences were examined through the lenses of possible selves theory and McClusky's theory of margin. These two theories provided the primary framework for this investigation.

This study utilized possible selves theory to determine whether the pathways taken by participants reflected choices based on hoping to achieve a desired self, avoid a feared self, or a combination of both (Barretto & Frazier, 2012), This process reflected on the impact of past,

present, and future selves on goal setting. This structure provided a frame of reference for looking at how the anticipated experience differed from the lived experience, and how women made meaning of the difference.

Circumstances and conditions under which women attempt to access education were examined through the use of theory of margin. This model offered an algorithm for the assessment of the burdens (load) and resources (power) experienced by the participants. These data provided a means of appraising the impact of personal and environmental factors on GED preparation and, ultimately, the decision to quit.

Possible selves are created from within the perspective of present self, reflecting an individual's environment and situation (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). In developing the future selves of adult students, environmental and situational barriers need to be inventoried, with plans formulated to overcome them (Porras-Hernandez & Salinas-Amescua, 2012). Life experiences can be interpreted in multiple ways, and how a situation is appraised can profoundly affect participation, performance, and achievement (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Adult students with fewer challenges will generate different possible selves than those with greater challenges (Cross & Markus, 1991). McClusky's theory of margin provides tools for taking inventory of what resources (power) are available to help diminish the effects of constraints (load), and works to ensure a realistic perception of the challenges ahead (Hiemstra, 1993). It is important for adult students to take fully on board "the difference between lofty aspirations and the harsh realities of the struggle to realize them" (Bamber & Tett, 2000, p. 74). Theory of margin and possible selves encourage precise evaluations of the present, helping to facilitate the planning and changes necessary to keep on track toward the desired possible self. Possible selves theory provides the

objective, while theory of margin points out the lack of congruence between the objective and the means to achieving the objective.

Summary

The literature reviewed revealed a lack of consensus as to the value of the GED. Opinions ranged from the GED credential being of equal value to a high school diploma, to the GED being of little value whatsoever, and finally to those who believed that the GED was valueless *and* detrimental to secondary education in its enticement of high school students to drop out. Most sources agreed that high school dropouts who passed the GED gained the advantage of access to post-secondary education and federal financial aid.

Statistics published by the GED Testing service gave the program a specious appearance of success by focusing on the number of women who tested, while failing to mention the numbers of women enrolled who did not pass anything. Also, administering official practice tests in some states acted as a filtering mechanism to ensure that only the candidates most likely to pass could take the GED. In the states where the passing scores for practice tests were inflated, far fewer students were eligible to take the actual GED. Practice testing effectively narrowed the number of students who would be allowed to take the GED, consequently the passing rate percentages for those states rose dramatically. The data from the GED Testing Service provided no information about women who joined GED classes but then dropped out, and the number of women who dropped out of GED classes remained unknown.

The section addressing perspectives on participation in adult education established that adults chose to participate in education for a multitude of reasons, and the adult learners themselves were the logical source for knowledge about their motives and rationale. Barriers to participation were shown to encompass external factors that were easily identified but often

difficult to overcome, and internal factors that often remained hidden. Possible selves theory and theory of margin had the capacity to provide the adult learner with the insight necessary to formulate plausible and specific goals for achievement of future academic success

The literature review highlighted the gap in the research where women who drop out of GED preparation programs become invisible, because the programs are not required to track or report drop-outs. The literature also established that possible selves theory and theory of margin provided structures through which factors that hindered educational progress could be identified and evaluated; then, a strategy could be developed to help manage problems well enough to allow involvement in education. Further, there is a clear need for adult educators to exam the barriers of those adults who are not attending education. This study addressed the gap established by the literature review by exploring the experiences of women who dropped out of the GED preparation programs according to the theoretical framework of Theory of Margin and Possible Selves. The next chapter addresses the research methodology for this study.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This study explored the perceived experiences of women who enrolled in a GED program, but dropped out before taking the GED test. This chapter explains the rationale behind using qualitative research for this project, and discusses the research methods used. Literature concerning the foundation and practice of qualitative research contributed greatly to this chapter (Creswell, 1998, 2003, 2008; Merriam, 2001, 2002; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1998, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). In addition, this chapter discusses sample selection, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, limitations, and research involving human participants.

Purpose of Study

This study explored the phenomenon of women who enrolled in a GED preparation program, but dropped out before taking the GED test. This research gathered the narratives of a sample of women and considered their reasons for withdrawing through the lenses of possible selves theory and theory of margin. Possible selves theory explored how they viewed their possible selves at the time they withdrew. Theory of margin was used to look at women's situations at the time they dropped out to learn which aspects of power and load they felt had contributed to negative outcomes.

Research Question

How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test?

Sub-Questions

- How did women describe their hoped-for future selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- How did women describe their feared selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- According to theory of margin, how did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?

Rationale for Research Design

Phenomenological research concerns the study of an experience through the individual's perspective. This study investigated the experiences of women who withdrew from GED preparation classes through their stories to discover how they made meaning of events. "Put simply and directly, phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question: 'What is the structure and essence of the experience of this phenomenon for these people'?" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Van Manen (1990) described phenomenological research as "the study of lived experience" (p. 9), noting "the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful...Lived experience is the breathing of meaning" (p. 36).

More than merely collecting stories from participants, phenomenology allows the researcher an intimate glimpse into how a person felt as he/she lived through an experience. A phenomenological study "focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 71). Listening to the stories of women, and hearing how they make sense of events, provides the researcher with an opportunity to attain a reasonable level of insight into their experiences (Merriam, 2002). "It is both possible and important to discover and understand how people make sense of what happens in their lives" (Locke et al., 2000, p. 97).

Although a variety of people can experience the same phenomenon, their individual experiences *of* the phenomenon will be unique. In phenomenological inquiry, emphasis is on how the participants make meaning of their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990); it provides a glimpse into each person's unique reality. Assigning meaning to experiences occurs through the lens of memory. As time passes, and through subsequent interpretations of an experience, the meanings associated with lived experiences deepen; experiences gain "significance as we gather them by giving memory to them" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 37). Utilizing this methodology allows participants the freedom to recollect and interpret experiences based upon how they choose to remember them. The flexibility of phenomenological research provides space for the participant to reassemble and interpret the essence of their experiences within their own frame of reference (Seidman, 2006), and also "allows the researcher to adapt to unforeseen events and change direction in pursuit of meaning" (Merriam, 2001, p. 20). Phenomenological research seeks to understand the meaning that participants make of events in their lives. Crucial to this goal is ensuring the interview questions are not designed to elicit specific responses (Esterberg, 2002; Patton, 1990) and that the researcher's bias is contained through bracketing.

Although qualitative research often involves gathering information from previously unknown participants, researchers conduct interviews with the conviction that the participants' experiences have meaning and their perspectives have intrinsic value (Patton, 1990).

> At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth…the most important personal characteristic interviewers must have is a genuine interest in other people. They must be deeply aware that other people's stories are of worth in and of themselves as well as for the usefulness of what they offer to interviewers. (Seidman, 2006, p. 94)

Effective interviewing requires a sincere desire to learn about other people's lives, as well as truly valuing and respecting their willingness to share their life experiences. The interview process provides the researcher with an intimate glimpse into the lives of participants as they recollect and interpret lived experiences.

The interview process does not fit into a neat and tidy pattern, partly due to the nature of phenomenological research but also because interviews reflect the unpredictability of listening to participants making sense of something they've experienced. Interview questions may need to be adjusted to adapt to new information and ideas that emerge during conversations with participants (Merriam, 2002). The interview may be the first time a participant has heard her experience spoken, may be the first time she attempts to make meaning in order to share the experience with another person, and may also be a time of new realizations and unexpected epiphanies. Asking the right question, at the right time, requires the ability to formulate questions based on the information the participant is presenting at that moment. "The first rule of interviewing is that if the respondent has something to say, the respondent must be able to say it…It's your responsibility to set topics…You must carry into the interview a general idea of what you want to learn about" (Weiss, 1994, p. 78).

Within the structure of phenomenological interviewing, "the goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study" (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). Rich, descriptive data results from a relaxed approach and attentive listening, not through impatient prompting or "long-winded or leading questions by the researcher" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 67). Ensuring participants have the necessary space and time to contemplate events and formulate their responses requires a researcher to be comfortable with periods of silence, resisting the urge to disrupt the interview through "finishing the respondent's sentences…

offering associations to what the respondent is saying… suggesting explanations for observations about which the respondent is perplexed," exhibiting restlessness, or through too many personal interjections (Weiss, 1994, p. 78). Seidman (2006) recommends asking open-ended questions and avoiding leading questions.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of allowing the participant to tell her own story (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Giving voice in qualitative research means not imprinting the researcher's perspective onto what is being said, and not insisting the conversation follow a rigidly prescribed path (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). This provides the setting for realizing the authentic meaning of the participant's experience.

Because qualitative research relies heavily on the interpretation of those narratives by the researcher, and in order to protect the data as much as possible from biased interpretation, researcher biases are identified and set aside to the fullest extent possible (Creswell, 1998). Assumptions and beliefs stem from many sources, and the research process itself can add to the already existing biases. Creswell (1998) stressed that "the researcher must set aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of participants in the study" (p. 235). Researchers have their own lived experiences. Ensuring trustworthiness requires recognition of "personal biography and how it shapes the study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). Bracketing becomes especially significant when parallels exist between the experiences of the participant and those of the researcher.

For this study, the researcher bracketed the potential influence of her particular biases through critical self-awareness and by keeping a reflective journal. Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest keeping a reflective journal "to document your thoughts, feelings and perceptions

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throughout the research and examine your position on issues raised and emerging themes. Why are these themes emerging and who are they important to - me or the participants?" (p. 18). The researcher checked her interpretation and understanding of data through consultations with her major professor.

Research Setting

The city of Boston, MA contains 15 distinct neighborhoods. Just under half of the 620,000 people living in Boston as of 2011 self-identified as 'other than White' (see Table 4), highlighting the city's ethnic and racial diversity. Although the median income recorded for the area in 2011 was just under $53,000, 8% of men and 11% of women showed incomes below the poverty threshold. Neighborhoods in Boston contrasted sharply in socio-economic demographics; residents in the most affluent neighborhood, Back Bay, had a median income in 2011 of $86,000 (City of Boston, 2013), while the least affluent neighborhood, Roxbury, showed a median income of $30,654. The sample for this research was gathered from the neighborhood of Jamaica Plain, where the median income ($55,861) came close to that of Boston as a whole and registered in the middle ground between the richest and the poorest neighborhoods.

Table 4. 2011 Demographic Data for Jamaica Plain and Boston, Massachusetts

	Jamaica Plain	Boston
Population	39,897	617,594
Median income	$55,861	$52,433
Median rent	$1,695	$2,000
Subsidized housing	26%	19%
Owner-occupied housing	40%	35%
Adult persons below poverty threshold - male	13%	8%
Adult persons below poverty threshold - female	16%	11%
Race other than White alone, self-identified	46%	53%

Data source: City of Boston, Policy Development and Research,
http://cityofboston.gov/dnd/PDR/Maps_and_Neighborhood_Profiles.asp

Boston and surrounding areas enjoy a dense concentration of colleges and universities

(Emerson, Harvard, MIT, Tufts, Wellesley), but 2011 figures reported that 14% of men and 17%

of women did not have a high school diploma or equivalent (see Table 5). Although an

untypically large percentage (36%) of women in Jamaica Plain had graduate and professional

degrees (see Table 5), 23% of women did not have any college and 11% did not have a high

school diploma or equivalent. Women with a bachelor's degree earned nearly three times more

than women without a high school credential, and one in every six women in Jamaica Plain had

an income below the poverty level.

Table 5. 2011 - Highest Level of Education by Sex and Percentage,
[Median Earnings] by Sex and Highest Level of Education

		Jamaica Plain	Boston	United States
Less than high school	Male	9% [$23,369]	14% [$23,243]	15% [$21,840]
	Female	11% [$16,921]	17% [$17,859]	14% [$14,623]
High school or equivalent	Male	15% [$28,558]	22% [$30,106]	29% [$31,730]
	Female	12% [$24,268]	21% [$25,732]	28% [$21,682]
Some college / Associate	Male	14% [$39,135]	20% [$34,057]	27% [$40,248]
	Female	15% [$28,199]	20% [$32,119]	30% [$27,330]
Bachelor's Degree	Male	27% [$52,967]	24% [$60,588]	18% [$59,459]
	Female	27% [$45,979]	23% [$49,957]	18% [$40,645]
Graduate / Professional degree	Male	35% [$60,899]	20% [$76,136]	11% [$80,917]
	Female	36% [$54,341]	19% [$57,518]	10% [$54,115]

Data source: US Census Bureau, American Fact Finder,
http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml

Population

The population consisted of women who lived in Jamaica Plain, MA, and had previously

enrolled in a preparation program for the GED, but who left before taking the GED tests. The

total number of women contained within this population was not known because the data

necessary for making an assessment have not been collected. State reports did not include adult

education participants who attended less than 12 hours of instruction, and national reports issued

by the GED Testing Service (through the American Council on Education) included only data for

people who tested in at least one subject area during that particular year (GED Testing Service, 2010a).

Sampling methods determine the rationale and procedure for the selection of research participants from within the population. This study used purposeful sampling. "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth…those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Snowball sampling (Creswell, 1998) was also used; participants were asked if they knew of other people who might agree to participate in the study.

After discussing this project with local community and adult education centers, there appeared to be numerous women available to interview. While none of the centers would go on record as to the number of dropouts, one center mentioned about 20% of women withdrew from the classes prior to taking the test. The director of one GED testing center stated that there was no shortage of women who had left preparation programs and assured the researcher that there was no issue in finding women matching the selection criteria. The sample for this study met the following criteria:

- To ensure their experience base could be recalled with clarity, the women had participated in a GED program within the past 5 years.

- The women were not currently participating in a GED program.

- The women had not taken the GED test or any other high school equivalency exam.

- The women were at least 18 years old.

Overview of Research Design

This section contains a summary of the steps taken to complete the research study. A more in-depth discussion of the research design appears in a later section.

1. Following the proposal defense, the pilot study was conducted.

2. Adjustments to the research protocol were made upon completion of the pilot study.

3. The researcher contacted GED adult education programs in the Boston, MA area and requested that her contact information be given to women who fit the criteria and would be willing to participate in the study.

4. When contacted by possible participants, the researcher discussed the research study, determined if they met the criteria, and asked if they would volunteer for the study. The researcher scheduled a meeting with volunteers who met the criteria.

5. The researcher met with each volunteer, explained the research project, and went over the informed consent.

6. After the volunteer signed the informed consent, the researcher asked the volunteer to complete the demographic questionnaire, after which the semi-structured interview was conducted. Snowball sampling was also incorporated; participants were asked if they would recommend anyone for this research. This process continued until 12 women who met the criteria had been interviewed and saturation had been achieved.

7. The researcher transcribed the interviews and conducted member checks to avoid misinterpreting the participant's responses.

8. The interview data were analyzed using continuous comparison. Each interview transcription was reviewed and compared to previous ones as the researcher continued gathering data from all 12 participants. The researcher reviewed her field notes from

each interview and noted reflections, ideas, and things to pursue based on this first set of data.

IRB Approval

Research involving the use of human participants raised ethical concerns. To ensure research participants were treated with respect and not exposed to dangerous situations, the Institutional Review Board at Kansas State University set stringent requirements for all research conducted that involved the use of human subjects. Permission for this project was obtained from the Kansas State University IRB (see Appendix A).

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative research incorporates multiple data collection sources to confirm findings (Merriam, 2002). This research study included a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and researcher journal (for data and as a measure to guard against bias).

Sample Recruitment

The specific purposeful sampling strategy applied was criterion sampling; as Merriam (2002) points out, key criteria for choosing participants need to be established before the search for participants begins. Participants were found through community adult education programs in Boston, MA. In order to protect the privacy of possible participants, and to avoid placing them under pressure to volunteer for this study, the researcher did not approach possible participants directly. Instead, the directors and staff of the adult education centers made the researcher's contact information available to women who were no longer participating in the programs, and they were invited to contact the researcher if they felt they wanted to participate in this research.

Snowball sampling was utilized; interviewees were asked to provide the researcher's contact information to other possible participants.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted prior to the research collection phase. Two women who met the research criteria were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to assure the interview questions gathered the relevant information. These women also provided feedback to the researcher as to the effectiveness of the questions. The women stated that several of the questions were unclear, and they helped the researcher reconfigure those questions. Adjustments to the final interview protocol were made accordingly. The pilot study allowed the researcher to practice the interview questions, work with the recording devices, and practice using HyperRESEARCH. Participants in the pilot study were not included in the final research data.

Data Collection Procedures

Following the pilot study, a total of 12 women who met the research criteria were interviewed. Focusing on a small number of participants who experienced a common phenomenon had the potential to provide "power to the stories of a relatively few participants" (Seidman, 1998, p. 48). This study sought to accurately represent the lived experiences of the women participants who withdrew from the GED testing preparation classes prior to completing the GED test. Although the interviews in this study elicited recollections and perceptions of women about a specific phenomenon they had all experienced (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), this study recognized that each experience occurred within its own context and set of circumstances (Seidman, 2006). The data collection and analysis focused on understanding how participants felt during the phenomenon and how they interpreted their experiences.

Data for this study were collected through demographic questionnaires and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The demographic data were collected in order to provide a rich and detailed description of the participants. Interviewing provided an opportunity to engage in guided conversations with participants in order to learn about specific events and learn what meaning had been constructed around those events (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2006).

Participants had the option to choose from several prospective interview sites because "participants who are given a choice about where they will be interviewed may feel more empowered in their interaction with the researcher" (Elwood & Martin, 2000). The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

With each potential participant, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study and went over the Informed Consent Form. Once the Informed Consent Form was signed and participation was confirmed, the researcher asked the participant to complete the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix C). Composed of questions regarding race, age, income, education, and family structure, the questionnaire functioned to provide background and personal data about the participants.

The (approximately) 90-minute interviews were conducted using the Interviewer Protocol (Appendix D). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher flexibility to follow up on unexpected details as they emerged (Merriam, 2002). The use of open-ended questions guided participants to respond in a narrative rather than providing "yes" or "no" answers (Merriam, 2002). This structure encouraged participants to discuss their view of themselves while they were participating in the GED classes, as well as perceptions of their future selves and how that had changed. In addition, the questions explored the load factors and power factors they felt had affected their lives during that time, including how those factors they identified had

affected their decision to not pursue the GED test. Interviews were held in a private and safe space, as arranged with the participants. To compensate participants for their time, each received a $25 gift card at the end of the interview. The Interview Questions Alignment Table (Appendix E) illustrates how the interview questions fell within the theoretical framework and aligned with research questions.

The study participants were asked to choose the time and locations for their interviews. Although a variety of location options were available (coffee shop, library, community center) all the women chose to be interviewed in their homes. The times of the interviews varied from first thing in the morning to late at night, and the times were chosen so that there would be no other people present during the interviews. The participants seemed to be relaxed during the meetings, and that may have been because they were in familiar environments. This arrangement also provided the researcher with an opportunity to see where the women lived. All the participants provided cups of coffee or tea and several had made cookies and cinnamon rolls. There was a feeling of hospitality.

Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder as well as a standard cassette recorder. Notes were taken during the interviews. The researcher personally transcribed the interviews as soon as was reasonably practicable, thus preserving the confidentiality of data. The use of assigned pseudonyms preserved anonymity. Participants' names do not appear in the transcriptions or in any research findings. All interview data has been stored in a secured fireproof filing cabinet and will remain there for the requisite five years, after which time they will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis focuses on the essence - the fundamental qualities - of a phenomenon from within volumes of transcription and piles of notes. Analysis generates understanding of events by identifying the most salient points and establishing what (and how) meaning was ascribed to those points, in order that these findings can be reported with as much eloquence, honesty, and depth as possible.

> The process of data collection is not an end in itself. The culminating activities of
>
> qualitative inquiry are analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings. The
>
> challenge is to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information,
>
> identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of
>
> what the data reveal. (Patton, 1990, p. 372)

Adding to the challenge, analyzing the data in phenomenological research necessitates setting aside presumptions, preconceptions, prejudices [whether positive or negative], and personal notions "about what is real" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). The distinctive realities presented and interpreted within each interview reflect the world of the participants and are not always readily discernable from outward appearances (Van Manen, 1990). The ambitious goal of data analysis in phenomenological research centers on finding the key configurations that allow these real worlds to be presented in ways both understandable and accessible to those outside the study, resulting in dense and full-bodied narratives that resonate with the reader; this process is most often referred to in the literature as thick, rich description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 1998; Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990).

The use of data analysis software provides an efficient and effective tool for analysis of qualitative data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). Interviews in this

study were coded (along with research notes) using HyperRESEARCH software. Designed for use in qualitative research, HyperRESEARCH facilitated the coding of data, organizing data, the creation of coding trees, and mapping relationships (Esterberg, 2002).

Codes were used to note points of interest in interviews, much like sticky notes and highlighters are used in textbooks. Additionally, coding served the function of marking common themes and ideas, and allowed those to be grouped and diagramed. Codes assigned to the transcribed interviews were produced as diagrams and data trees, which were then examined for themes and patterns. Coding contributed to the discovery of the essence of the experiences, as well as assisted in analysis from the perspectives of possible selves theory and McClusky's theory of margin. "The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced… How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is?" (Merriam, 1998, p.159). Analysis provided answers to the questions that fueled the research. Interview data were coded as soon as the interviews were transcribed. Analysis of data began when the first interview was coded; collection of new data ran concurrent with the analysis of existing data (Merriam, 1998).

Trustworthiness

Verification strategies work toward ensuring the credibility of qualitative research. Phenomenological research findings must reflect the reality of participants. "Interpretive or qualitative research must give *voice* to participants so that their voice is not silenced, disengaged, or marginalized" (Creswell, 2008, p.196). The methods used in evaluating qualitative research focus on "how well the researcher has provided evidence that her or his descriptions and analysis represent the reality of the situation and persons studied" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 77).

Creswell (1998) rejected quantitative terminology, but attempted "to find qualitative equivalents that parallel quantitative approaches to validity" (p.197). He set out eight procedures - prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, thick description, and external audits - and recommended that "qualitative researchers engage in at least two of them in any given study" (Creswell, 1998, p. 197).

Therefore, in this study the following strategies were used to address issues of validity, credibility and reliability, and demonstrate trustworthiness.

> Clarifying researcher bias: Presenting the researcher's bias prior to beginning the study made the reader aware of any aspects of the researcher's position which had the potential to impact the study (Creswell, 1998). The researcher made clear her background and prior experience with adults in GED programs and through her field notes was able to analyze any researcher bias.

Member Checks

In this study, member checks were implemented so participants can judge the accuracy of the accounts. "While you may have used different words, participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives" (Merriam, 2002, p. 26). Polkinghorne (2007) recognized member checking as an aid in establishing the credibility of research; "generated texts can be given to participants for their check on whether the description captures the essential features of the meaning they felt; if it does not, they can suggest alterations or expansions of the text to more closely display their meaning" (p. 482). Member checking helped to ensure that what the participant meant to say had been accurately presented and that they recognized their own voices in the research.

This research sought to chronicle and share the lived experience of participants. In order to safeguard the narratives from misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, the interview transcripts and summaries of findings were mailed to the individual participants for review.

Participants were instructed to phone or email the researcher if they felt the interview transcripts had not accurately record their thoughts and feelings. Participants did not change or add to their transcripts.

Reflective Journal

Creswell (2003) pointed out that "self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative" and works well toward the endeavor of restraining bias and assumption. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) put forward that self-reflection helped to create and maintain "an open and honest attitude," and recommended that researchers "should continually monitor their own subjective perspectives and biases by recording reflective field notes or keeping a journal throughout the research process" (p. 77). To address this point, the researcher kept a reflective journal throughout the interview process (Merriam, 2002). The researcher kept a log of her feelings, impressions, and ideas, as well as observations and field notes, as she moved through data collection and analysis. To check for researcher bias, the major professor analyzed the journal notes.

Clarifying Researcher Bias

"Clarifying researcher bias from the outset of the study is important so that the reader understands the researcher's position" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). The researcher had personal and professional connections to the GED program. Three members of the researcher's immediate family obtained a GED. Further, the researcher volunteered for several years in the adult

education program in Manhattan, KS, and also volunteered in the literacy program at the Riley County Correctional Facility. She later taught in the GED program in Wamego, KS.

Through her field notes, the researcher was able to analyze any researcher bias. The participants opened their homes for the interviews and this experience further clarified their situation.

Protection of Human Rights

The women who participated in this research have been 'studied', their lives focused on and examined by a researcher who did not share their experience of the phenomenon. The implication that qualitative research has a role in the perpetuation of "other" needed to be acknowledged.

> Often this speech about the 'Other' annihilates, erases: 'no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about our pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and now you are at the center of my talk. (hooks, 1990, pp. 151-152)

For the women involved in this study, it was unclear whether the experience had the potential to be of any significant benefit for them. For the researcher, their involvement was what made this research possible, and their willingness to share their experiences was crucial to the success of this project. It was important to remember that despite efforts toward equity "interviewers and participants are never equal" (Seidman, 1998, p. 93). In interview situations, the power lies with the interviewer (Esterberg, 2002). Agreeing to be interviewed allowed the researcher access to the participant's world. Interview questions must have often sounded

intrusive, one-sided invitations from a stranger to reveal personal data and describe private experiences. "It is a grave responsibility to ask. It is a privilege to listen" (Patton, 1990, p. 359).

In keeping with the IRB guidelines, the research and interview process was explained to the participants, and a signed consent form obtained, before interviews began. Participants were assured that they could stop the interview and leave at any time. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants. Both the interview tapes and transcripts were free from identifying information, apart from pseudonyms. The interview recordings were locked in a secure, fireproof filing cabinet. After five years the interview tapes will be destroyed.

Summary

This chapter explained the rationale for the use of qualitative research and phenomenological methodology. The research and interview questions were developed within the theoretical framework of theory of margin and possible selves. Twelve women participants were purposefully selected through volunteers from GED centers and snowballing techniques. The research questions were highlighted, with reasoning provided for the use of one-to-one semi-structured interviews and demographic questionnaire. The data analysis using HyperRESEARCH was explained in the search for common themes and ideas on a continuous basis. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed using member checks, researcher journaling, and clarification of researcher bias. Finally, the important role of the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board in ensuring the safety of research participants was highlighted. Discussion of the findings is in the next chapter

CHAPTER 4 – Results

This study explored the phenomenon of women who enrolled in a GED preparation program, but dropped out before taking the GED test. This research gathered the narratives of a sample of women and considered their reasons for withdrawing through the lenses of possible selves theory and theory of margin. Possible selves theory explored how they viewed their possible selves at the time they withdrew. Information about the population is presented through brief biographical paragraphs and a table of participant characteristics. This chapter also presents findings from in-depth interviews with 12 participants. Five key findings were identified and examined through the use of participant quotations.

Research Question

How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test?

Sub-Questions

- How did women describe their hoped-for future selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- How did women describe their feared selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- According to theory of margin, how did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?

Sample Demographic Data

In this study, 12 women, who had dropped out of the GED program in the Boston area, were interviewed. Most of the women were unemployed. Ten of the women were single. Their

ages ranged from 19 to 62. Two of the women had no weekly income. The weekly income of the

other women ranged from $97 to $210. Table 6 lists the specific details for each participant.

Table 6. Participant Characteristics: Employment, Income, Marital Status, Age, HS Education, Children

	Employment (Hours per week)	Weekly Income* (Household)	Single/ Married/ Partner	Age	Last HS Grade Finished	Children (Living at home)
Ann	Head Start (8)	$210 (210)	Single	59	11	4 (0)
Cassie	Waitress (20)	$200 (200)	Single	40	11	None
Diane	Unemployed	$110 (110)	Single	55	11	2 (0)
Ellen	Unemployed	None (**)	Single	19	11	None
Gail	Unemployed	$115 (115)	Single	24	11	1 (1)
Julie	Unemployed	$165 (165)	Single	41	11	None
June	Unemployed	$200 (200)	Single	62	11	None
Karen	Unemployed	$240 (240)	Single	36	11	2 (2)
Louise	Unemployed	None (None)	Single	37	11	2 (1)
Natalie	Unemployed	$110 (110)	Single	22	11	1 (1)
Paula	Unemployed	$97 (97)	Partner	24	11	1 (1)
Teresa	Unemployed	$247 (247)	Married	53	8	4 (0)

Note. * Does not include food stamp benefits ** Chose not to answer

Eleven of the participants reported English as their first and only language. Spanish was

the first language of one participant, and she was also fluent in English (see Table 7).

The education level of their parents varied. Three participants indicated that neither of

their parents graduated from high school. One reported only her mother had graduated high

school. Eight participants had parents who had both graduated. In five cases, the mother of the

participant had attended some college, but none of the fathers.

In response to racial identity, most of the women mentioned Black. When asked to state

their race(s), seven women stated Black, three women stated bi-racial, one woman stated White,

and one woman stated Hispanic.

Table 7. Participant Characteristics: Language, Parents Education, Racial Identity

	First Language	Other Languages Spoken	Parent(s) Graduated HS	Parent(s) had some College	Racial Identity
Ann	English	None	No	No	Black / Native American
Cassie	English	None	Mother	Mother	White
Diane	English	None	Both	Unknown	Black
Ellen	English	None	Both	Mother	Black
Gail	English	None	Both	Mother	Black
Julie	English	None	Both	Mother	Black
June	English	None	No	No	Black
Karen	English	None	Both	No	Black / White
Louise	English	None	Both	No	Black
Natalie	English	None	Both	No	Black / White
Paula	English	None	Both	Mother	Black
Teresa	Spanish	English	No	No	Hispanic

All but two of the participants were single, and apart from discussions arising from the

demographic survey very little mention was made of spouses or significant others. When they

discussed their futures none of the women mentioned their current state of being single nor expressed a desire to be married.

It was clear that the participants were living on tight budgets, and several women spoke about wanting a higher income and that having more money would be a great help, but they did not speak of themselves as being impoverished. There was much discussion about the advantages of obtaining a well-paying job in the future. The women acknowledged that they had very little money. However, they did not use the word "poor" and they did not seem to dwell on it. The researcher inferred that this was due to a mindset and not due to a sense of shame, since all the participants appeared to the researcher to be quite open and forthcoming when talking about other areas of their lives.

Participant Profiles

The profiles below emerged from a compilation of the demographic questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. A summary profile for each participant is listed below. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym.

Participant 1: Ann. Ann was 59 years old and lived on the first floor of a triple-decker apartment building. She was single and did not mention the father of her children. She dropped out of high school when she discovered she was pregnant. Anne was a recovered addict (drugs and alcohol), and was also HIV positive. She shared that she had exchanged sex for drugs in the past, and she believed that was how she had contracted the HIV virus. Her four adult children helped her with living expenses, and she said she had a good relationship with them. Anne worked two mornings a week at a local Head Start program, reading to children. Her home was full of photos of her family, and her grandchildren often came to her house after school.

Participant 2: Cassie. Cassie was a part-time waitress and was 40 years old. She was

single and had no children. She rented a room in a friend's third floor apartment. Cassie dropped

out of high school because she needed to work to help support herself. At the time of the

interview she was hoping to pick up more hours at the restaurant where she worked because it

was the only place she knew of that didn't require a GED. She also worked a couple of hours a

week at a tattoo parlor in exchange for tattooing services.

Participant 3: Diane. Diane lived in a one-bedroom apartment in public housing. She

had rented out her bedroom to a graduate student and was sleeping on the couch in her living

room, and was worried that the housing authority would find out. Her apartment had many

photos of her grandchildren. She did not often see her children, and she had a cat that she said

helped keep her company.

Participant 4: Ellen. Ellen was the youngest of the participants (19) and lived with her

mother on the top floor of a six-family apartment building. She had five older siblings who no

longer lived at home, but who helped pay bills whenever they could. Ellen's mother was

chronically ill and Ellen was often the primary caregiver. During the interview, the apartment

was very cold and Ellen was wearing multiple layers. She said that they could not afford to keep

the heating very high.

Participant 5: Gail. Gail and her young son lived with Gail's mother in an apartment on

a low-income housing development. Gail shared her bedroom with her son. Her relationship with

her mother was strained, and Gail said that her mother had slapped her the previous week during

a heated argument and that they had never had a good relationship. Her mother worked during

the day and did not have much to do with Gail's son. Although they were not a couple and did

not live together, the father of Gail's child was involved in their lives. Gail was attempting to get on the housing list for an apartment of her own.

Participant 6: Julie. Julie had previously worked as a member of the housekeeping staff at New England Medical Center, but was currently unemployed. She lived alone in a sparsely furnished studio apartment in public housing. Apart from mentioning her mother, Julie said nothing about friends or family. Julie had a diagnosis of bi-polar affective disorder, and she said her illness had caused her to drop out of high school and had also played a part in quitting her job at New England Medical. She said she took things day by day, and that her medication seemed to help with the paranoia and anxiety.

Participant 7: June. June was the oldest study participant (62). She lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise housing authority building. June made quilts, and her apartment had stacks of fabric and a sewing machine in the living room. She said she was often depressed, and that getting older added to the depression. June said her life was a series of ups and downs. She mentioned that she had a warm relationship with her sister.

Participant 8: Karen. Karen lived with her two children in a duplex on a dead-end street, behind a large supermarket. She said that the father of her children was closely involved with their lives and that she thought of them as a family unit, although they were not a couple and he did not live with them. Karen was closely involved with her children's schooling and was especially proud of her son's place on the football team and her daughter's academic successes. Karen was hopeful that her children would graduate from high school and go on to college.

Participant 9: Louise. Louise lived with her youngest son on the top floor of a large house that had been converted into apartments. The building smelled strongly of cannabis, and Louise's apartment had such a strong smell of bleach that the windows had to be left open. She

said she was trying to rid her apartment of the cannabis smell that permeated the building, but said it felt like a losing battle. Louise was waiting to hear from the housing authority about moving to a smaller apartment in a different building. She had already used the limit of 60 months of welfare cash assistance so she was not receiving any welfare payments, and she was not getting child support. She was getting help with her rent from the local housing authority and also was receiving food stamps. She had family members that she could occasionally rely on for financial help. The father of her youngest child was not involved in their lives. Her older son had recently left home.

Participant 10: Natalie. Natalie lived with her son and her father in a brick apartment building on a housing project. There was a large park across the street. When her parents divorced with she was very young, her mother had moved away and Natalie had stayed with her father. She reported that she had a close relationship with her mother and that she often saw her. Natalie's father was terminally ill and it was unclear whether Natalie would be able to remain in the apartment when her father had to move to a nursing facility or died. Her child's father was not closely involved with them. Natalie wanted to make a better life for her son.

Participant 11: Paula. Paula had previously lived in a housing shelter with her young daughter, and was currently living in a temporary housing apartment. She was waiting for permanent housing. The father of her child was closely involved in their lives and they were a couple, although he did not live with them because Paula's eligibility for housing was based in part on her being a single parent. As a child, Paula's family had suffered multiple episodes of homelessness and she was determined to have a permanent home for her child. Paula hoped to get involved with Project Hope, a non-profit organization aimed at helping poor families out of poverty through education and job placement.

Participant 12: Teresa. Teresa lived with her husband in a housing authority apartment, and was the only married participant in the study. She said she had a strong relationship with her four adult children. Her only son was incarcerated. Teresa had raised her grandson from infancy. Teresa's husband had a diagnosis of schizophrenia and was taking medication, and she said he suffered with depression. Teresa was fluent in Spanish and said that she helped translate for Spanish-speaking residents when they received letters and documents that were written in English. Teresa finished middle school and never went to high school.

Findings

The guiding research question in this study was, How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test? This section presents the following five key findings obtained through12 semi-structured interviews.

1. The majority of participants (10 of 12) no longer believed they would achieve their desired future-selves.

2. The majority of participants (9 of 12) indicated past selves continued to adversely affect them.

3. The majority (10 of 12) of the participants identified the status quo as their feared possible self.

4. All participants (12 of 12) showed an imbalance in the load and power factors in their lives, wherein load outweighed power.

5. The majority of participants (8 of 12) stated that they had struggled with learning and that having a tutor would have helped them to continue with GED classes.

Finding 1: The majority of participants (10 of 12) no longer believed they would achieve their desired future-selves.

All of the participants in this study held hoped-for future-selves at the time they enrolled in the GED preparation programs. The majority of the participants no longer held those positive future-selves at the time they dropped out, and those interviewees shared how their dreams had been eliminated by not getting the GED. A participant who had hoped to get into the nursing field responded, "I know I can't make it without the GED, like I need the GED to do any and everything right now. Without that there's nothing I can really do" (Natalie).

Dropping out of GED classes adversely affected the goals of participants who had sought the GED to better their employment prospects. One participant who had hoped to work at Target or Home Depot, which would have also given her access to health insurance, said, "I don't think that person is possible. So, I think I was just, um, kind of fooling myself that things could get better" (Cassie). The goal of obtaining a job with greater earnings and benefits was no longer held by another interviewee who responded succinctly "I didn't get a better job, I didn't make more money, I didn't better myself" (Julie). When asked what she now saw herself doing in the future, one woman responded, "growing old and dying" (June).

Two women who identified as single parents had wanted to become better role models for their children by getting the GED. One of the women was concerned that her teenage son would be less likely to heed her advice about remaining in school as a result of her dropping out of GED classes.

> I was upset with myself because I felt like I can't even do this…I'm just sad because I'm trying to lead by example for my kids. But, you know, mommy doesn't have what I'm trying to tell you all to get. So it hurts, it hurts. I have a son who's fifteen, who I

encourage to stay in school, get good grades, but mommy didn't finish high school but you can do it? You know what I'm saying? (Karen)

The second woman, who had hoped to be a better role model for her daughter by getting a GED, recognized that her child would soon be asking questions and would want to know why her mother did not have a high school credential. The participant was now unclear how she would answer her daughter's questions.

> Um, I was pretty upset because, you know, I felt like I was slacking and I wasn't doing something right, I felt like I was going down the wrong track…I have a daughter and she looks up to me and I didn't want to just sit at home doing nothing, and when she got older, or like now, she's three, um, she questions a lot. I didn't want her to ask me, mommy do you go to school, or why didn't you go to school. And now that she's old enough she's gonna ask them questions so I wanted to better my life and make a difference for my daughter, be a role model. (Paula)

Another participant in this study reported that she had quit high school in order to attend GED classes. She had imagined her future-self as being able to quickly get through the GED while working full time, then later moving on to college. She had been unemployed since leaving high school, and had attended GED classes on and off before finally dropping out.

> I thought it would be more easier to transition from there [GED] to work, more easy than like actually going to school. I thought I could go to the GED for two or three hours and then go to work for the rest of the day…then I was going to go to a two year college first, like Bunker Hill…and then transfer to a 4-year college…It was kind of heartbreaking, cause I had all these plans and, you know, I was ready to go to college and everything. I don't know, it's like the GED has just stopped everything. It kind of crushed everything

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when I left the GED program…I was disappointed in myself, too, because I really had high hopes about the GED, getting completed and everything. And I just felt like, wow, another failure, another failure…[What happened to the person you hoped to become?] She's gone, she's gone. (Ellen)

To become an embalmer and funeral director or a police officer had been the desired future-self of one participant, but she now had a felony criminal conviction for violence. She saw her criminal record as a stumbling block. "Everything I want to do, I can't...I wanted to be a cop but I couldn't be that because I started getting into trouble" (Louise). When asked about her previous desire to be a funeral director, she replied, "It's really no more of a desire now."

Despite dropping out of the GED classes, two of the women involved in this research had maintained their hoped-for future selves. The first of these two participants had dropped out of high school in 1976, and wanted the GED to be able to work for Goodwill Industries helping to sort donations.

I wanted to get into this program that's at the Goodwill on Harrison Avenue, and the lady was telling me, well, you need your high school diploma to get into this...And I'm going to get into another program where I live, they're supposed to have a GED program. I'm not giving up on my dreams, it's gonna take me a little longer to do it, but I'm going to get there…Hopefully, I can get the job at Goodwill, I'm not going to give up. I probably would be doing the clothes in the back, more in the background, or putting clothes on the racks or something like that. (Diane)

The second of these participants needed the GED as one step toward starting her own wig designer and salon business. She wanted to be independent and make a better life for herself and her son.

You know, I never saw myself working for someone else, I always saw myself as the boss and maybe people working for me. That's how I always saw myself…I see myself being a business owner, maybe living outside of Boston in a cheaper place…I basically just see myself getting better, and I'm more determined than ever. Anyone who's ever doubted me, who just thinks I'm going to be a single parent living in a kind of like, poverty kind of neighborhood, I'm just going to try to prove them wrong. (Gail)

Finding 2: The majority of participants (9 of 12) indicated past selves continued to adversely affect them.

Most participants recalled one or more disadvantageous aspects of their past that had continued to burden them. The problems caused by past mistakes persisted as obstacles and stumbling blocks. Most of the women stated that dropping out of high school had negatively affected their futures. One woman shared that, although she loved her child, if things in her past had been different she believed she would be closer to her goals. "You know, I feel like my son is a blessing, but probably if I didn't have my son, you know, I'd probably be done with college right now" (Gail). The same woman was deeply embarrassed about dropping out of high school. "Certain people, they don't know, I lie. You know, if they ask me if I graduated I will tell them yes. I was ashamed."

Another participant recalled how becoming pregnant contributed to her dropping out of high school, and how not graduating from high school led to self-doubt. "I knew that I should have finished high school, period. I needed it to go further in life…But the last few years of high school, I started getting in trouble, getting pregnant and what not. I don't know, that's really what stopped me. My life, I'm so stressed out with life. I always quit. I just always quit." (Natalie) One woman felt that school had gotten much more difficult since she had dropped out

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of school in 1976, "when I was going to school they didn't have all this hard stuff, the math was pretty simple. I wish I had my high school diploma back then" (Diane).

One of the women explained that she knew if she hadn't dropped out of high school she would have already finished college, and she knew she needed the GED to be able to enroll in college. However, because of the shame of being a high school drop out, being in the GED program make her feel bad about her self, and conspicuous.

> Cause, had I graduated from high school, I wouldn't be going through what I'm going through now. If I'd graduated from high school I would have already achieved some of my goals, I would have probably already finished a nursing program. So going through the GED program you feel like a failure, because everyone knows, once you're in the GED program everybody knows, she didn't finish high school. (Karen)

Ann shared details of her personal history that included occasional prostitution and addiction to drugs and alcohol. She identified becoming pregnant and dropping out of high school as the beginning of her troubles, and she regretted raising her children in that environment. Although she was no longer using drugs or alcohol, a lasting reminder of her past was her diagnosis of HIV positive, something that she had been living with for over 10 years. She had dropped out of high school over 40 years ago and continued to be angry with herself for never graduating.

> Almost 60 years old, you been in school, you went up as far as the 11th grade, you wouldn't let yourself graduate, you got pregnant, you got knocked up as they call it. You wouldn't let yourself finish what you know you can do. That's the piece that still pisses me off today, I should have finished, I should have graduated with the rest of my class…
> I was running around with every Tom, Dick, and Harry, getting high. And wherever I

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could get high, I got it. They were there, the three older children were right there, they saw me go through all of it, they saw me getting high… Things I did in my past has now come back to kick me in my behind. (Ann)

Finding 3: The majority (10 of 12) of the participants identified the status quo as their feared possible self.

The majority of women expressed their feared-selves as a continuation of their present situations. They reported that being without the GED caused them to feel stuck in the status quo with no means of moving forward. One woman explained that when she quit the GED classes "it crushed everything. It destroyed everything. I can't go no further without that…it's like a wall…I just can't get over that wall" (Natalie). A second participant also felt trapped in her current situation; "I feel like I'm in between a wall, that I'm stuck, like a maze and I can't find the place to get out" (Teresa).

Another participant feared her life was going to continue to mirror her mother's life, worrying about money, working to be able to pay bills, and with no energy left for anything else.

I kind of felt like I was going to be like my mother. I always felt like I didn't want to be like my mom. No one knows that. She just goes to work, and she stresses about bills, it's kind of like, won't you try to do something to change it, if you can? I don't know, my mom's not really motivated. She just works and she comes home. So I thought, after that I was gong to be like my mother. Yeah, and just be unhappy. (Gail)

After dropping out of GED classes, one participant saw her future as bleak, stuck in the same place, living off welfare, and going nowhere.

I know I can't make it without the GED, like I need the GED to do anything and everything right now. GED or high school diploma, without that there's nothing I can do

really. I can get little side jobs, maybe, that don't require that, but that's nothing for

me…I'm not sure without the GED thing, I don't know where I'll be or what I'll be

doing. In 10 years I'll still be sitting here if I don't get a GED… not making it nowhere,

probably living off welfare for a while, longer than I wanted to. (Natalie)

Another woman continued to live in her mother's house, with no job and no prospects.

She said that she still had some goals, but no longer felt that she would be able to reach them.

I don't know, I just feel like it's, it's just going nowhere. Nothing's happening. I mean,

with the jobs and everything, I've been to so many interviews but I still don't have a job,

so I just feel hopeless. I don't have my GED. I just feel like, what is going on? I don't

know…Yeah, I still have them [plans]. But I just feel like now I probably won't really

achieve them. I don't know, I don't know. I just found myself, right here, in my mom's

house, still jobless, with no education. (Ellen)

One of the interviewees was a single parent who was no longer eligible for welfare cash

assistance, was unemployed, and was not getting child support because the father of her children

was also unemployed. "Oh my God, I am living in a place where I don't want to live, I have

pretty much no help. I don't know, sometimes, I'm just living, to be honest with you" (Louise).

The fear of trying to find a job with no education was the reality for one women who

said, "I can't finish, I can't pass, so I can't do anything else. I felt stuck. Everybody, every job

you apply for, they all want the same thing, you know? I'm trying to find a job, with no

education" (Karen). One participant was in a career that she could no longer maintain, "I wanted

to change my career goals a little bit because I've been taking care of the elderly for like 29 years

and I can't lift them like I used to, and I can't do all the heavy work like I used to, I just can't"

(Diane).

Two women did not associate feared selves with their current situations. One of the women had health problems that included diabetes and bipolar disorder and had been helped to find a place living in subsidized housing. She was the only participant who did not mention a feared self. She was not worried about failing to get her GED, and said that she would go back "if my health was better. I would go, and, um, if it was nearby" (Julie).

The second woman's feared self was the possibility of going back to a life of drugs and alcohol. She connected being overwhelmed with possible relapse. "I was done. Walked up the stairs, got on my bus, came home, dropped them books and never picked them up again. That was a wrap for me. I didn't give a damn…Thing about being an addict, things start getting overwhelming too much, we go back to our resources that made us feel better, getting high. Relapse is easy, I need that written on my forehead" (Ann).

Finding 4: All participants showed an imbalance in the load and power factors in their lives, wherein load outweighed power.

The women in this study described a wide-ranging assortment of burdens (load) and resources (power). Participants reported experiencing relationship problems within their families, worries about childcare, illness (personal and family), homelessness, and problems with transportation. All participants lived beneath the poverty threshold (see Table 6). A common thread that appeared throughout the narratives involved struggling with learning in the classroom. The women described how the lack of a GED limited their access to employment and education. Encouragement from family and friends, help with childcare, religious faith/church, and public transportation were mentioned by participants as sources of support.

One woman struggled to pay her bills, and said that if she hadn't had access to food where she worked that she feared she would have gone hungry. Hours at work were always changing which caused her to miss class, and when she was in class she struggled to learn.

It's just a constant struggle, week to week, and I just never know if I'm going to make it. And, trying to get the bills paid, just always stressful, I never have anything left over. Fortunately, I work in a restaurant so food is not a problem but I think if I did not have that it would be terrible. The [work] schedule's really inconsistent and I need the money so I can't say no to shifts that are offered. So, I would have to skip class…I think, um, just not having a lot of support made it harder…I thought that it [GED class] wasn't going to be as difficult, the material was hard to understand when I was so tired, and just getting the work done on time was impossible for me. (Cassie)

One participant had a young child and lived with her mother. She was unemployed and shared that she had stopped applying for many jobs because of the high school or GED requirement. She identified math as a serious stumbling block to obtaining her GED. Although her frustration with math had contributed to her quitting GED classes, her determination to overcome her math problems caused her to research for online help, and resulted in locating a website where she could improve her math skills. She took notes from the website and carried a notebook with her so she could study the math whenever she had time.

I've been living here [with my mother] since I was a teenager, and me and my mom don't have the best relationship…I've always had help with childcare, my son's always at school, since the age of three…There are certain jobs that ask for your diploma, if they ask for a diploma I just won't follow through with the job, of course, because I need my diploma…I just wasn't confident when it came to math, so I felt discouraged. My fear

was just not being able to do the math…Not too long ago, I just Googled fractions and started clicking on stuff, and found this great website that explains everything. You can do problems on there, too. So, it's kind of like school, in a way. That's the only way I'm going to be able to do it, if I just teach myself online…It's really good, like they'll explain everything to you and I just take notes in my notebook. I just take notes, and I'm just going to study the notes, because I really can't get help with the math unless I pay for a tutor…I'm going to go online, I'm going to tutor myself, I'm going to write things down, and then I'm going to study everything in the notebook. And then I'm just going to get my GED. (Gail)

Another participant was struggling with mobility and transportation issues. Her son was incarcerated and as a consequence she was raising her grandchild. She felt supported by her husband and children, but health problems were difficult to overcome.

Well, my husband did support me here and there. They [children] would always say they're so happy I'm going to school…it made me feel good, you know, like I'm doing something for me, and moving on…Transportation was a problem because I had surgery in 2004, and I have to be taken, or if I take the bus it is a problem because also I suffer from claustrophobia, stresses in life that I've been through… My grandson lived with me since he was five days old, and I had to struggle with that. (Teresa)

One woman shared that she was living with her child at her father's house, was struggling financially, and felt that she had little emotional support. Also, she was very concerned about her father, who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

We're not financially set, housing-wise and all of that…my son is one source of motivation, but you really can't conversate with him. And I don't have that [support] in

my life, you know, 'you can do it, go ahead and do it'. I stay with my dad but he's older and to me it just seems like he really don't care one way or another…I recently found out my dad has lung cancer. I think that's a big part of my stress, I don't have no motivation for nothing, that's just messing my mind up a lot, worrying about my dad…I've been with him all my life, damn near, living with him, so that took a big toll on me. (Natalie)

One interviewee described her life as a shambles. She had been required to attend anger management classes because of a violent crime conviction. She was unable to find a job. Her housing situation was uncertain. She had used all her eligible months on welfare (TANF, 60 month lifetime limit). She had poor childcare options, and she had suffered from bereavement. She was getting food stamps, which helped lessen her burden.

At the time my father had just died, and my living situation, I was up in shambles, it was crazy… I was living in a rooming house, and I wasn't supposed to have kids in the room, so I used to, I was basically sneaking him (baby son) into the room. The landlord didn't live in the rooming house. It was a house full of, pretty much drug addicts, so they didn't care… I can't get cash assistance. I get food stamps, but no help with the rent. I was getting child support, they stopped that, well he [child's father] stopped working so I couldn't get it… I had family members that would watch him [baby son] every now and then, but I didn't really like it. Like only when, really when it was my mother or his other grandmother or his father, but then when they weren't around I had to resort to other people, like my cousins, or friends. Nothing steady…And other people had deadlines and I had to fit him in with their schedule, sometimes I had to get multiple buses… It was a struggle so it was either my son or the class…Like, dragging him from house to house to get him a babysitter and go to the classes. It got aggravating and I just stopped. (Louise)

Although she received strong emotional support from a parent, mental illness, fatigue, and a lack of money were stumbling blocks for one woman who found that her mental health problems brought things to a standstill.

My mom, she was saying good job, just it's good that you're doing this for yourself. [I was] very worn out, uh, just say worn out, because I was working all the time. I didn't hardly go, cause I was too tired…I have Bi-polar, well, I had mood swings, depression, um kind of like paranoia. And um, nervousness. I have diabetes, too…I don't make enough money so it's hard…My bipolar came over everything. (Julie)

Not having money for rent or transportation, living with a parent suffering from a serious illness, and feeling like she had no support was how one woman described her situation.

We was kinda struggling with the rent and everything...My mom had like a heart condition. Her heart goes into A-Fib. When I was, during the GED classes, she was like in and out the hospital a lot. It kind of stressed me out. And I felt like, I don't know, I was in my shell in the middle of the class, I didn't want to do nothing. I was just staring off into space while she was teaching…She [mom] is supposed to be having surgery soon…The main struggle I was going through was really, it was not having, like, money. At the program I went to, it [Charlie Card monthly travel pass] was $25, but the deadline was crazy. By like the Monday they would be like, it's too late for you to pay, the deadline's already up or something, so you'd have to go through that whole month without a Charlie Card. So for some people, for me too, when I didn't have a Charlie Card that they paid for [subsidized] it was kind of hard getting to school and everything, because I'd have to scrape up money and everything…I just feel like nobody's there for me. (Ellen)

One participant had previously lived in a homeless a shelter with her young child and was still without a permanent home at the time she stopped attending classes. She talked about how she had found solace in prayer, and that she felt hopeful that God would help her.

I was in the shelter, so like if I needed clothes for my daughter or anything, they would help me…I'm still on Housing Authority lists, cause like right now this is temporary, I'm still considered homeless…Daycare, I couldn't get daycare, they wouldn't give me a voucher, they said because I don't receive, um, I'm not receiving welfare, like cash, and that was the hard part about it, I couldn't get daycare and of course I couldn't afford it… My circle's pretty small, so, it's just like me, my boyfriend, my mom and my dad… I didn't think, honestly, that I was going to get back on my feet. I just started praying, like, I don't know too much about the church, so I just like recently started praying. God has been on my side a lot recently. (Paula)

One interviewee had support from a parent and felt that the teachers in the GED classes were also supportive. She experienced considerable difficulty with math and worried that she was annoying the teachers by constantly having questions.

My mom gave me support. Um, the people at the place itself [adult learning center] they were really, really helpful…The math was so difficult and it was so hard, I felt like I was taking up all of the teacher's time, and I just felt like I always had a question, and it was just too much, not being able to do the work in front of the people that's in there…I just got on their nerves, honey. (Karen)

The experience of being overwhelmed in class brought one woman to tears, and she found math to be frustrating and distressing. She felt that part of the problem was that it took her a lot longer to grasp math concepts than it did the younger students. Another challenge she

experienced was arthritis and transportation was a problem. During the interview she shared that her main source of emotional support was her cat.

> The math they was doing was just way too advanced for me. Not for me to even grasp, and a lot of days I left that [*name redacted*] feeling frustrated and close to tears. I would have to leave the classroom because I would be so frustrated that I'd be crying. I felt inadequate. That I couldn't do this… I was really down on myself because I was really, really trying hard to get this. Us older ladies in the class, you know, it takes us a lot longer to grasp what he was trying to teach…I have arthritis now, and I wake up and I'm like really, really stiff in the morning and I'm in a lot of pain…If I'd had someone who could take me in the morning and drop me, that would have made a big difference. (Diane)

Finding 5: The majority of participants (8 of 12) stated that they had struggled with learning and felt that having a tutor would have enabled them to continue with GED classes.

None of the participants had been offered a tutor or a mentor during their time in GED preparation programs. Eight of the participants stated that they felt one-on-one tutoring would have provided them with the additional help necessary to keep them in class. None of the participants were financially able to hire a private tutor. Several participants shared that they had needed more attention than the instructors could provide, and that if they had been able to have one-to-one help it would have made a positive difference.

> The GED teachers got other people that they have to go and check on. You got my full attention, I need it back, but he had the whole class to participate with…I just didn't see myself getting the math, math and writing. My writing sucks. It's like a run-on

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sentence…A tutor, a math tutor would have been fine. Yeah. It sure would have. It would

have made me stick and stay. (Ann)

The math was so difficult and it was so hard, I felt like I was taking up all of the teacher's

time, and I just felt like I always had a question, and it just was too much…It [tutoring]

definitely would have helped, but they don't offer that. And if they do, I didn't know

about it. It would have made a huge difference. I would never have left. I would never

have left had I had that, you know? (Karen)

It was just the math. I really felt discouraged when it came to the math…You just have to

get a paid tutor, and I can't really afford that because I haven't been working. I would

probably have my GED if I found someone who would say, hey, I'll work with you every

week, you don't have to pay me anything, or you don't have to pay me much. (Gail)

I love math, math was no problem, and reading's not a problem, but I had a problem with

my writing…Um, if I had a little more support, like pushing me to do this. When I see,

this is all on me, I just took the easy way out, and I shouldn't…if I had a one-on-one tutor

that helped me with writing I think I would have finished. With that little motivation

behind me, I would have finished. (Natalie)

I felt like I was going to fail…The math, the math, I don't know what it is, but we do not

get along at all. And that's what I really need the help in, but, you, know, I asked for a

tutor and everything…I think it [tutor] would have helped a lot, I really do, because I do

better with one-on-one time anyways. So, if I had a tutor I think, you know, I think it

would have helped a whole lot. (Ellen)

Mr. Harrison, he would put a math equation on the board and I would look at it like okay,

how do I solve this, because I had no idea…and I'm looking at math equations that I

can't even think of possibly trying to solve because I don't know how to do it…All I

needed was the math tutor, and somebody who could get me there and get me home, and

yeah, someone to talk to. I probably would have just been able to make it, kept on going.

I probably would still be there right now. (Diane)

Results

The primary research question for this study was, How did women perceive the

experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test? The

sample of 12 participants were from the Boston area and had all dropped out of the GED

preparation program within the past five years. The first two sub questions looked through the

lens of possible selves theory noting how they described their hoped-for future selves and feared

selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes. The last sub question

examined their load and power as described by the theory of margin.

Sub-question 1

The first sub-question, How did women describe their hoped-for future selves at the time

they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?, is addressed by the first theme, the majority

of participants (10 of 12) no longer believed they would achieve their desired future-selves.

The participants' experiences of the phenomenon were varied and different for each

individual; however, the ramifications of dropping out were perceived in a similar manner. The

women in this study had enrolled in GED programs because they believed that without a high

school equivalent it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a well-paying job with benefits.

They also needed the GED to be able to access higher education. The experience of dropping out

of GED programs was interpreted by most of the women as an end to their dreams, and

consequently they expressed the belief that their chances for better employment and further education had been ruined.

Most of the women felt their visions of better futures for themselves and their families had disappeared. Dropping out of the GED program had the effect of putting up a roadblock between the women and their desired future selves. Several participants felt that they had let their families and children down, which caused them to feel additional distress and suffering.

Dropping out of high school was recalled with a deep sense of shame and regret, and was commonly described as a monumental mistake. The experience influenced how the women viewed their present academic capabilities, and the aftereffects of quitting high school resulted in their inability to obtain employment and to access further education. They viewed dropping out as a self-inflected wound.

Sub-question 2

The second sub-question, How did women describe their feared selves at the time they withdrew form the GED preparation classes?, was addressed by the second and third themes. The majority of participants (9 of 12) indicated past selves continued to adversely affect them. The majority (10 of 12) of the participants identified the status quo as their feared possible self.

Most of the women feared that they would remain as they were, without the GED and without hope of being able to change their current situations. The participants had viewed the GED as the pathway to a better life, and quitting the GED program eliminated that hope. They found themselves back where they had started. They were living their feared selves.

Sub-question 3

The third sub-question, According to theory of margin, how did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?,

was addressed by themes four and five. All participants suggested an imbalance in the load and power factors in their lives, wherein load outweighed power. The majority of participants (8 of 12) stated that they had struggled with learning and felt that having a tutor would have enabled them to continue with GED classes.

All of the participants reported incomes below the poverty line, and only two of the women had jobs; both jobs were part-time and did not include benefits. Several of the women were single parents and had children living at home, and in two instances the fathers were involved in the children's lives. Housing was an additional load factor, including living in homeless shelters and temporary housing. None of the women owned cars, but the mass transit system in the Boston area made it possible to function without a vehicle. Emotional support from friends and family was a source of power for many of the participants, while other women had strained relationships with their families. Their challenges outweighed their resources.

Almost all the women explained how they had struggled with learning, and they suggested that having a tutor would have enabled them to continue studying. This would have increased the power. They described feeling overwhelmed during classes and having no idea what instructors were talking about, particularly with regard to math. Women described feeling that there wasn't the opportunity to ask enough questions of the instructor, which resulted in their failing to progress in learning and led to quitting the GED program.

How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test? Many of them were living their feared self at the time of the interview and for most the possible self of when they were taking the GED preparation classes was no longer one they valued. Only a couple of women had been able to sustain their vision of a possible self. The load factors were stronger in their lives than the power. Many felt they were

a burden to the instructors and were afraid to keep asking questions. They were overwhelmed in the courses and life circumstances made it impossible to attend on a regular basis.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of women when they dropped out of the GED preparation programs. This chapter included the presentation and analysis of the data. Data from the demographic questionnaire, semi structured interviews and the researcher's reflection notes were discussed. The five themes emerged from the data and addressed the research questions. The participants' voices were present in the number of quotes from the interviews that were included with each theme. The discussion and implication of the findings are in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 – Summary and Conclusions

This chapter consists of a summary of the study, discussion of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and conclusions. The latter sections are to expand the understanding of the data and relate it to the literature. In addition, the recommendations are to expand the research base and the understanding adult GED learners. Finally, a synthesizing statement is offered to capture the scope of what was attempted in this research.

Summary of the Study

Through the narratives of 12 participants, this study explored the phenomenon of women who enrolled in a GED preparation program, but dropped out before taking the GED test. Because the number of women who dropped out of high school outweighed the number of women who completed the GED test, the number of women without a high school credential had been steadily increasing (GED Testing Service, 2013b). Women who dropped out of GED preparation programs faced severely limited access to further education, with limited employment opportunities and a likelihood of living below the poverty threshold (Merriam et al., 2007; Swanson, 2010). Little was known about why women enrolled in GED preparation programs but failed to continue to the point of testing. Research had been conducted on retention in adult education but had focused on those who had been successful in their endeavors, rather than on those who had not (Quigley, 1997). "Knowing why adults participate in formal adult education does not tell us why many do not" (Merriam, et al., 2007), and this study was conducted for the purpose of better understanding the experiences of women who were unsuccessful in GED preparation programs.

This study looked at the perceived experiences of the participants through the lenses of possible selves theory and theory of margin. These theories contributed a frame of reference through which to view the narratives as women recounted their experiences. This research examined how feared selves and desired selves were reflected in the narratives of the participants. This research also looked at how women's past, present, and future selves played a role in their experience of the phenomenon. Theory of margin provided a means to view the network of challenges and support perceived by the women at the time they stopped going to classes.

This phenomenological study used interviews and demographic surveys to learn how twelve women perceived their experiences of dropping out of GED preparation programs. Listening to the narratives of the participants as they recounted their experiences afforded the researcher an opportunity to gain insight into how the women felt at the time the events took place, and also helped to shed light on how they made sense of the events (Merriam, 2002). The researcher transcribed the interviews and the data were then coded using HyperRESEARCH software. Demographic data were gathered to provide a description of participants and was presented in Table 6 and Table 7.

Findings from the interviews reflected that the majority of the women who participated in the study had abandoned their desired future selves, and they indicated that negative effects from their past selves continued to adversely affect them. The majority of participants believed their current lives reflected their feared selves. There was an imbalance in the load and power factors present in the lives of all the women, and their burdens exceeded their resources. The majority of the women identified learning as a struggle, and they believed that a tutor would have enabled them to continue in GED classes.

This research was based on the following research question and sub questions:

How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test?

- How did women describe their hoped-for future selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- How did women describe their feared selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation classes?

- According to theory of margin, how did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?

Discussion of the Findings

Finding 1: The majority of participants (10 of 12) no longer believed they would achieve their desired future-selves.

The findings suggested that all the participants desired better futures with improved opportunities for education and employment, and financial security for themselves and their families. They stated that gaining the GED was necessary in order to achieve their goals, and enrollment in GED preparation classes was their first step toward achieving their desired future-selves. The women stated that they believed the GED was the only way forward toward achieving their desired future selves and they did not know of any other options. Even though they were unsuccessful in their attempts, participants continued to recognize the value of the GED.

The women in this study lived beneath the poverty threshold and struggled to survive, and they shared how their dire circumstances were part of the driving force behind their attempts at adult education. The participants' stories revealed how their situations were often difficult and in turmoil, and they were preoccupied with getting through the day to the exclusion of everything else and consequently had little time left to devote to detailed plans. Previous studies indicated that goals created in desperate environments were often poorly constructed and consequently had less chance of being achieved (Robinson et al., 2003; Rossiter, 2009). In addition, the participants shared that they were fearful of failure and that fear was constantly with them because so much was at stake, and they expressed an underlying doubt about their own capabilities. Markus and Ruvolo (1989) found that "when feared possible selves dominate the working self-concept, performance will be disorganized and impaired" (p. 214). A strong sense of self-efficacy was shown to be a necessary factor in the achievement of desired possible selves (Comings, Parella, & Sorcione, 2000); at the time they quit the GED classes the majority of the participants had lost belief in their abilities to attain their goals and they expressed disappointment in their self-perceived shortcomings.

Failure to achieve their desired selves caused the participants to become "less certain that positive self-relevant outcomes were possible for them…Instead, images and conceptions of negative possible selves were more accessible" (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992, p. 117). The women stated that all their plans for future success had been predicated upon gaining a GED credential, and they reasoned that dropping out of GED classes eliminated the possibility of achieving their hoped-for futures. The participants explained that dropping out generated negative emotions about themselves and a loss of self-esteem, feelings which "can have a marked impact on the form and content of future behavior" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 958). The women conveyed

that they were unable to achieve their dreams and that they were saddened by the realization that their goals of financial security for their families would not be realized.

Finding 2: The majority of participants (9 of 12) indicated past selves continued to adversely affect them.

The majority of the women in this study directly attributed past-self choices to their present situations. They recognized that past choices resulted in long-term repercussions and they believed their current obstacles were consequences of their past selves. Three of the women stated that they regretted becoming pregnant in high school, and that becoming a parent at such a young age contributed negatively to their current situations. They stressed how much they loved their children, but they also believed that if they had not had children in high school they would have already achieved their educational goals. The responsibilities associated with parenthood, especially single parents, weighed heavily on the participants and limited the time and energy that could be applied to attending classes and studying for the GED.

One of the participants reported being a recovering alcoholic with a history of drug misuse, and she was HIV positive. She explained that her addictions had begun in high school where she felt she didn't fit in, and that she had become more interested in getting high than in finishing high school. She also became pregnant while still in school. The participant shared that sitting in the GED classroom caused her to feel powerless, as if she were back in high school, and the experience filled her with anxiety. She went on to state that the threat of relapse was always with her, that anxiety made staying clean and sober much harder, and that memories and fears from the past caused her to doubt herself and her ability to achieve her goals.

Women in this study had expressed regret when they spoke of dropping out of high school. Not graduating from high school left an empty space where an important life event

should have been. How a situation was appraised had a strong influence on how the situation was experienced (Barreto & Frazier, 2012), and all the women in this study explained that their appraisal of dropping out of high school was that it had a catastrophic affect on their educational and financial futures, as well as causing suffering for their families. Research detailed how the empty spaces created by lost opportunities and unmet milestones stood as reminders of personal failure and had the potential to cause long-term suffering (Rossiter, 2007; Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996). The majority of participants in this study shared that they continued to suffer as a result of not meeting the expected milestone of high school graduation. Their narratives told of educational barriers and economic hardships, and the women also spoke of continued suffering caused by feelings of hopelessness, shame, and humiliation. The participants commented that they felt ashamed of not getting the GED, which added to the existing negative past selves.

Comings et al. (2000) illustrated how chronic negative forces in the lives of students created barriers to learning and weakened persistence in adult education, making it difficult "to overcome the negative self-efficacy about learning built up during previous schooling" (p. 7). The women in this study had been unsuccessful in completing high school and memories of those past selves continued to exert negative forces in their lives by reminding them of what they had lost.

> Lost possible selves are similar to regrets, and given the robust negative relationship between regrets and well-being, it is perhaps not surprising that the salience of a lost possible self has been associated with lowered well-being, heightened distress, and increased regret. In other words, thinking a great deal about a goal that is no longer available is misery. (King & Hicks, 2007, p. 32)

All of the participants had reported negative high school experiences, and such negative high school experiences were linked to high dropout rates in adult education programs (Malicky & Norman, 1994). Quigley (1995) noted that students enrolled in adult education classes because they valued education, but found that the motivation levels that enabled students to enroll were not always enough to overcome powerful memories of negative past experiences. The women in this study valued education and had regarded education as their gateway to achieving their dreams, and yet feelings of inadequacy that had been fostered in high school continued to cause them problems. "The effects of experience influence all learning – what learners are attracted towards, avoid and how they approach a task are all related to what has gone before" (Bamber & Tett, 2000, p. 62). Past choices and experiences continued to haunt the women in this study. None of the women blamed their dropping out of high school on the school system. When they did express blame, the blame was aimed at themselves. It was the researcher's impression that the participants had an awareness of the past as a continuing source of strife, but that they blamed themselves for their failures without realizing the significant contribution of economic and environmental factors over which they'd had no control.

Finding 3: The majority (10 of 12) of the participants identified the status quo as their feared possible self.

Dropping out of GED preparation classes had effectively sent the women in this study back into situations from which they had struggled to break free. The participants had been living their feared selves when they began GED classes. When they quit classes they were propelled back into their feared selves where they continued to live below the poverty threshold, with all of poverty's attendant challenges (Payne, 2005). The women believed that they would remain as they were for the foreseeable future, and research showed that without an education their

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situations were unlikely to improve (Capra, 2009; Georges, 2001; Murnane & Tyler, 2000). The researcher's impression was that the participants had been sincere in their statements of wanting better things for themselves and their families but that there was a sense of resignation about their failure to achieve their dreams, as if their failure was somehow merited. When the women spoke of their previous hopes and dreams it seemed to the researcher that they spoke of something they longed for but no longer believed they could achieve, and consequently gave the researcher the impression of having accepted a bad situation that they could do nothing to improve. For low-income women to have a sense of resignation about living their feared selves was not uncommon (Payne, 2005). A study of the possible selves of low-income women enrolled in adult education classes (Robinson et al., 2003) found that many women had little belief of ever achieving a hoped-for self, and many had accepted the unpleasant likelihood that living their feared self was inevitable and unavoidable.

> Feared selves can also inhibit effective functioning if they are seen as inevitable and are not balanced by achievable hoped-for selves. Without this balance, feared selves can reduce performance by interfering with concentration and leading to distracted attention, reduced focus, and negative cognitions and affect. (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007, p. 70)

The participants in this study expressed that they did not know what steps to take when it became apparent to them that they were about to fail in the GED programs. They lacked the means of "visualizing possible failure and strategizing how to get around it" (Lee & Oyserman, 2007, p. 46). Lack of faith in the ability to make progress was evident and "occurs when a dreaded possible self dominates the working self concept" (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989, p. 224).

Finding 4: All participants (12 of 12) showed an imbalance in the load and power factors in their lives, wherein load outweighed power.

As participants discussed their situations their stories revealed issues they struggled with and where they found support. Load factors were present throughout the narratives. All of the women reported incomes below the poverty threshold (see Table 6). Nine of the participants reported experiencing the continuing effects of negative past selves. Other load factors mentioned in the narratives included lack of faith in their abilities to achieve the GED, diminished expectations, parenting concerns, illness, problems with mobility and transportation, threat of homelessness, lack of childcare, troubles within family relationships, and unemployment. Power factors were reported with less frequency; they included the love they felt for their children, emotional support received from friends and family, occasional financial gifts from family, help with childcare, religious faith and involvement in church, and access to public transport.

Participants receiving welfare cash assistance were required to be actively seeking employment in areas where many employers would not provide applications to people without a high school credential. Several of the women told of previously living in shelters and temporary housing, with their names on housing lists that meant they would wait years for permanent housing. Women who had lived in shelters and had formed friendships and felt part of the communities would find themselves being transferred to temporary housing in areas where they knew no one. The interviews for this research were carried out in the homes of the participants during winter, and several participants apologized for the lack of heating but explained that they did not have the money necessary to keep their homes warm.

The imbalance between load and power hampered participants' efforts to obtain the GED. The women expressed that they lived with a sense of urgency, and that they had little or no downtime. The women described their lives as often full of intense difficulties and crises that demanded their immediate attention. Efforts by the women to succeed in adult education did not occur in a vacuum, and their efforts were adversely affected by the oppressive load they carried (Miller, 1967). The scarcity of power in their lives was significant; "more power means a greater margin to participate in learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 93). Living with negative margin long-term was shown to be a cause for concern because "when Load continually matches or exceeds Power, and if both are fixed and/or out of control, or irreversible, the situation becomes highly vulnerable and susceptible to breakdown" (McClusky, 1970, p. 96).

Two load factors evident throughout this study were low incomes and single parent families. Incomes reported by the participants placed them all below the poverty threshold. Previous studies had revealed that women who dropped out of high school were statistically more likely to live in poverty (Capra, 2009; Maralani, 2011; Rivera, 2008; United States Census Bureau, 2012b), and 54.5% of households headed by single women with no high school credential lived below the poverty threshold (United States Census Bureau, 2012b). Poverty was shown to be particularly harmful to learning inasmuch as "poverty robs people of their future stories and the commitment to education…Poverty robs people of the power to solve problems" (Payne, 2005, p. 164). Surprisingly, however, participants in this study did not focus specifically on these load factors. When the issues of money and income were discussed, participants readily acknowledged the scarcity of cash but did not appear to regard themselves as living in poverty, although their incomes placed them in that category. During Ann's interview she stated she was low-income, she was not poor, yet her weekly income was $210. As mentioned above, previous

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research, including government statistics, presented single motherhood as a load factor and a significant contributor to familial poverty. However, the participants with children (but with no spouse or partner) did not refer to themselves as single parents. In addition, participants' narratives did not indicate that they considered their situations to be out of the ordinary nor they did not express the desire for their situations to be otherwise. Also, the women did not appear to link their lack of money with being lone parents. This was notable because the perceptions and perspectives of the participants appeared to be contrary to the expectations that had been generated from the literature (Capra, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2012b).

With regard to power, none of the participants mentioned their access to healthcare or health insurance as a resource. The majority of women in this study identified as women of color, and research showed that women of color were statistically below national averages in their ability to access healthcare (Dowdy, Nurss, Nelson, Pottinger-Bird, & Walters, 2005). However, the participants lived in the Boston area, and since 2007 the citizens of Massachusetts had been required by law to have health insurance coverage (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2006). The state provided no-cost health insurance for low-income residents and their families. From the narratives it was clear that participants and their families had serious, ongoing medical needs and that they had repeatedly benefited from access to healthcare. For example, Natalie lived with a parent who was terminally ill. Ellen lived with a parent who suffered with degenerative heart disease. Ann received drug therapy for the treatment of HIV. Julie had treatment and therapy for bi-polar affective disorder and depression, and Teresa's husband had been receiving treatment for schizophrenia and depression. The burdens of coping with illness and disease were still present, but because of medical insurance provided by the Commonwealth

of Massachusetts (2006) the participants had an invaluable safety net. The omission was notable because access to healthcare had added significantly to their power and lightened their load.

The women in this study expressed that their situations often felt precarious as they struggled to provide basic shelter and sustenance for themselves and their children. Their efforts to secure basic needs regularly consumed large portions of their time and energy, consequently there was little strength left for achieving higher-level goals (Freire, 1970; Maslow, 1954; Payne, 2005).

Finding 5: The majority of participants (8 of 12) stated that they had struggled with learning and felt that having a tutor would have enabled them to continue with GED classes.

Participants viewed dropping out of high school as a burden that had greatly added to their load. Their narratives revealed that they considered that their time spent in high school had generally not been focused on learning. The women stated that they had experienced difficulties learning in GED classrooms and had frequently not understood the lessons being taught.

The women had been given educational assessment tests as part of the adult education enrollment process, and their scores placed them in GED preparation classes. Despite having received positive educational assessments, their negative memories of high school acted as triggers and instigated feelings of inadequacy that resulted in beliefs that they were perhaps slow-witted or unable to learn (Beder, 1991, Rossiter, 2009). "It is well established that experience does influence adults' approaches to learning and their capacity to integrate new information" (Belzer, 2004, p. 44). The decision to enroll in adult education classes coupled with the experience of returning to a classroom environment had the potential to increase the amount of load experienced because "the actual process of making the decision to join a GED class was

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tough on their self-esteem" (Dowdy et al., 2005, p. 19), and the decision to attend a GED program required that they faced social stigma and their fears around learning. Feelings of déjà vu exerted a strong influence. Adults returning to education reported that attending adult education classes felt like they had returned to high school (Beder, 1991).

> Negative past experience of school may be too strong, especially when they walk into classrooms or deal with instructors that remind them too clearly of those past experiences. This is especially true of learners who experienced culturally insensitive teachers or racism, or who had been labeled failures. (Kerka, 1995, p. 3)

Adult learners "perceive their current learning context in light of their previous experiences" (Belzer, 2004, p. 47), and for the women in this study the school struggles from their pasts continued on to affect their present attempts at education.

The women in this study assessed their situations and determined that if they had had a tutor they could have overcome their learning struggles. Ann said she needed one-to-one tutoring in math because the teacher had a classroom full of people to help and could not spend a lot of time with just one student. She felt conspicuous asking questions in front of other students, and felt that she would have eventually learned the math if she'd had access to a tutor willing to spend a lot of time on individual math problems. Diane shared that she had been frustrated to the point of tears because she couldn't keep up with the lessons in class, and felt "all I needed was the math tutor." Ellen disliked the math teacher, struggled to understand the math lessons, and believed a tutor would have led to her taking the GED because "math is the only thing that's keeping me away from taking that test." She believed that a tutor would have helped her get beyond what she saw as a temporary learning block.

Karen had asked questions during class but the answers had not always made sense to her, which added to the doubts she had about her ability to learn. She felt that she had monopolized the teacher's time by asking many questions, especially as the classroom was full of people who also needed help. In the end she stopped asking questions and eventually her frustration reached the point where she stopped going to classes. Karen believed that a tutor would have made the difference and that she would have remained in class.

Many of the women had been out of school for a number of years and were not used to learning in a classroom environment. They struggled in classes where teachers had limited time to spend with individual students. The women's understanding of the role of a tutor was someone who helped with lessons, but also someone who provided emotional support and motivation. Two of the women used counselor and tutor interchangeably. Research had shown the value of tutors to adult education students (Appleby, 2008a; Barton et. al, 2007; Belzer, 2004), but the women in this study could not afford to pay for private tutors and the adult education programs they had attended did not offer that service.

The participants' perceptions of themselves as dropouts appeared to contribute to their notions that shortfalls in their learning were due, to a great extent, to some kind of internal deficit. "Poor performance derives not only from deficits in skills and abilities, but from doubts, anxieties, negative expectations, low perceived control, (and) low self-efficacy" (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992, p. 96). In general, the women perceived their learning performances as poor, and did not directly blame their self-assessed lack of learning on the teachers or the programs. Nothing was said to indicate they had considered classroom sizes too big or that curriculums were unsound. They blamed themselves for any learning problems, and they believed that the only way they would have been able to successfully continue in the GED programs would have

been via one-on-one instruction with tutors. Participants' self-perceived inability to learn in a classroom had contributed to their load, and they identified tutoring as the power factor that would have offset the load.

Demographic survey

The demographic survey provided a variety of descriptive information about the lives of the women. With regard to employment, only 2 of the 12 women were employed. Ann read to children at a neighborhood Head Start program two mornings per week (8 hours total) and received a weekly stipend of $60. Cassie worked an average of 20 hours per week as a waitress and took home average earnings of $200 per week. It had been clear from research that women without a high school credential were likely to suffer high levels of unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Taylor et al., 2011), and the level of unemployment among this group of participants was 83%.

Women without a high school credential were likely to live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2012b) and to have come from low-income families (Levitan et al., 2003; Lewis, 1996; Murnane & Tyler, 2000). All participants in this study had personal and household incomes that registered below the poverty threshold. Two of the women reported receiving no regular income. Louise was no longer entitled to federal welfare cash assistance, and the father of her child was unemployed and unable to pay child support. The second woman, Ellen, had no personal income. She lived with her mother and did not answer the question about household income because she wasn't certain of the exact amount, although she said she knew it was very little.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 62. Five of the women still had children living at home, three had adult children who no longer lived at home, and four of the women had never

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had children. Eleven of the women identified as single, one as married. The literature showed that over half of the households headed by women without a high school diploma lived below the poverty threshold (Capra, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2012b), and that children of low-income households were statistically more likely to drop out of school (Lewis, 1996).

All but one of the women had dropped out of high school after completion of 11th grade. The exception was Teresa, who dropped out after 8th grade. Demographic questions about the educational attainment of their parents showed that eight of the participants had parents who had both graduated from high school, one had only a mother who had graduated, and three women came from a family where neither parent had graduated. Five women had mothers who had attended some college. Previous studies concluded that children of high school graduates were statistically more likely to graduate from high school themselves (Gibson, 2000; Payne, 2005; Robinson, 2001). This study did not reflect those research findings; 75% of the participants in this study grew up in households where at least one parent had a high school diploma, yet all the participants themselves were high school dropouts.

Language did not appear to be a barrier to participation in education. Eleven of the women listed English as their first and only language. Teresa's first language was Spanish, and she was also fluent in English.

The racial identities of the participants were self-reported as: Black (7), Black and Native American (1), Black and White (2), Hispanic (1), and White (1) (see Table 6). The three participants who identified as biracial explained that they felt themselves to be members of the Black community. A high proportion of Black women participated in this study. (This could be explained by the use of snowball sampling.) However, Black women had been shown to be more vulnerable to dropping out of high school than White women (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2013; United States Census Bureau, 2013). Black women continued to face the economic and educational barriers that they had struggled with for hundreds of years (Dowdy et al., 2005), and with regard to the role of the GED

> It is important that the reader consider the statistics associated with the lives of Black women in order to appreciate the value of the GED in the context of the GED story. Black women had not gained economically, educationally, or socially at the close of the twentieth century. (Dowdy et al., 2005, p. 20)

Despite the aforementioned need for the GED among the female Black community, in the realm of adult education, "participation patterns alone have consistently borne out the fact that Blacks and other people of color are underrepresented" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 244). In a discussion of challenges and barriers faced by non-traditional adult students, Bamber and Tett (2000) pointed out that

> Each of us, though unique as individuals, are positioned within society according to hierarchies of power constructed around such factors as class, caste, race, gender, and sexuality. In other words, social encounters in the lecture room are mediated within the parameters set by this broader social context. So the colour of a person's skin, for example, is not a neutral category. It is imbued with different meanings in different contexts…Educators need to be aware of, and responsive to, such realities. (p. 62)

Implications for Practice

The women in this study would have benefited greatly from the provisions of childcare services, transportation to and from classes, small class sizes, and one-to-one tutoring. However, those implications for practice were unlikely to be easily met. The reason the provisions were not already available through adult education centers and community centers was the lack of funds,

and there was no indication that was going to change (Comings, 2007). Fortunately, the results of this study indicated other implications for practice that had the potential to be of great benefit to this population, and would be inexpensive to implement.

Adult students in this population experienced ongoing concerns and challenges from outside the classroom (Hiemstra, 2002; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992), and they told how the burdens of their lives affected their ability to focus in class and take in new information. "The concerns of your learner do not just center on the content of the course" (Hiemstra, 2002, p. 4). McClusky (1964) understood that for women who headed households, the struggles of life left little margin for adult education. Women were more likely than men to live with multiple, chronic factors that limited their autonomy and restricted their access to adult education (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). "The pressures of juggling the roles of student, partner, parent, worker would be lessened if the role of student was seen as including the others" (Cullen, 1994, p. 8). In light of that, the researcher presents the following suggestions.

Adult education students would benefit from the creation of a volunteer network for the provision of childcare, transportation, and tutoring at adult education centers. Such a volunteer programs could be coordinated through local places of ministry/worship, non-profit organizations, or as part of community service projects for college students. Such services would have the potential for lessening situational barriers (Quigley, 1997) and "contribute to increased persistence" (Comings, 2007, p. 30) among adult education students.

Second, enrollment in adult education programs should include a detailed discussion of theory of margin and possible selves theory with all students, either one-on-one or as part of orientation in the classroom. Hiemstra (1993) recommended that instructors introduce students to the theory of margin, and he believed that an awareness of margin resulted in an epiphany for

adult students "in terms of their own life circumstances" (p. 42). Theory of margin would help adult learners with ideas of how adjustments could be made to load and power within their circumstances to help them stay in class.

Possible selves theory would introduce learners to the idea that their dreams for the future are much more likely to be realized if they are supported by careful planning and measurable goals. Detailed possible selves would incorporate plans for dealing with setbacks, and could be modified as goals changed. Students who have never been on a college campus, or have no one in their families who attended college, could not be expected to have the cultural capital necessary for navigating through unknown territory. It may also be the case that the learner has no understanding of the college admissions process or financial aid. The process of mapping out plans for achieving future selves becomes easier when one has a clear understanding of what that future self would look like, and the more details the map contains the clearer the future self seems.

Women who lived in violent situations, generational poverty, and/or generational illiteracy did not always display high levels of insight into their life circumstances (Appleby, 2008b; Payne, 2005). Stephens (2010) found that "this population has become so accustomed to lack in their lives that blatant barriers are unrecognizable" (p. 8). Consequently, any discussion of margin and possible selves should be thorough, as free of assumptions as possible, and should include illustrations and multiple examples.

> If you want people to succeed you have to make sure that the structures are in place for
> that to happen…It's not equal for adults that come in with responsibilities for families
> and children. There needs to be a little more flexibility within that, more resources, more
> support. Without such commitment to support, there is a serious moral question to be

answered by those who would unthinkingly put students through such difficult situations.

(Bamber & Tett, 2000, p. 66)

Participation in adult education often requires considerable sacrifices over an extended period of time (Beder, 1991). Introducing students to theory of margin and possible selves theory would give educators the opportunity to provide adult learners with increased insight and also provide tools that could help them stay persist in school.

Thirdly, the researcher recommends that GED preparation programs record the participation of all students, including students who drop out. The data on dropouts should measure the length of time they attended, and efforts should also be made to determine what factors contributed to the student leaving the program. Making a case for federal funding or grant funds would be strengthened by having up-to-date data on the circumstances causing students to dropout of GED preparation programs, as well as being able to quantify the number of students who were unable to persist.

Finally, the goals of social justice and critical pedagogy cannot be realized in a system that ignores the issues arising from the intersection of racial identity, gender identity, class, ethnicity, ability, and poverty. Adult educators must seriously question the role they play in their work with the undereducated population who are in the welfare system, especially the population represented by this study. Cultural hegemony is so ingrained in the current welfare system that the imbalance of power largely goes unmentioned and unchallenged, and adult education classrooms are in danger of perpetuating the power disparity. Women receiving welfare benefits are not offered adult education options, they are told to attend classes until they reach a certain level of literacy and then take a job, or face economic sanctions (Rivera, 2008). Adult education instructors are often required to report participant attendance to welfare caseworkers (Rivera,

2008), knowing that simply missing a GED class can result in the withholding of participant's benefits. How did adult educators become participants of a system that treats adult learners with disrespect and employs punitive measures to keep them in line? The new rules under welfare reform (the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act and the 1998 Workforce Investment Act) focused on work first, mandating that adults who receive assistance must acquire literacy levels that would enable them to obtain employment, hence the focus on job readiness and not education (Rivera, 2008). They may be able to find jobs, but the jobs they are qualified for will not raise them out of poverty and they are not given the option of postsecondary education (Hays, 2003). Freire (1971) stressed that classrooms should not be delivery systems for the purpose of domesticating learners, but that the goal of adult education should be liberation. There is nothing liberating in the duplicitous government policies that seek to force women into jobs that keep them and their families beneath the poverty threshold, and adult educators should find a way to disentangle themselves from this ethical catastrophe.

Recommendations for Further Research

Previous studies showed the vital role possible selves played in motivation and goal-related performance (Barreto & Frazier, 2012; Leondari, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Rossiter, 2009). Possible selves provided strategies for mapping out plans, developing goals, and building steps toward the attainment of desired future states (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). All the women in this study held desired future selves when they began GED preparation programs, but by the time they dropped out of GED classes the majority of the woman had abandoned their desired possible selves; it appeared that their desired possible selves lacked robustness. There also appeared to be no built-in strategies for coping with setbacks. The researcher submits the

following suggestions for additional research utilizing possible selves theory with this population.

Interviews with this population exploring the influence, nature, construction, and complexity of their desired selves would help address the following questions.

1) What criteria were used for selection of desired possible selves?

2) How elaborate and well strategized were their desired possible selves?

3) How was the possibility of setbacks addressed within the planning of their desired possible selves?

4) What would account for the apparent lack of robustness within their desired possible selves of this population?

5) How did past selves influence the selection of their desired possible selves?

6) What impact did their margin have on the selection and construction of their desired possible selves?

Second, interviews could be conducted with women who dropped out of GED programs, and women who recently passed the GED, to compare the possible selves of the two groups. The educational outcomes for the women who participated in this study illustrated the "difference between lofty aspirations and the harsh realities of the struggle to realize them" (Bamber & Tett, 2007, p. 74). Well constructed, definite possible selves that also incorporate steps and plans for progress, as well as strategies for dealing with setbacks, are much more likely to be realized (Oyserman, et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2003). Comparisons of the two groups would promote the discovery of any discernable differences in the framing and robustness of their possible selves.

Finally, additional studies could be conducted to explore the effects of tutoring on the possible selves of women in GED preparation programs. Interviews with women at the time of enrollment could be compared with interviews conducted at intervals after tutoring had been in place to look for any indications of reshaping of their possible selves. Research indicated that for women "adult education may be especially likely to provide an opportunity to reshape possible selves, expand horizons, and change long-held self-perceptions of ability" (Lips, 2007, p. 57). In looking at the possible selves of low-income mothers in adult education, Lee & Oyserman (2007) stated that there had been little research into the possible selves of that population, and that possible selves provided the means to "understanding unique aspects of self-development and the evolution of self-concept" (p. 45). Such a study would provide an opportunity to explore whether tutoring affected the development of possible selves and increased feelings of self-efficacy.

Concluding Remarks

The goal of this research was to explore how women perceived their experiences of dropping out of GED preparation programs. The results revealed that dropping out destroyed most of their desired possible selves and thereby eliminated the visions they had held for their futures. They ended back where they had begun, with the addition of another failed attempt at education.

They had started from a place of fear, and the GED was supposed to be their doorway out of the dire economic situations they found themselves in. At the time they dropped out of the GED programs the women experienced feeling overwhelmed by their struggles. Motivation to enroll in GED classes had been largely based on the fear of remaining in the status quo and also the desire for financial security for themselves and their families. The participants' desired

possible selves had been constructed out of desperation, in situations with few options available, and the GED seemed to them to be their only choice. Furthermore, the women had little margin and no safety cushion, so as soon as one thing went wrong there was the very real possibility that the whole thing would come tumbling down. They were attempting to complete the GED courses while living a life that was consistently full of urgent needs and crises, and their margin appeared to be so imbalanced as to make it unlikely that they would succeed under their current circumstances.

One research sub question asked how the women described their feared selves when they quit the GED program. The reality turned out to be that they had been living their feared selves at the time they enrolled in the GED program, and that's where they returned after dropping out. Hence, the answer to that question was that they described their feared selves in exactly the same way they described their present lives.

This study explored the experiences of women who had dropped out of the GED program through the lenses of these two theories, possible selves and theory of margin. This population had been invisible in the literature. Past research focusing on GED students considered only those who were enrolled or had made it through to testing. This study contributed to the knowledge base and filled a gap in the existing literature by focusing on a population of women who would have benefited greatly from adult education, but who were not successful in their attempts to complete the GED program and subsequently, never earned their high school equivalency.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval Letter

KANSAS STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y | University Research and Compliance Office

TO: Royce Ann Collins   Proposal Number: 6751
        Educational Leadership
        22201 Innovation Dr., Olathe KS 66061

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
        Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 07/15/2013

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Considering the Lived Experiences of Women who
        Dropped Out of GED Preparation Programs."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for <u>one year</u> from the date of this correspondence, pending "continuing review."**

APPROVAL DATE: 07/15/2013

EXPIRATION DATE: 07/15/2014

Several months prior to the expiration date listed, the IRB will solicit information from you for federally mandated "**continuing review**" of the research. Based on the review, the IRB may approve the activity for another year. **If continuing IRB approval is <u>not</u> granted, or the IRB fails to perform the continuing review before the expiration date noted above, the project will expire and the activity involving human subjects must be terminated on that date. Consequently, it is critical that you are responsive to the IRB request for information for continuing review if you want your project to continue.**

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

☒   There is no more than minimal risk to the subjects.
☐   There is greater than minimal risk to the subjects.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review at least annually, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

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Appendix B- Informed Consent Form

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM
Cora Holt
Department of Adult, Occupational and Continuing Education
Kansas State University

<u>CONSIDERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WHO DROPPED OUT
OF GED PREPARATION PROGRAMS</u>

Part A- General Information

<u>Purpose of study</u>: The purpose of this study is to talk to women who dropped out of the GED program in order to learn about their experiences.

<u>Procedure and duration</u>: You are being asked to participate in an interview and to complete a brief survey. The interview will take approximately ninety minutes; the survey will take approximately fifteen minutes.

<u>Use of result:</u> Data collected in this study will be used as research toward a doctoral dissertation. You have the right to withdraw your permission for your data to be used.

<u>With your permission,</u> *the interview will be audio recorded*. The tape will be transcribed; your name or other identifying information will not be included on the transcript. At the end of the research project the audiotapes will be destroyed.

<u>You do not have to participate in this interview</u>. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may stop participating in this research at any time or choose not to answer any question, without penalty.

<u>The risks and discomforts are minimal.</u> The use of your time is involved. No physical risk is involved, and your behavior or responses will not be manipulated in any way.
Every precaution will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of any records generated by this research. Only the principal investigator (Cora Holt) and her professor (Dr. Royce Ann Collins) will have access to the audiotapes of the interviews and the transcripts. The

audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a locked file for five years; at the end of that period both the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed. Your name and any other identifying information will not appear in any reports or documents that are published as a result of this research project. If you do not understand any portion of what you are being asked to do, or the contents of this form, the researcher will be available to provide a complete explanation. Questions are welcome at any time. Please direct them to Cora Holt (617) 942 7240.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Contact Information:

Rick Scheidt, IRB Committee Chair

University Research Compliance Office

203 Fairchild Hall

Kansas State University

Manhattan, KS 66506

(785) 532 3224

<u>Part B – Signed Consent Portion – to be retained by respondent</u>

I have been informed of any and all possible risks or discomforts. I have read the statements contained herein, have had the opportunity to fully discuss my concerns and questions, and fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a human subject, and the attendant risks and consequences.

I give my permission to audio record this interview. ☐ YES ☐ NO

I would like to receive a copy of the final report. ☐ YES ☐ NO

_____

Research Participant   Date

_____

Researcher   Date

<u>Part B – Signed Consent Portion – to be retained by researcher</u>

I have been informed of any and all possible risks or discomforts. I have read the statements contained herein, have had the opportunity to fully discuss my concerns and questions, and fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a human subject, and the attendant risks and consequences.

I give my permission to audio record this interview. ☐ YES ☐ NO

I would like to receive a copy of the final report. ☐ YES ☐ NO

_____

Research Participant   Date

_____

Researcher   Date

Appendix C - Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to complete this questionnaire. If you don't want to answer a question, please leave it blank. This information will be treated as confidential, and will not be used in any way that would identify you.

Your age: _____

Do you have a partner/spouse? _____

If you have children, what are their ages? _____

How many of your children live at home? _____

If you work outside the home, where do you work?

_____

Your job title: _____

Average total hours worked per week: _____

Your weekly salary or hourly wage: _____

Total weekly income for your household: _____

Please state your race. If you identify as multi-racial, please list all that apply:

_____

Highest grade you finished in school: _____

Did your mother graduate from high school? _____

Did your father graduate from high school? _____

Did either of your parents attend college or technical school? _____

Is English your first language? _____

Apart from English, what other languages are spoken in your home?

_____

Appendix D - Interview Protocol

Interview Questions and Prompts

    1. When did you begin the GED preparations classes?

    2. What your family structure at that time? (single, living with parents, married?)

    3. As you think back to that time, how would you describe yourself? What was your attitude toward life? (contented, hopeful, worried about the future?) Did you have any goals or plans for the future? (if so, what were your goals or plans?) Did you envision yourself achieving those goals or plans? (did goals seem realistic, achievable?)

    4. Why did you begin the GED preparation classes? What were your reasons for pursuing the GED? (employment, prepare for post-secondary school, self-improvement, family pressure, friends were going?)

    5. At the start of the GED preparation classes, how did you envision the person you were going to be in the future? What role did the GED play in your vision of your future?

    6. Did you have anyone supporting you (or encouraging you) to complete the GED classes? If so, who? How did they support/encourage you?

    7. When you were taking GED classes, did you also have a job? (If so, how did that impact your attendance at the classes?)

    8. What did you struggle with the most while you were attending the GED classes? (finding the time to attend, childcare, transportation, uncomfortable in school environment, self-doubt, bored, did not understand the lessons?)

    9. What caused you to stop attending the GED classes? (finding the time to attend, childcare, transportation, uncomfortable in school environment, self-doubt, bored, did not understand the lessons?)

11. Why did you not take the GED exam? (worry about passing, didn't feel ready, decided it wasn't important?)

12. When you stopped going to the adult education classes, what did the experience feel like? (relief, disappointment?) Why did you stop going?

13. At the time you stopped going to classes, did you think you would not take the GED test?

14. At the time you stopped going to classes, how do you think others saw you?

15. At the time you stopped going to class, which resources (or support) were you relying on to help you? How had your resources (or support) changed compared to when you started classes? How did the changes affect your going to class?

16. At the time you stopped going to class, what challenges / struggles were you experiencing? How had the challenges / struggles changed compared to when you started classes? How did the changes affect your going to class?

17. What is your life like now? Describe how you feel about life. How do you see yourself now? What do you see yourself doing in the future? How did the decision to stop going affect your vision of the future?

18. Do you think your life would be different if you had passed the GED? How would it be different?

19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience in the GED preparation classes or your reasons for dropping out of the classes?

Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework		Research Questions		
Guiding research question: How did women perceive the experience of dropping out of GED preparation programs before taking the GED test?					
	Theory of Margin	Possible Selves	1.a. *How did women describe their hoped-for possible selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation program?*	1.b. *How did women describe their feared possible selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation program?*	1.c. *How did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?*
1. When did you begin the GED preparations classes?					
2. What your family structure at that time?	Load/Power				✓
3. As you think back to that time, how would you describe yourself. What was your attitude toward life? Did you have any goals or plans for the future? (if so, what were your goals or plans?) Did you envision yourself achieving those goals or plans?		✓	✓	✓	
4. Why did you begin the GED preparation classes? What were your reasons for pursuing the GED?		✓	✓	✓	
5. At the start of the GED preparation classes, how did you envision the person you were going to be in the future? What role did the GED play in your vision of your future?		✓	✓		
6. Did you have anyone supporting you (or encouraging you) to complete the GED classes? If so, who? How did they support/encourage you?	Power				✓
7. When you were taking GED classes, did you also have a job? (If so, how did that impact your attendance at the classes?)	Load				✓

Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework		Research Questions		
	Theory of Margin	Possible Selves	1.a. *How did women describe their hoped-for possible selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation program?*	1.b. *How did women describe their feared possible selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation program?*	1.c. *How did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?*
8. What did you struggle with the most while you were attending the GED classes?	Load/Power				✓
9. What caused you to stop attending the GED classes?	Load/Power	✓	✓		✓
11. Why did you not take the GED exam?	Load/Power	✓	✓	✓	✓
12. When you stopped going to the adult education classes, what did the experience feel like? Why did you stop going?	Load/Power		✓	✓	✓
13. At the time you stopped going to classes, did you think you would not take the GED test?		✓	✓		
14. At the time you stopped going to classes, how do you think others saw you?		✓		✓	
15. At the time you stopped going to class, which resources (or support) were you relying on to help you? How had your resources (or support) changed compared to when you started classes? How did the changes affect your going to class?	Load/Power				✓
16. At the time you stopped going to class, what challenges / struggles were you experiencing? How had the challenges / struggles changed compared to when you started classes? How did the changes affect your going to class?	Load/Power			✓	✓

Interview Questions	Theoretical Framework		Research Questions		
	Theory of Margin	Possible Selves	1.a. *How did women describe their hoped-for possible selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation program?*	1.b. *How did women describe their feared possible selves at the time they withdrew from the GED preparation program?*	1.c. *How did women perceive the load and power factors present in their lives at the time they dropped out of GED preparation classes?*
17. What is your life like now? Describe how you feel about life. How do you see yourself now? What do you see yourself doing in the future? How did the decision to stop going affect your vision of the future?		✔	✔	✔	
18. Do you think your life would be different if you had passed the GED? How would it be different?		✔	✔	✔	
19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience in the GED preparation classes or your reasons for dropping out of the classes?	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔