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# A Grounded Theory Study of Working Adults Navigating Advanced Degrees

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Charles Slider

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Abstract


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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

There is considerable body of research about adults navigating advanced degrees, but little regarding adults in graduate degree programs while in full-time educational careers. Guided by Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory (GT) that reflected the lived experiences of teachers within a school district as they progressed through advanced degrees while full-time employed. Fourteen adult learner participants were asked to talk about their experiences as both full-time educators and graduate students. The constant comparative analysis method was employed to analyze the data to develop a theory entitled enduring driven succeeding. The theory explained stages that the participants underwent as they pursued an advanced degree. Four stages emerged from this GT study. Each stage represented behaviors one can expect in similar contexts: (a) visioning experiences in which the learner arrives at a clear mental picture the desired outcome; (b) investing experiences which occur when a learner decides on following a course of action towards the accomplishment of a goal; (c) clicking experiences in which learners begin to understand and apply their learning in meaningful ways; and (d) reflecting experiences which occur as adult learners reflect and rethink their successes and failures in order to move forward to pursue their goals. This theory can be useful in preparing university administrators, recruiters, or trainers to understand the challenges faced by full-time working adult students as they navigate advanced degree programs. Extending this theory through the method of grounded action (GA) may also assist in providing good action plans for resolving the issues faced by adult learners as they pursue advanced degree programs.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to God and several very important people in my life. I would like to acknowledge my father, Charles Valent Slider Sr., and my mother, Claudia Beatrice McCray Slider. Without their love and patience, I would not be here today. Even though they are both in heaven, I know that they are still watching over my family and me. I would also like to acknowledge the untiring support of my wife, Letitia Miranda Slider, for allowing me the latitude to stop and study when I wanted to. She is definitely my gift from God.

During the development of my study, my son Charles and his wife Shanita had my first grandchildren, Caiden Marie and Rhylan Noelle Slider. I would like to dedicate this study to Caiden, Rhylan, and any other grandchildren who may be born after them. I also want to dedicate this study to my youngest son, Orlando, and my daughter, Cassondra. I would finally like to acknowledge the grace and mercy of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without Him this study could not be, for everything was created for Him and by Him, and I thus praise His holy name.

Acknowledgments

Reaching the educational level of a doctoral degree was not a goal that I set out to accomplish when I was in high school. Achieving this degree was more of a destiny that was orchestrated by God. I would like to say that this experience was fun, but it was more than fun—it was an adventure. I can say that it was extremely challenging psychologically as well as physically. Through this experience, I came to realize who I am and what I am truly capable of achieving. I can only say that God can do anything, because He definitely guided me through this endeavor; even when I thought I would never finish, God knew.

God provided several guardian angels along the way. Among them were Dr. Mitchell Olson and his lovely wife, Rev. Sharon Olson, who provided support most times without me asking for it. I want to sincerely recognize all their efforts on my behalf. My mentor, Dr. Olson, whom I affectionately call Dr. O, has provided so much support that I know this was planned out by God. Dr. O would always point out to me how I could improve and kept me on target when I drifted off course. He taught me how to be a true grounded theorist and not to force preconceptions into theory. Dr. O would always provide honesty. No matter how badly it hurt, he meant it for my improvement, and for this he will always be my *Number One Guardian Angel.* Sharon spent many hours reviewing my grammar and showed me true compassion and empathy. I will always be grateful to her for her patience.

I must also recognize the Drury University Graduate School of Education staff, Dr. Gail Slye and Dr. Edward Williamson, who were critical in helping me to develop into a researcher. Their persistence helped me focus on reaching the highest standards possible. Dr. Williamson provided moral support at low points in my program by listening to my concerns and

reservations. Dr. Slye provided encouragement while I was an adjunct at Drury by offering wisdom from her experiences.

Dr. Edward Burgess was the pioneer who led the way for me. Dr. Burgess and I were both students under Dr. Olson, until Dr. Burgess completed his doctoral program with Walden in December 2011. He provided collegial advice that money cannot purchase, and I will always be grateful to him.

Mrs. Sharon Prohaska, my transcriptionist, was always timely and accurate with interview transcriptions. She was always careful not to allow me to read into the interviews and provided clear, concise transcript support. Her advice came in handy as well, and she was a Godsend.

Dr. Judith Blackburn, the superintendent of the school district that provided the subjects for this research study, approved my research without any reservations and gave me all the latitude and trust to complete this research study. Dr. Blackburn never wavered in giving me her support throughout the study. Even when I knew there were some staff members who did not appreciate my research, Dr. Blackburn never retreated on her agreement. Without Dr. Blackburn's untiring support, this study would not have been possible.

It would be unjust for me to not acknowledge the Walden University Research Support Center, which was a key element in my successful completion of the dissertation process. I will always remember the genuine support and concern the Walden family provided me during my years as a doctoral student. Without this support, I would still be working on trying to finish this study.

Finally, it is with sincere humbleness that I thank Doctors Bernie and Rita Turner for the unselfish sacrifices they undertook to create a path for older students in the American higher education system by establishing Walden University. It is through their courage and diligence that I and thousands of other nontraditional students have been able to attain our dream of achieving a doctoral degree. These two wonderful human beings envisioned a "university without walls" that could reach students any place or time, when the student was able to accommodate learning. Without the Walden dream, many dreamers would not be able to live out their passion. To Doctors Bernie and Rita Turner I am eternally grateful!

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Section 1: Introduction of the Study

Working in a full-time career while enrolled in an advanced degree program is a problematic issue in the United States and internationally because while higher education helps keep a country globally competitive, it is difficult for adults to incorporate into their busy lives (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Eisenbach, 2013; Gardner, 2009; Holmberg, 2013; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Thelin, 2010, 2011; Wendler et al., 2010; Zumeta, Breneman, Callan & Finney, 2012). The United States and other nations use the ratio of advanced degree completion as a measure of future success in scientific research and economic progress (Bowen et al., 2009; Gardner, 2009; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013, 2009; Thelin, 2010, 2011; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschell & Hutchings, 2008; Wendler et al., 2010; Zumeta et al., 2012). The attrition rate for completion of advanced degrees ranges from 40% to 70% based on the various specialties (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Nettles & Millet, 2006). However, in some institutions, over the last 40 years 50% of the students who enroll in advanced degree programs have not finished them (Bayley, Ellis, Abreu-Ellis & O'Reilly, 2012; Council of Graduate Schools, 2009; Gardner, 2008, 2009; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 1996).

Educators responsible for producing master and doctoral level graduates must assist students in overcoming obstacles to their programs of study (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). Teachers enrolled in advanced degrees programs also face challenges such as: (a) career transitions, (b) being laid off or fired from a job (Phillips & Pugh, 2010), (c) lack of finances for advanced schooling (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006), (d) the time it takes to complete a degree (Wendler et al., 2010), (e) political and economic shifts, (f) unclear career pathways, (g) full-time or part-time enrollment, and (h) family situations and stability (Noonan,

Lundy, Russell-Smith & Livingston, 2011; Smith et al., 2006; Wendler et al., 2010). Even though researchers have previously explored these external challenges, very little is known about the lived experiences of practitioners who are in the process of pursuing advanced degrees.

Creighton, Parks and Creighton (2008), Pierce and Hawthorne (2011), and Wendler et al. (2010) agreed that little is known about what goes on with students in the process, but Creighton et al. found that mentoring is critical when it comes to doctoral student completion. Doctoral completion rates provide very little information about the student-faculty relationship before doctoral completion (Creighton et al., 2008). With respect to coaching and mentoring of these graduate students, there is plenty of literature applicable to the undergraduate level and junior faculty but very little on master and doctoral level students (Nettles & Millet, 2006).

Approximately half of all students enrolled in doctor of education (EdD) programs will not attain the degree, and a large percentage of those who do will take longer than three years to finish (Creighton et al., 2008; Thelin, 2010, 2011; Wendler et al., 2010). Similarly, Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) found that 43% of all doctoral level students drop out before program completion. The United States competes with other nations to produce and retain competitive graduate level candidates in advanced technology, math, and the arts and sciences (Aud et al., 2013). Advanced degrees provide professionals with the superior knowledge and skills required to support innovative and creative progress in the global economy (Wendler et al., 2010).

## Background of the Study

Teachers may currently complete advanced degrees through traditional and nontraditional means. Traditionally, full-time students attend and live on a college campus before working in a career (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Angeillo, 2010; Rouse & Cline, 2011). This type of graduate

student is normally at or near the age of 23, single, and often as-yet unemployed as a teacher (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Rouse & Cline, 2011). Nontraditional students take online and evening courses offered by many colleges and universities. Nontraditional students are often employed full-time, support a family, and are in the age group of 23 to 78 years (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Angeillo, 2010; Gibson, Harris & Colaric, 2008; Rouse & Cline, 2011; Turner & Turner, 2009). Many universities and colleges have established satellite branches in rural areas across the United States, reducing commuting time while still providing an on-campus feel to course delivery (Horn & Berktold, 2012).

Practitioners who pursue advanced degrees, whether traditional or nontraditional, strive to improve their knowledge, better assist their students' success in academic achievement, attain advanced knowledge, achieve validity as a teaching professional, and increase their pay (Fatima, 2009; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1998; Rice, 2003). Practitioners within Midwest School District 1 (MSD1) who have earned advanced degrees receive promotion on the pay ladder and increased competitiveness for staff administrative positions.

Not all full-time educators learners are able to manage course requirements and maintain a personal life, leading some to either drop out or lose motivation to complete the degree (Brydon & Fleming, 201; Eisenbach, 2013; Ellis, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Klenowski, Ehrich, Kapitzke & Trigger, 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 2010 Wendler et al., 2010). Glaser (1998) asserted that it is easy for advanced degree students to stall on research projects that do not capture their interest. Wendler et al. (2010) found several reasons for the incompletion rate: (a) inadequate financial support, (b) decline in international students enrolled in graduate programs, (c) lack of

career entry points and career progression, and (d) attrition rate due to time of degree completion (Thelin, 2010, 2011; Turner & Turner, 2009; Wildavsky, 2010).

## Problem Statement

Much is known about reasons why graduate students either complete or fail to complete advanced degrees (Brydon & Fleming, 2012; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Thelin, 2010, 2011; Wendler et al., 2010; Zumeta et al., 2012). Wendler et al. (2010) found several major reasons why graduate students become derailed or drop out, such as: change in family status, scheduling issues, other career interests, financial constraints, personal problems, needing to work, dissatisfied with program of study, conflict with job or military, and unsuitable enrollment. However, the current literature does not include how learners handle financial challenges, family commitments, job requirements, mental and physical disabilities, or the lack of career progression.

In MSD1, many educators pursuing advanced degrees complained about the impact of fulfilling school requirements while also attempting to balance effective job performance and their personal lives. Learners experienced stress based on these demands. In my participant interviews I found that the adult learners of MSD1 did not know what effect the degree earning process would have on them until they were in the midst of it. By knowing what to expect in the process of learning a degree, students may resolve the stress that they face as they navigate this process.

There is currently little research about and understanding of full-time working students navigating the *process* of obtaining advanced degrees (Crum, 2009; Stegeman & Glaser, 2009; Wendler et al., 2010). Processes are the milestones or phases that need to be successfully

completed before going on to the next step in the degree program (Fives & Looney, 2009; Johnson & Munch, 2010; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Stegemann & Glaser, 2009). Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) addressed how doctoral students progress through their degree program in three stages to successfully complete their degrees. Presently there are several GT studies in the area of adults navigating educational experiences (Mezirow, 1978; Olson, 2006; Tyink, 2006; Vander Linden, 2005). An inductive research study on the challenges faced by full-time graduate students seeking either a master or doctoral degree while employed in full-time careers assists in supporting the current literature because it provides a substantive GT (Glaser, 1978, 1998) that explains what life is like for graduate students in the process of completing degrees. This study has also provided a picture of what a prospective graduate student can expect during the process of completing an advanced degree program. This study closed a gap in the literature by providing a substantive GT about how learners resolved their concerns while progressing through advanced degree programs as full-time students while working in full-time careers.

## Nature of the Study

I conducted this study utilizing classic GT methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I selected GT because it best allowed the participants to voice how they navigated the area of interest under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory is an inductive discovery process that allows for the natural unfolding and emergence of a theory that has a core variable, or category explaining what the research participants are working on. The core variable is fleshed out with properties, categories, and subcategories that conceptually explain the participants' main concerns within the interest area being studied (Olson, 2008).

Grounded Theory is not findings but rather an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses (Glaser, 1998). It is probability statements about the relationships between concepts. These concepts, or categories, are related to each other as a theoretical explanation of the actions that continually resolve the main concern of the participants in a substantive area (Glaser, 1998). Grounded Theory can be used with either qualitative or quantitative data (Glaser, 1998). The goal of GT is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior that is relevant and problematic for those involved (Glaser, 1978; Simmons & Gregory, 2003).

I collected study data from face-to-face interviews. I transcribed all interviews from the researcher's tape recordings and from field notes (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). (See Appendix F for an example of coding.) Once I conducted the initial interview, I used GT coding procedures to generate initial themes and direct subsequent interviews (Glaser, 1978). I followed the constant comparative analysis method for developing categories and, eventually, the emergent theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

I developed a *grand tour* question in order to initiate this inquiry. Grounded Theory requires that the grand tour question be open-ended and as broad as possible in order to allow the interviewee to be unconstrained and to prevent the researcher from imposing any preconceptions or bias as the interview is initiated (Burgess, 2011; Glaser, 1998, 2011; Olson, 2006; Olson & Aelong, 2013; Simmons, 2010). The grand tour question is essentially the starting gate to obtain unforced interview data (Olson & Aelong, 2013). It is nonleading and can be stated in declarative form so as not to indicate a preferred response (Burgess, 2011; Olson, 2006; Olson & Aelong, 2013; Simmons, 2010). The grand tour question for this study was, "Talk about your experiences as both a full-time educator and graduate student."

I interviewed fourteen volunteers over a period of six months. All participants selected for this study were teachers of grades seven through twelve from MSD1 who were currently enrolled in an advanced degree program or advanced certification program, or had recently attained an advanced degree. I selected the participants using purposeful sampling; this method was used to identify the first interview. Purposeful sampling is a technique used to select participants who specifically have experiences in the area of interest being studied (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002). I conducted the subsequent interviews through theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling was the process used to collect, code, and analyze the data in order to decide where to go next in the analysis (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011; Olson, 2006).

I invited the subjects to participate on a volunteer basis and were informed that they could decide to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research without incurring any repercussions. I conducted the interviews for this study in conference areas throughout the MSD1 and inside the teachers' classrooms when feasible. I made every effort to conduct the interviews after duty hours, or during free periods or lunch hours so as not to interfere with the participants' routine workday. I always communicated with participants face-to-face, and I explained to them the steps followed pertaining to ethical protection and appropriate protocol to prevent any human rights violations.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of full-time teachers within MSD1 as they progressed through advanced degrees while continuing to teach in secondary educational classrooms. The intent of this research was to conceptualize the

perspective of full-time educators obtaining degrees by giving voice to these teachers within the district so as to provide awareness to other educators who are contemplating entering into a degree program. The results may in turn assist other practitioners in the fields of education, nursing, psychology, sociology, and engineering by providing information about the process of progressing through an advanced degree as an adult student who is employed full-time.

### Conceptual Framework

I used transformative learning theory (TL), developed by Mezirow (1978), as the conceptual framework for this study. Transformative learning theory is of interest because it is a theory pertaining to adult learners. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) defined the nature of TL as, "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them [adults] more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (p. 22). Mezirow and Taylor called this process *communicative learning*, which adults conduct through individual experience, critical reflection, and open dialogue with others. In the process, an individual's worldview might be questioned, challenged, or altered.

Mezirow (1978), and Mezirow and Taylor (2009) developed ten phases of learning in the transformative process as follows:

1) A disorienting dilemma.

2) Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame.

3) A critical assessment of assumptions.

4) Recognition of one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared.

5) Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.

6) Planning of a course of action.

7)      Acquiring of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.

8)      Provisional trying of new roles.

9)      Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

10)     A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (pp. 12-22)

It is not that students experience all ten phases but that one or more phases may affect their lives and begin the process of communicative learning. These phases define the possible impact that navigating a new experience has upon the adult learner. Mezirow and Taylor's (2009) phases of learning suggest that adults learn to reason for themselves on how to advance and assess making judgments. Transformative learning theory aids adult learners in evaluating a subject matter rather than acting on the preconceived beliefs of others or themselves (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

GT requires that all data, including existing theories and research, must be compared to the emergent theory in order to be considered a proper channel of analysis (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011). I considered TL as a point of comparison after the substantive theory, had emerged, for three reasons: (a) the participants involved in this study were adult educators, and TL was developed specifically for this particular population; (b) TL seeks to compare and establish a general, abstract model that explains the general structure, dimensions, and dynamics in the adult learning process; and (c) TL provides a model that is not grounded in the culture of any particular environment but focuses on enabling an understanding of how adults learn through holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic practice (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

**Operational Definitions**

*Area of Interest:* The topic being studied, the literature pertaining to it, and any type of data that is directly related to the topic (Glaser, 1998, 2011). Literature must be avoided until after the substantive GT emerges and is then reviewed for relevance through constant comparative analysis, where it may earn its way into the emergent theory (Glaser, 2001, 1998). This prevents the researcher from preconceiving codes and theories that are irrelevant to the study (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011).

*Category:* A type of concept derived from a high level of abstraction, which stands by itself (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Straus, 1967).

*Classic Grounded Theory (GT):* A general inductive methodology for generating theory. It is useful in any field that wishes to generate inductive discovery (Glaser, 1978). Grounded Theory can be used with either qualitative or quantitative data (Glaser, 1978, 2009). It employs a set of rigorous research procedures that lead to the emergence of conceptual categories. These concepts and categories are related to each other as a theoretical explanation of action that continually resolve the main concern of the participants in a substantive area of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

*Coding:* The act of abstracting concepts from empirical data (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

*Concept:* The underlying meaning or pattern of behavior within a set of incidents (Glaser, 1998).

*Constant Comparative Analysis:* A procedure in GT designed to generate conceptual categories and their properties from the beginning of data collection and analysis (Glaser, 2004).

The researcher analyzes data by comparing: 1) incident to incident, 2) concept to the incident, and 3) concept to concept (Glaser, 2004).

*Core variable:* A category that emerges from comparative analysis of data and serves as the foundation for the theory. It recurs frequently, links various data, and allows for maximum variation in accounting for behavior in the action scene (Glaser, 1998).

*Dimension:* A theoretical code that is broader than a property and cuts across the theory (Glaser, 1998).

*Graduate Education or Advanced Degree*: Educational programs that require the student to have achieved a bachelor degree or higher as a prerequisite to enter a particular program, which when completed results in a graduate level certificate, master, doctorate, or specialist certification.

*Grand Tour Question:* A question beginning the interviewing process that allows the interviewee unconstrained responses to how they resolve their main concerns in a particular situation (Burgess, 2011; Olson, 2006; Olson & Aelong, 2013; Simmons, 2010). It is a broad, open-ended question designed to allow the participants the freedom to discuss what is relevant to them without influence from the researcher. A grand tour question is often modified or adjusted from interview to interview or as the researcher finds the need to funnel down (Glaser, 2011; Simmons, 2010) as the theory emerges.

*Indicator*: An incident within empirical data that, upon analysis, points to the existence of a code or a property (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

*Property:* A conceptual element of a category of a lesser level of abstraction or a sub-concept of a concept (Glaser, 1998).

*Saturation*: The emergence of similar categories from multiple data sources. Saturation in GT occurs by comparing incident after incident and continuously fitting and going back to the data to verify and correct the parts of the puzzle that are emerging through the GT process. This is accomplished by alternating data collection with coding and conceptual memoing, which prevents the researcher from collecting redundant data where no new conceptual properties or dimensions emerge (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011).

*Theoretical Synergy:* Combining multiple GT theories and through constant comparative analysis developing a more mature GT by extending its usefulness and power. Glaser (1978) first introduced this concept as cumulative design, and Raffanti (2006) referred to it as *theoretical synergy*.

*Enduring:* An adult learner's ability to persevere through challenges while pursuing goals and balancing daily activities.

*Driven*: An adult learner's internal and external motivation to push toward succeeding (Olson, 2006).

*Succeeding*: An adult learner's experiencing of a series of successes or completions in learning goals. It can also be a final point of completion that marks a time of celebration, or finish line (Olson, 2006).

## Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

I made several assumptions in conducting this research. First, I assumed that all participants would be candid and honest during their interviews. Second, I assumed that the participants were seeking to achieve higher education to improve professionally, as practitioners, or both. Third, I assumed that the participants would feel confident that the data collected would

not be used to negatively affect their careers within MSD1. I reinforced this point during the briefing time before the interview. I assured all participants that nothing that identifies them with the data collected would be reported to the district, and anonymity would be maintained throughout the research. All information collected was held as strictly confidential.

There were several possible limitations to the quality of this research. Grounded Theory requires the researcher to remain unbiased; therefore, even though this researcher was currently an educator in the process of navigating through an advanced degree with Walden University while working, every effort was made to avoid bias or forcing of data through the lens of his own experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Another potential limitation was that all interviews were planned to occur during nonduty hours or during lunch hours of the interviewees within a 4-month period, which created time constraints for the researcher. To overcome this difficulty, those participants who could not be interviewed due to scheduling conflicts throughout the workweek were rescheduled for interviews at a more feasible time.

## Significance of the Study

The substantive theory that emerged from this research may have a positive impact on MSD1's professional learning plan and teaching staff by providing a representative view of the main concerns of the participants who are seeking to navigate advanced degree programs. This study will contribute to the field of education because there is not enough research that provides the main concerns of participants in the area of adult students balancing full-time careers while attempting a graduate degree (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Bowen et al., 2009; Taylor, 2007; Thelin, 2010, 2011; Wendler et al., 2010; Zumeta et al., 2012). Advanced

degree students in the fields of nursing, psychology, sociology, engineering, and other educational fields may also benefit from this study.

## Summary and Transition

The purpose of this inquiry was to conceptualize the lived experiences of full-time teachers within MSD1 as they progressed through master or doctoral level programs in order to provide awareness to other educators who are contemplating entering into a degree program. Grounded Theory was the methodology used to develop an emergent theory. Grounded Theory was selected as the methodology for this study because it is inductive and follows a process of constant comparative analysis to produce data that accurately reflects the lived experiences of the study's participants. The initial interviews began with a nonleading, grand tour question: "Talk about your experiences as both a full-time educator and graduate student." Mezirow's TL was used as the conceptual framework for this study because it centers around transformation of adults' frames of reference as they engage in learning.

Section 2 will discuss literature that pertains to TL and GT as well as other literature reviewed in connection with the area of interest. I reviewed certain studies prior to beginning the research along two lines: (a) to establish what research already existed with respect to the area of interest, and (b) to identify the research methodology. Section 3 presents classic GT methodology and the seven GT steps that were followed in order to develop the emergent, substantive theory *enduring driven succeeding*, and its categories, subcategories, and properties. Finally, Section 5 provides a summary and conclusion of this study with recommendations for future research and the social impact of this study on the field of education and others.

Section 2: Literature Review

**Introduction**

I organized the literature review as follows: the grand tour question, followed by a discussion of research related to working adults in higher education, and the relationship of this study to previous research. Then I transition to a summary of related literature, potential themes that emerged, and academic literature that influenced this study. Finally, I discuss GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the tradition selected for this study, as compared to other research traditions.

I gathered literature utilizing key words and phrases (graduate degree, history of education, barriers, higher education, and advanced degree) to search for relevant data, peer-reviewed literature, and journals that related to and supported the emergent substantive GT, *enduring driven succeeding*. Databases searched included ProQuest, EBSCO, Academic Search Primer, ERIC: Education, Google Scholar, Amazon and Walden University Library resources, education course materials, and archives for relevant data that supported the emergent GT.

**Review of Related Research and Literature**

**Grand Tour Question**

The area of interest in this study is how full-time educators navigate advanced degrees. Each participant provided their responses to the same grand tour question (see Section 3), which allowed the participants to speak freely. The grand tour question asked of each participant was, "Tell me about your experiences as both a full-time educator and graduate student."

**Working Adults in Higher Education**

Many of the new students enrolling in institutions of higher learning are nontraditional (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011; Sanders, 2014). They are older, full- or part-time employed, and

engaged in multiple responsibilities between which they must maintain a delicate balance (Planty et al., 2009; Sanders, 2014). These working adults come from all occupations; therefore, professors, mentors, and college administrators must gain an understanding of how to support each of these students' needs (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). Meeting the needs of nontraditional students will be a growing challenge for the American higher education system, with 12% through 52% of advanced degree students enrolled working in full-time or part-time careers (Planty et al., 2009).

**A Brief History of United States Higher Education**

The United States' higher education leadership developed a university system that has endured the colonial era and multiple conflicts and wars (the American Revolution, Civil War, WWI, WWII, Korean Crisis, Vietnam Conflict, and currently Iraq and Afghanistan) (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Murray, 2013; Thelin, 2010, 2011). The creative minds of US higher education leadership resulted in the United States evolving into the forefront as a premier model of a quality university system, particularly from 1970 through 1990 (Althaus, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Thelin, 2011; Walker et al., 2008).

**Golden Age of Higher Education.** From 1945 after WWII through 1970, US higher education enjoyed prestige, prosperity, and popularity (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Eisenmann, 2004; Freeland, 1992; Thelin, 2011). Following WWII the US higher education system evolved into an international magnet drawing foreign students from all over the globe to study in the United States. It was the world's best research university system from 1970 through 1980 (Wildavsky, 2010). Due to the progress, notoriety, and growth of the educational sector, American college leadership and journalists around the globe coined this era the *Golden Age* in American higher

education (Eisenmann, 2004; Freeland, 1992; Thelin, 2011). Wars, conflicts, civil rights marches, civil disturbances, and the women's rights movement greatly impacted this era (Murray, 2013). Federal laws providing funding and ensuring civil rights also helped to ignite growth in American higher education institutions (Althaus, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Murray, 2013).

All these factors caused the educational system to transform to the needs of a diverse population of adult students who were fully engaged in working careers (Bowen et al., 2009; Murray, 2013). Institutions reconfigured in two aspects: (a) from providing limited access to just a selected few students to open access for massive numbers of students in all socioeconomic statuses, and (b) displaying and encouraging creativity in academic curricula for undergraduate, professional, and graduate level growth in research study (Althaus, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Thelin, 2011). Simultaneously, the American higher education system made itself relevant by becoming the global model for elite scholarship systems (Althaus, 2011; Thelin, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

**Adults Returning to College and Working Fulltime.** As adults return to institutions of higher learning, many discover that advances in technology and academic skills they once used prior to leaving academia have become outdated (Bayley et al., 2012; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011; Sanders, 2014). These working students are referred to as nontraditional students (Bosch, 2013; Lucas, 2006; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011; Turner & Turner, 2009). They are typically aged 25 years and older, married, and working in full-time or part-time careers (Althaus, 2011; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). Nontraditional students are following a dream of earning an advanced degree in order to improve their lives and gain more knowledge (Turner & Turner, 2009).

Nontraditional students have always existed from the conception of the American higher education system, but during the Golden Age this population of students became more prevalent due to a larger working population having increased access to higher education due to new federal laws and funding (Lucas, 2006; Murray, 2013; Thelin, 2011). However, nontraditional students still faced the challenge of fitting the mold of traditional graduate students, those who continue on to graduate school immediately following undergraduate study (Gardner, 2008, 2009; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

In order for American institutions of higher learning to provide positive support to nontraditional students, professors and mentors must be aware that these students may face many challenges (Gardner, 2009; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011; Sanders, 2014), such as management of time and conflicts of competing personal, family, professional, and academic obligations (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009). In response to the prevailing challenges faced by nontraditional students, entrepreneurs began developing Internet-based institutions of higher learning utilizing advanced technology that also supported nontraditional, international students (Althaus, 2011; Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hyman, 2012; Lei & Gupta, 2010).

**Walden University.** Walden University, a for-profit, nontraditional, online institution, has made significant contributions to nontraditional graduate students nationally and globally. Walden was founded by Bernie and Rita Turner in December 1970 to provide working students the ability to reach their dreams of obtaining advanced degrees. The Turners' intent was to create a university without walls that was capable of supporting older, working adults with the ability to continue growing as professionals into agents of social change (Turner & Turner, 2009). The Turners' goal was to affect a marginalized population of older, professional students in a higher

education system geared to young full-time graduate students who were unemployed and living on campus (Turner & Turner, 2009). The Turners understood the challenges faced by nontraditional students because of their own experiences gained while working in full-time careers and being part-time students with the barrier of being considered too old to be accepted into traditional institutions. On July 5, 1971, Walden assembled its first summer session consisting of 141 doctoral students at Cove Inn located in Naples, Florida (Turner & Turner, 2009). Walden graduated 70 doctoral students at its first commencement ceremony on July 1, 1972, consisting of 46 PhD and 24 EdD candidates in the field of education. Walden has existed for over 44 years and has graduated thousands of nontraditional advanced degree students.

The Turners met barriers created by accreditation governing bodies, which questioned the quality of this online institution of higher learning (Turner & Turner, 2009). Other online universities also suffered from resistance in the accreditation processes, influenced by the traditional brick-and-mortar institutions' leadership questioning the validity and quality of the new online delivery systems (Bayley et al., 2012).

**Brick-and-mortar versus online institutions.** Traditional American universities face the challenges of reconfiguring academic course delivery to meet the needs of an older and growing population of nontraditional students (Ebersole, 2010; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). The average age of a nontraditional student is projected to be 35 by the year 2018 (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). Traditional universities must develop Internet platforms to service these nontraditional students if they want to be relevant as educational institutions (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hyman, 2012).

Even though American higher education governing bodies are making changes in the structure of their universities to accommodate traditional as well as nontraditional students in the new technological information era, what still remains is the human element (Lei & Gupta, 2010). The human element is the passion and desire each graduate student possesses to continue to pursue completion of a degree program as they navigate challenges during the process (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). College professors and mentors of these adult students must become familiar with challenges these students may face and their individual academic strengths and weaknesses (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011).

Traditional brick-and-mortar institutions often resist the disruption caused by online institutions, but many have begun to create online platforms to compete with online institutions and complement traditional classrooms (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Hyman, 2012; Joseph, 2013). These efforts allow brick-and-mortar institutions to attract nontraditional students and increase their competitive edge. Joseph (2013) supported the use of technology but acknowledged the limitations of face-to-face interaction not occurring, in which 20% of learning occurs. Traditional universities must be willing to take risks with the unfamiliarity of online systems and incur the costs of establishing curricula and training instructors (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

**Platforms of delivery.** With the vast improvements in technology, online education is moving at an increasing rate of growth and quality of which traditional universities must take advantage in order to be relevant (Althaus, 2011; Hill, 2012; Hyman, 2012). Platforms for online delivery will have to be integrated into these institutions in order for them to maintain pace with

current trends of for-profit, online institutions in meeting the challenges faced by nontraditional

students. Typical platforms of delivery are as follows:

- *Ad hoc online courses and programs* are short-term or one-off courses that are
  experimental in nature or address a specific training area and function to support
  traditional institutions' immediate needs at low cost. (Hill, 2012).

- *Fully online programs* are master and doctoral degree programs from online-only, for-
  profit, and nonprofit institutions. (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hill, 2012).

- *School-as-a-service* aids in overcoming barriers between traditional education and
  scalable online education by allowing institutions to outsource or collaborate with an
  external company for online content, curriculum, and/or student services, providing
  support, experience, and capabilities to support the institutions (Hill, 2012).

- *Educational partnerships* involve external organizations providing portions of online
  courses and communities of practice, including a network of peer instructors worldwide
  working in similar programs (Hill, 2012).

- *Competency based education (CBE)* is a self-paced model that is based on broad
  outcomes by starting with the desired end state and moving to the learning experiences
  that should lead students to the desired goals. It can be implemented in face-to-face,
  online, and hybrid models (Hill, 2012).

- *Blended-hybrid courses and the flipped classrooms* combine a structured online and face-
  to-face class, allowing instructors to move the traditional lecture, or content
  dissemination, away from face-to-face to online delivery outside of class time. The

instructor has the freedom to help students one-on one with specific problems (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hill, 2012; Hyman, 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011; Wildavsky, 2010).

- *Massive open online courses (MOOC)* are online courses framed to enable an unlimited number of students to take a course from the faculty who designed the course (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hill, 2012; Hyman, 2012).

In recent years, major universities such as Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Princeton, the University of Michigan, and the University of Pennsylvania have experimented with several different delivery platforms of online courses in order to meet the needs of the growing nontraditional student population (Hyman, 2012). The need to have a flexible course schedule combined with the ability of students to virtually attend classes any place and any time their schedules allow assist nontraditional students. Several systems even provide students with free enrollment (Hyman, 2012).

If traditional institutions want to continue to be relevant in higher education, they must be cognizant of the competitive nature of online, for-profit institutions and recognize the legitimacy of online education as a growing force in advanced degree education (Hill, 2012; Hyman, 2012; Joseph, 2013). If brick-and-mortar institutions can: (a) move toward some form of online model that will increase their competitive edge in supporting nontraditional students nationally and internationally, and (b) lower the expense of attending higher education for these students, they will continue to thrive in the expedient, technological era (Althaus, 2011; Hill, 2012).

**Relationship of Study to Previous Research**

Many adults who are pursuing advanced degrees do not have a clear understanding of what to expect upon entering a program of study (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009; Klenowski

et al., 2011; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Nontraditional students may have taken off several years between academic endeavors to pursue full-time or part-time careers and upon entering advanced programs are not aware of the amount of time it will take to complete their degrees or the many challenges that they may face during this process (Wendler et al., 2010). If the adult learner is not aware of the challenges that they may face, successful completion of a degree program is at risk (Bayley et al., 2012).

Challenges adult learners may experience while pursuing a degree program include lack of support from family, mentors, and colleagues (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013; Joseph, 2013); poor communication with faculty; isolation; and lack of understanding the requirements of the degree program or the dissertation process (Bayley et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011). If adult learners cannot obtain adequate support required to overcome barriers such as these and have a clear understanding of the degree process, they may experience frustration and stress (Bosch, 2013; Selye & Fonder, 2013), causing learners to drop out or stall during the degree process. When learners face barriers and a lack of support, they can find it challenging to maintain balance in their daily lives (Bayley et al., 2012; Bosch, 2013; Gardner, 2009; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011).

**Maintaining Balance**

Maintaining balance was a significant theme of many studies reviewed (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011). Without balancing, adult learners become frustrated and confused due to their inability to maintain a routine. Many studies showed that in order for adult learners to maintain balance, they must integrate strategies to implement their goals and have adequate support systems.

Graduate students may also face challenges in the area of time management skills (Ellis, 2013). While adult students progress through their specific programs, balancing careers, family, and social relationships is critical to their success (Bayley et al., 2012; Eisenbach, 2013; Holmberg, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011). Eisenbach (2013) and Holmberg (2013) noted that female advanced degree students had a higher dropout rate than that of their male counterparts and that the competing roles of mother, spouse, and caregiver had priority for the female students in deciding on careers and degree completions. Both researchers iterated that there is tremendous tension on mothers who are pursuing doctoral degrees (Bayley et al., 2012; Eisenbach, 2013; Holmberg, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011). No matter what their gender, adult students require collegial and family support in order to endure the process (Bayley et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011).

In order for graduate students to overcome challenges, they must properly manage time by setting deadlines and establishing daily routines (Bosch, 2013; Ellis, 2013; Philips & Pugh, 2010; Ravo, 2004). They may seek alone time by sequestering time to balance work responsibilities, family relationships, and academic challenges (Clerehan, McCall, McKenna & Alshahran, 2012; Ellis, 2013). Adult learners can also sequester to reflect on their transforming identity from learner to professional (Clerehan et al., 2012).

Graduate students also need sound advice and guidance from mentors and professors when they are faced with the challenge of time management (Ellis, 2013; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011) and maintaining the balance between positive and negative stress (Selye & Fonder, 2013). If adult students have adequate support systems, stress can be substantially reduced (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009; Klenowski et al., 2011).

**Support Systems**

The challenges and barriers adult students face may be overcome if they have adequate support systems (Klenowski et al., 2011). Support systems consist of family members, the technology of an institution, peers, community, professors, and mentors (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013; Bosch, 2013; Eisenbach, 2013; Ozturk, 2012). Support systems enhance scholarly growth and identity (Gardner, 2009). Through face-to-face interactions, adults learn by doing and belonging (Bosch, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011). Actively engaging in debate encourages scholarly discourse, which has a positive impact on academic growth and supports a student's inclusion in a group (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Forsyth, 2010). Through collegial inquiry and reflection, adults develop scholarly identity and mastery of skills required for being proficient scholars and researchers (Bayley et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011).

Support systems that are inadequate and or lack a clear understanding of the process of navigating advanced degree progression can hinder the success of graduate students (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). The lack of understanding of the degree program will have a direct impact on the adult learners' positive motivation to succeed in their programs.

**Lack of Understanding the Degree Program Process**

Many adult students do not clearly understand how to negotiate the process of scholarly writing and lack collaborative skills (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Trafford and Leshem (2009) termed this inability as *doctorateness,* the challenge of being able to put together the dissertation thesis into a polished, acceptable publication. This can be a challenge for adult students and their instructors because of lack of communication, appropriate psychosocial development, and other barriers that prevent adult learners from reaching the goals and standards of their degree program

(Gardner, 2009; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Olson and Drew (1998) referred to doctorateness as *dissertationese*.

The proper fit of professor and student is critical in overcoming challenges during the dissertation process (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). Nontraditional students enter their programs of study most times with no idea of how to initiate theoretical inquiry into an area of interest and conceptualize ideas in writing (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). Mentors and professors of these students must be aware of this lack of understanding and the barriers that nontraditional adult learners have to overcome to succeed.

**Barriers**

Graduate students often face institutional, dispositional, and situational barriers (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013; Bosch, 2013; Cross 1981; Joseph, 2013). Institutional barriers consist of inadequate course offerings and scheduling, restrictive institution policies, high tuition costs, or inadequate staff support. Dispositional barriers consist of the adult learner's psychological attitude, understanding of program goals, inability to manage time, negative reactions to stress, learning style, and social and economic situation. Situational barriers consist of the geographic location of learners from their institutions, allotted time that is given to work, family and academic responsibilities, and the type of learning environment.

Situational and dispositional barriers can be overcome if adult learners are self-starters, possess self-discipline, and are knowledgeable about technology (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013). Technology used as a standalone system can be a barrier to learning due to the lack of face-to-face communication (Joseph, 2013), so adult learners must be able to communicate with others in online networks in an open-minded, mature manner (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013; Cross, 1981).

Another barrier for adult learners and their institutions of higher learning is the evaluation process and academic readiness of adult learners for advanced degree programs (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011). With the rapid improvement in technological delivery systems, institutions need a better understanding of learner characteristics in order to provide appropriate learner support online (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013; Bayley et al., 2012; Hyman 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011). If institutions can identify the barriers that may hinder adult learners from progressing, they will increase the chances that these students will successfully complete their programs. However, caring and nurturing professors and mentors (Pierce & Hawthorne, 2011) must monitor adult student motivational drive.

**Motivational Drive**

All adult students enter their programs with a level of internal and external motivation: a drive. This motivation is the passion they have toward the completion of their programs. Brydon & Fleming (2011) explained this drive as *sustaining the passion*, which is learners' inner motivational drive to accomplish the degree with or without outside support. If learners can sustain the momentum of the passionate drive, their chances of completing the process are greater (Brydon & Fleming, 2011).

Learners' level of motivation correlates with their degree of locus of control (Weiner, 2010). Locus of control is the ability learners possess to manipulate situations through their own enthusiasm (Weiner, 2010). The amount of control learners have is normally equal to the amount of authority they have in any given situation (Rotter, 1966, 1989; Weiner, 2010, 2000). Adult learners who have a positive locus of control display confidence under stress and logically resolve conflicts with sound resolutions. When adult learners understand their locus of control,

they have a clear understanding of things they can control and matters that are beyond their

ability to control during degree progression (Weiner, 2010).

## Summary of Related Literature

Graduate students in American institutions of higher learning face many challenges that

they must overcome in order to complete their degrees (Bayley et al., 2012; Eisenbach, 2013;

Holmberg, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Wendler et al., 2010). Several

studies address the behaviors of adult graduate students, but only several provide a theory of

what may occur to adult learners who are in the degree-earning process (Gardner, 2009; Otkay,

Jacobson & Fisher, 2013; Willis & Carmichael, 2013). Negotiating the challenges of an

advanced degree is not a new phenomenon but is a perennial dilemma (Thelin, 2011; Wildavsky,

2010).

Current studies reveal that graduate students may face the inability to properly manage

time (Klenowski et al., 2011), lack proper support and support systems (Brydon & Fleming,

2011), lack finances (Bayley et al., 2011, Smith et al., 2006), and face family hardships (Bayley

et al., 2012; Clerehan et al., 2012; Schepp, 2012). Other challenges graduate students may also

face are poor study environments (Bayley et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011), negative stress

(Eisenbach, 2013; Holmberg, 2013; Selye & Fonder, 2013), social and cultural obstacles

(Clerehan et al., 2012), and lack of self-motivation (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Eisenbach, 2013;

Holmberg, 2013).

## Literature Related to *Enduring Driven Succeeding*

Many adult students develop strategies to succeed in progressing through advanced

degree programs. Several critical strategies are having a vision (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner,

2009; Miller, 2009; Olson, 2006), investing in that vision (Fawcett, 2009; Gardner, 2009; Olson, 2006), mastering the skills required to complete the degree (Olson, 2006; Walker et al., 2008), reflecting on those experiences of trial and error, or mental rehearsal (Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Regmi, 2013), and handling stress (Bayley et al., 2012; Clerehan et al., 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011; Selye & Fonder, 2013).

Graduate students need to have a clear vision of what their goal is as well as a plan with strategies and options to reach it (Gardner, 2009; Miller, 2009; Olson, 2006). This vision will be the foundation of their program of study. In this vision, learners decide on which program in which to invest (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009; Klenowski et al., 2011). The vision will also be supported from strategies developed within the specific program based on the specific needs of each adult learner. Fawcett (2009) defined visioning and vision as having a strategic plan for a future outcome. The plan provides strategies that support achieving the goal of degree completion.

As graduate students experience the degree process, they learn lessons by developing skills through trial and error (Fatima, 2010; Gardner, 2009; Olson, 2006). Research supports that when adult students invest in their programs, they are motivated to use trial and error to refine new learning skills and overcome challenges (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Fawcett, 2009; Olson, 2006). Participants of these studies invested in their programs through trial-and-error experiences where they were faced with skill development. During trial and error, adults can face challenges that may derail their progress during the navigation through degree programs (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Olson, 2006).

Adult learners who master their learning through practice and proper application begin to experience aha, or eureka!, moments (Bayley et al., 2012; Ellis, 2013; Olson 2006). Olson (2006) refers to this as *clicking*. *Mastering* (*clicking*) brings these eureka! moments where everything begins to come together and make sense (Bayley et al., 2012; Clerehan et al., 2012; Ellis, 2013; Gardner, 2009; Olson 2006). *Clicking* involves the student and the support systems by which the learner begins to master the subject matter and feel accepted by colleagues.

Adult learners in graduate programs utilize critical thinking skills in the development of theses and capstone dissertations (Bayley et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011). Adult learners may use reflecting to critically dissect problems they faced during the process of degree completion (Gardner, 2009; Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Mezirow (1978) in TL theorized that adult students learn through critical thinking and reflection (Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Regmi, 2013). During reflecting strategies, adult students conduct what Mezirow terms *premise* reflection, utilizing critical thinking to allow new learnings to change one's conceptual understandings.

Finally, as graduate students progress through their programs, they may experience stress, frustration, and anxiety (Bayley et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011; Selye & Fonder, 2013). In order for adult students to successfully complete their degree programs, they must be able to manage the stress created from competing academic, personal, family, social, and work responsibilities (Bayley et al., 2012; Clerehan et al., 2012; Klenowski et al., 2011; Selye & Fonder, 2013). Selye and Fonder (2013) found that a certain amount of stress is good for learners because it helps them maintain that alert edge. They name this good stress *eustress*. Stress may

occur as adult learners reflect on trial-and-error episodes to gain a better understanding. Mezirow

and Taylor (2009) refers to these trial and error episodes as *disorienting dilemmas* in TL.

<h2 style="text-align:center">**Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory**</h2>

Mezirow's (1978) GT study on transformative learning (TL) was the conceptual

framework that supported the emergent GT of this study. Mezirow theorized that adult learners

learn through communication and dialogue by evaluating new knowledge and ideas. During this

evaluation the adult learner questions the validity of previously held assumptions in what

Mezirow refers to as *critical assessment of assumptions* (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Taylor,

2009).

All ten stages of transformative learning (see p. 9) emerged as relevant to this study

(Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The ten stages may or may not occur in sequence

and may not all occur in every adult (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009); however, the disorienting

dilemma occurs with all adult learners when confronted with new knowledge that challenges

their experiences. The challenges may result in an adult doing a self-examination of assumptions;

exploring options of new learning, roles, and relationships; and planning a course of action based

on their assessment. Throughout the stages of TL the adult learner experiences levels of stress, as

well as possibly anger, fear, and apprehension when reconfiguring old knowledge that was either

learned wrong or is obsolete. Conner (2004) addressed this reconfiguring as *unlearning*.

In TL adult learners recognize their discontent with or acceptance of the transformation

of their knowledge and identity (Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Through

accepting new knowledge, adult learners face another disorienting dilemma, implementing the

new learning or plan(s). Mezirow theorized that adult learners implement new ideas through

trying out or trial-and-error learning (Olson, 2006), which may result in stress and frustration even if the adult is knowledgeable in the skill they are trying out (Olson, 2006; Selye & Fonder, 2013). Further, adult learners may integrate new knowledge through *premise reflection*, thus building a broader perspective and gaining self-confidence in new roles and relationships (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

## Emergent Themes

During this study, the following themes emerged as significant during memoing and constant comparative analysis:

- *Time management* is identified in the literature as a key determinant in the completion of an advanced degree (Bayley et al. 2012; Bosch, 2013; Ellis, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011). Time management consists of scheduling and prioritizing tasks and needs.

- *Credentializing* refers to an effort to be accepted as mastering a field of study, or being considered as an expert (Baldwin, 2013; Bosch, 2013; Gardner, 2009; Paulson & Armstrong, 2010). Walker et al. (2008) refer to these experts as *stewards of the discipline*. Many adult learners in the literature and participants in this study strived to obtain an advanced degree as a measurement of their proficiency and mastery in a field of study.

- *Strategizing* was identified as a means by which adult learners develop plans with logical, incremental steps or stages to achieve a specific goal or task (Bayley et al, 2012; Clerehan et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009; Ravo, 2004).

## Academic Literature

As adult students enter advanced degree programs, many do so without a clear understanding of what it may take to bring the program to a successful completion. This often leads to apprehension and stress (Bosch, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011, Selye & Fonder, 2013). Most of the challenges remain unknown until these students are several months into their educational journey (Bayley et al., 2012; Gardner, 2009, 2010). The academic literature that follows supports challenges of adult learners while navigating the process of earning advanced degrees.

Bain et al. (2012) studied factors that encourage success in adult learners' efforts to complete this process. Their findings resulted in five major factors that could predict success: positive self-esteem, caring professors, affordable tuition, knowledgeable advisors, and family support. Bain et al. also uncovered five secondary factors that could predict success: personal motivation, job security, ability to meet family responsibilities, access to online library resources, and spirituality or religious beliefs. Finally, they conclude that a community of connectedness is required to establish confidence in graduate school experiences due to the apparent isolation graduate students experience as they progress through their programs.

The community of connectedness may be strengthened through adequate Internet support combined with face-to-face communication with colleagues and mentors (Wells &Dellinger, 2011). The use of the Internet versus face-to-face modes of learning has shown to have no significant difference on adult learners' ability to communicate, perception of learning, and final grades (Wells & Dellinger, 2011). The critical key to both modes of learning is learner-instructor interaction. This is where connectedness is rooted and nurtured (Wells & Dellinger, 2011). The

challenges faced by both the adult learner and the instructor are poor technology, course design, better understanding of graduate student characteristics, and appropriate support systems (Akuamoah-Boateng, 2013). Adult students are a major factor in the success if they are aggressive self-starters, possess self-discipline, know technology well, and have the ability to collaborate in an online environment.

## Research Traditions

Creswell (2014) and Johnson and Christensen (2012) introduced three strategies of inquiry that are used in research to gain understanding of social and human problems: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Several research traditions have developed within these methods, which are briefly discussed hereinafter.

### Narrative Research

The researcher studies the lives of the participants and asks one or more participants to provide stories of their lives, which the researcher then chronologically retells. The stories are then combined into a composite story (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

### Phenomenological Research

The researcher searches for the source of the participants' experiences as a phenomenon as described by the participants. The researcher sets aside his or her own experiences in order to gain a clear understanding of the participants involved in the study (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

### Ethnography

The researcher studies a cultural group in its natural environment over an extended period of time, primarily collecting data from interviews and observations (Creswell, 2014; Johnson &

Christensen, 2012). This method allows the researcher flexibility to adjust his or her data

collection techniques to suit the environment and focuses on the lived experiences of the

participants in their daily context (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

**Case Study**

The researcher investigates in detail a specific program, activity, event, or process of one

or more participants. Case studies are limited to a particular time and activity and may use many

different collection processes over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2014; Johnson &

Christensen, 2012).

**Choice of Grounded Theory Methodology**

This researcher had a choice between phenomenology, case study, and GT. The latter

methodology was selected because after reviewing the area of interest, the researcher decided

that a case study was too constricting and not general enough in nature (Creswell, 2014). A case

study only explores the depth of a program within local boundaries and is limited by space and

time (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Even though the case study method could have provided

interesting aspects of educational activity within an educational setting, it could not explain how

the participants resolve their concerns within an action scene and could not produce an

explanatory theory (Glaser, 2011, 1998, 1978).

The phenomenological tradition was not selected for this study because it only focused

on the way participants gave meaning to their lives, and the participants' reasoning was accepted

as legitimate causes of their behavior (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). In the phenomenological

tradition, the researcher identifies the key elements in human experiences surrounding a

phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). A shortcoming that was noted in this strategy is the limitation on

the number of participants, and the extensive and prolonged engagements needed to develop relationships and meaning in patterns of data (Moustakas, 1994).

GT, a general method of inquiry (Grounded Theory Institute, 2008), best suited the research study question. Classic GT allows for data to emerge, and through constant comparative analysis develop it into an explanatory theory without forcing preconceptions (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Johnson & Christensen, 2012), unlike the aforementioned qualitative traditions.

A number of GT traditions have emerged (classic, Straussian, feminist, and constructivist) since Glaser and Strauss first introduced the world to GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Strauss and Corbin (1990) presented a qualitative version of GT that Glaser (1992) argued was forced, filled with preconception, and did not allow for emergence of the theory. Constructivist GT became an option many GT researchers have chosen to embrace. Charmaz (2003) argued that constructivist GT is midway between the absolutes of positivism and the subjectivity of postmodernism. Glaser argued that constructivist GT utilizes jargonized GT terminology and symbolic interaction, far from the classic GT methodology originated by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 2009).

Classic GT was selected for this study because of a desire to develop an emergent substantive theory (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Johnson & Christensen, 2012) explaining how the participants within MSD1 resolved their issues of negotiating an advanced degree program. It will also provide scholars and laymen from other professions a better understanding of what one might experience while pursuing an advanced degree. Grounded Theory was selected for this study due to its inductive nature. It

develops a generalizable theory that can be modified with the emergence of new data (Glaser,

1978, 1998, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## Literature Related to Grounded Theory

In reflecting on GT literature related to this study, several studies had significance to the

area of interest, namely Gardner and Gopaul (2012), Olson (2006), Otkay et al. (2013), and

Willis and Carmichael (2011). Olson (2006) had the most significant influence in this study due

to the core variable *driven succeeding* and its three categories: *visioning*, *investing*, and *clicking*

and were integrated into the theory of *enduring driven succeeding* utilizing a process suggested

by Raffanti (2006) called *theoretical synergy* (Glaser, 1978, 2007; Raffanti, 2006). Further detail

about theoretical synergy and its application are found in Sections 1 and 4 of this study. Olson's

research focused on how adult students successfully progressed through ABE courses and the

processes that supported their success. Otkay et al. (2013) focused on how adult learners

obtaining doctoral degrees experienced learning in the field of social work. Otkay et al. (2013)

discovered the core variable of *learning through experience*, finding that participants in their

study experienced learning in three areas: developing an effective teaching style, learning to

establish authority, and broadening integration into social work education. Even though Olson

(2006) and Otkay et al. (2013) looked at different levels of adult education, both studies focused

on the learning experiences of adults through their investment in their particular programs of

study.

## Summary and Transition

The American higher learning system reached its epitome in the Golden Age from 1945

to 1970, during which it developed world-class, brick-and-mortar universities. The American

higher-education system must now adapt from its traditional emphasis on young, full-time students right out of college to a growing population of nontraditional adult students who are returning to school while balancing work and other responsibilities. Online, Internet-based platforms have aided nontraditional students in completing degrees from their home locales. Walden University, founded in 1970 by Bernie and Rita Turner, was one of the first accredited online universities dedicated to the needs of nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students face a variety of challenges as they add school to full-time work and other commitments. Current literature reveals several themes that full-time working adults face as they return to school: maintaining balance, time management skills, having effective support systems, understanding the degree seeking and dissertation writing processes, academic readiness, motivational drive, and other situation and attitudinal hurdles. However, literature reviewed in connection with the emerging GT *enduring driven succeeding* revealed that adult students develop strategies for succeeding in advanced degree programs, including having a vision or goal for the program in which they invest, mastering the skills required to complete the degree, and coping with feelings of stress. Mezirow's TL was revealed as relevant to this study because it shows adults exploring options and planning courses of action provided by new learning, roles, and collaborative relationships.

Although several research studies exist that address graduate student progressing through advanced degree programs (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Gardner, 2009), a review of current literature points to a gap in what is known about adult student progressing toward completion of advanced degrees. Currently no inductive study utilizing GT methodology exists in this area of interest, which was also identified as a gap in the literature. Several GT studies address adult

learners (e.g., Vander Linden [2005] and Olson [2006]), but this research study addressed a subset of that area: *how teachers navigate advanced education while pursuing full-time careers.* The GT *driven succeeding* developed by Olson (2006) was most critical in the emergence of the substantive GT in this study *enduring driven succeeding* (see Section 4).

Section 3: Research Method

**Introduction**

As discussed in Section 2, GT was chosen over narrative, phenomenological, ethnology, and case study methods as the research methodology employed to uncover and theoretically classify what occurred with the participants of this study. Grounded Theory is an inductively driven method of sociological research. Classic GT developed by Glaser and Strauss was chosen because it allows for data to emerge and develops an explanatory theory through constant comparative analysis without forcing preconceptions. Data was initially gathered through interviews that were initiated by asking an open, grand tour question and were then coded, conceptualized, and drawn up into an explanatory theory discovering what is going with this substantive area of interest. It was determined that GT would best tell the lived experience of the full-time teachers from MSD1 who were or had recently been engaged in an advanced degree program of study and would serve as a tool for what adults in other areas might expect who are considering a program of study while working full-time.

**Research Tradition: Grounded Theory**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed GT. It is an inductive, systematic, and empirical research methodology in the sociological arena that is based on the principle of eliminating preconception from research and letting the data drive the results (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2011). The purpose of GT is to generate a theory that emerges directly from data and explains the social behavior of the participants under its lens (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2011). The explanatory theory that emerges accounts for how the participants continually resolve the area of interest being studied (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory develops the

explanatory theory through seven stages: (a) preparation: minimizing preconceptions, (b) data collection, (c) analysis: constant comparative analysis, (d) memoing, (e) sorting, (f) theoretical outlining, and (g) writing up.

Grounded Theory can use any type of data, whether quantitative or qualitative. Glaser (2005) stated that classic GT is not restricted to any particular type of data, research discipline, or theoretical code. The data is delimited at both categorical and theoretical levels. The researcher looks for the frequency, or saturation, of theoretical codes in order to form a theory. If categories do not saturate that are central to the question under investigation, the researcher will return for further analysis until data has been provided that emerges, is relevant, and fits (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After the theory has fully developed from the data, then already-existing literature and theories can be analyzed to possibly fill in gaps in the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Rationale for Utilizing GT**

After careful scrutiny of the three types of traditions—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed—the focus narrowed down to the qualitative and mixed-method traditions. A mixed-method study can handle all types of data, both quantitative and qualitative (Creswell, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Olson, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Simmons, 2010), but mixed methods was not deemed to be appropriate, as it includes quantitative methods, which could not address the concerns of the participants. Grounded Theory is a general method of inquiry that falls within the qualitative tradition (Grounded Theory Institute, 2008). Grounded Theory was selected as the research methodology due to its inductive method of discovery and its ability to uncover and understand what the participants in the interest area were working on in their behavior and actions (Glaser, 1978).

**Preparation: Minimizing Preconceptions**

Glaser (1998), the author of GT, stated that forcing data is a normal occurrence of the traditional researcher mindset, whether knowingly or unknowingly pursued. Every researcher enters into research with a certain level of knowledge on the subject and a question of inquiry, which can precipitate certain preconceptions. Forsyth (2010), for example, used the word *entitativity*, which means to preconceive cohesion in a group just from observation without proof that cohesion exists.

With GT, the researcher avoids preconception and forcing of their own ideas into the theory and instead trusts the method to reveal the theory (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011). The research, in fact, begins by asking a *grand tour question* that allows the participants to express their concerns unconstrained by a leading question that would steer them in the researcher's direction. The researcher must remain open-minded throughout the study and trust in the emergent process in GT to occur. As concepts develop from the data, the researcher must be mindful not to force the data to fit, with the awareness that each participant may not go through the process of navigating an area of interest in the same way.

GT utilizes rigorous coding procedures that help to generate conceptual categories and induce a theory (Glaser, 1978). In GT, there are two types of coding: substantive coding, which includes open and selective coding, and theoretical coding. Substantive coding is pulling the initial concepts from the raw data. The initial stage in substantive coding is open coding. The researcher completes open coding in GT after each interview has been transcribed. He or she looks at every sentence of the interview to sum up the concept it conveys. These concepts are

written in the margin of the interview transcript. In selective coding, the researcher looks at the open coding to find commonalities among code words.

Theoretical codes conceptualize how substantive codes relate to each other as findings and are integrated into the theory that emerges. The researcher looks for those theoretical codes that appear the most frequently, or are saturating the data. The saturated codes form the basis for the theory that will explain the behavior of the participants in the interest area, which is called the explanatory theory. The explanatory theory is continually tested against future interviews and subsequent data, such as literature that is reviewed, to see if what has been discovered so far remains a core category. The researcher must be sensitive to surprises from and within the data analysis and being constantly open to new emergence in and from the data during coding and constant comparative analysis.

## Context of the Study

MSD1 is located in a rural area that is experiencing rapid growth because it is located near an expanding military installation. Due to the economic growth, federal funding has increased to support academic improvement in order to keep pace with the growth in student population. This funding increase has allowed the school administration to build several new school structures and modernize classrooms by equipping them with state-of-the-art technology such as portable computer systems for students, SMART Boards, and iPads. The district's administration actively supports practitioners pursuing advanced degrees and is seeking ways to help assist these practitioners in completing their programs of study. The teachers' experience in the field of pedagogy ranged from three to 20 years in public education. The participants taught

in varied content areas ranging from English, mathematics, social studies, administration, counseling, to special education.

<p style="text-align:center;">**Measures for Ethical Protection**</p>

Participants for this research study were selected utilizing the purposeful sampling method, which is defined as selecting participants who are best suited to understand the research and the research question(s) (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The researcher requested permission to conduct the interviews from the participating school district prior to beginning any data collection. The district agreed to provide a list of practitioners who were pursuing or had just recently completed advanced degrees. Written proof of enrollment in an advanced degree program was required of all volunteers prior to participating in the study. The researcher verified these documents at the district's Office of Human Resources. The principals of both schools were consulted to ensure that teachers involved in the study were interviewed only during timeframes that did not interfere with their duty hours. The researcher began randomly interviewing the participants when they were available.

All participants in this research were sent an invitation letter (see Appendix D) and administered an informed consent release form prior to the interview (see Appendix E). During the informed consent appointment, the researcher informed each participant that they could withdraw from the research at any time without any repercussions and that if during the study they had concerns that could not be addressed, they could contact the researcher's dissertation chair, Dr. Mitchell M. Olson.

The identities of the participants remained anonymous. Any data that was collected during this research has been protected by the researcher as confidential and can only be released

to the reviewing institution, Walden University, upon request. Concerted efforts were made to guarantee the confidentiality of all data collected through interviews, and the researcher properly secured archives in order to maintain confidentiality. Only the dissertation chair and the researcher have record of the participants' true names. All research data pertaining to this study has been secured at the researcher's home and will be destroyed by the fifth anniversary of this dissertation writing. The researcher's dissertation chair also has duplicate copies of all transcripts containing all of the recorded interviews that have been completed during this research study (IRB Approval Number 12-17-12-0140271).

## Role of the Researcher

The researcher has worked in the field of education for more than 25 years. During his career he had experience as a secondary-level educator and several years as an adjunct professor teaching graduate-level courses. The researcher had been teaching in this particular school district for approximately eight years and was not a supervisor of any participants who were involved in this study.

The researcher made all attempts to suspend any experiences and biases as a practitioner within this school district and as an educator seeking an advanced degree. The researcher entered the area of general interest as an inquirer allowing the theory to emerge unforced. He remained mindful to adhere to and trust the GT methodology so that the substantive theory emerged untainted by any preconceived perspectives (Glaser, 2011).

## Criteria for Selecting Participants

In this research study, the researcher conducted 14 initial interviews and six follow-up interviews for this study. The participants selected for this research were teachers who had

entered, were in the progress of completing, or had completed an advanced degree program. A letter explaining the research was disseminated throughout the school district requesting willing participants (see Appendix D), and the participants who volunteered were provided with a consent form that they signed (see Appendix E).

## Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Data for this research was collected utilizing face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions (Burgess, 2011; Glaser, 2011; Olson, 2006). Maximum efforts were given to meet each interviewee and conduct a face-to-face interview. Participants were interviewed in their perspective counselor's offices or classrooms, whichever was available at the time. Rubin and Rubin (2005) noted that interview locations should allow the interviewee to feel comfortable and not on edge. The lengths of interviews were planned for one hour; however, if additional time was required for the interview, the researcher allowed the participant to decide on whether to continue the interview or schedule a follow-up. Follow-up interviews, if required, always occurred in person and face to face with the participant and researcher. The follow-ups were scheduled based on the participant's availability. The researcher took into consideration that some participants were actively attending degree programs and faced time constraints. Interviews were recorded and transcribed along with handwritten notes taken during each interview.

Even though interviews were the primary tool in gathering data, GT does not exclude other types of data, which must earn their way into the emerging theory through the principle of constant comparative analysis, or checking additional data against earlier collected data. The researcher considers all data as relevant, whether it is baseline, vague, interpreted, or proper line (Glaser, 1998). Glaser (1998) defined these forms of interview data as:

- Baseline, the best description a participant can offer.

- Proper line, the participant says what they think they are supposed to say.

- Interpreted, a representation made by a trained professional whose job it is to make sure that others see the data through his professional perspective.

- Vague, when respondents offer ambiguous data for the purpose of covering up the true nature of a situation.

In other words, just because data was considered objective, subjective, obvious, or constructed, it was not excluded. All such types of data helped the researcher to understand what is going on in the area of interest, and trusting the method allowed the systematic processes in GT to work into an emergent theory. It was not assumed that any face sheet variables such as age, sex, social class, race, or skin color had relevance unless relevance emerged from them and they then earned their way into the substantive theory (Glaser, 1998).

**Grand Tour Question**

In GT the *grand tour question* is the initial, open-ended question asked in an interview. Its purpose is to allow the interviewee to express his or her concerns without the researcher contaminating the data with preconceptions (Burgess, 2011; Glaser, 1998, 2011; Olson, 2006; Olson & Aelong, 2013; Simmons, 2010). In essence, the grand tour question can be considered the starting gate to obtain unforced interview data. It may be posed as a statement. The grand tour question for this study was, "Talk about your experiences as both a full-time educator and graduate student." Follow-up questions were generated based upon responses that were provided by participants to probe into specific concerns offered.

**Constant Comparative Analysis**

Constant comparative analysis is a procedure in GT designed to generate conceptual

categories and their properties from the beginning of data collection and analysis (Glaser, 1978,

2004; Simmons, 2010) and is ongoing throughout theory emergence. With constant comparative

analysis, the researcher analyzes data by comparing incident to incident, concept to incident, and

concept to concept (Glaser, 1978, 2004; Simmons, 2010).

**Memoing**

The GT researcher uses memoing to write up creative thoughts and ideas that

conceptualize and categorize codes and their relationships to each other. The four basic goals

memos serve are: (a) to develop theoretical ideas, (b) to allow freedom in content and form, (c)

to create a data bank of the codes that have emerged, and (d) to be sortable by concept (Glaser,

1998, 2011; Simmons, 2010). It is through memos that the researcher captures fragile ideas and

thoughts and keeps track of the emerging theory (Glaser, 1998, 2011; Simmons, 2010). There are

two types of memos: initial memos, which are a rudimentary write-up of idea(s) disregarding

context and grammatical rules, and mature memos, which develop categories and subcategories

and show the saturation of theoretical concepts over the extended study (Glaser, 1978, 2011).

The memos are then sorted for emerging codes in the process of constructing the emergent

theory.

**Sorting and Theoretical Outlining**

In sorting the memo bank, the researcher organizes the matured memos into piles based

on like conceptual content. The sorting may produce a theoretical code that will further organize

the memos (Glaser, 2007, 2011; Simmons, 2010). During this phase, additional memos may be

generated. This is the final stage in generating the emergent theory (Glaser, 1992). The theoretical outline is developed from the sorted memos and provides the visual outline of the major concepts generated from the data. Theoretical sorting forces the researcher to make decisions on where each concept fits in the emergent theory (Glaser 1998; Simmons, 2010). This provides the framework to organize the emergent theory and depict the relationships between concepts. This theoretical outline forms the first draft of the substantive theory (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011).

**Writing Up**

Finally, the theoretical outline that developed from sorting of the memo piles, which is an accurate representation of the emergent theory, is written up into the final draft (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011; Simmons, 2010). During the write-up, the researcher should write according to their realization while sticking to the original integration of codes and themes that have emerged and are encapsulated in the memos.

The data collection followed Dr. Barney Glaser's timetable model, which provides an approximate timeline for completion of GT research and publication. A facsimile of this model is provided in Figure 1 below.

## Barney Glaser's Dissertation Timetable

How to do a dissertation in 6 – 8 months
Presented April 15, 2004 at Stanford University

| Enter Field | Field Notes 6 – 8 weeks | Selective Coding 6 – 8 weeks | Memo Bank | Sorting 6 – 8 weeks | Write-up | Publication |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

**Memoing continues**

**Enter Field:**
•Collect data
•Ask: what is going on?
•Ask: what is this an indicator of?
•Ask: what is the main concept?
•Develop categories
•Avoid taping—produces too much data
•Code field notes

**Field Notes:**
•Analyze data
•Constantly compare
•Pick-up variables
•Move to theoretical sampling
•Delimit
•Remember to go far enough to see if core variable is correct

**Selective Coding:**
•Continue Theoretical Sampling
•Saturation (should take about 6 weeks)
•Memos grow
•Leads to a "memo bank"

**Memo Bank:**
•Memos get more mature
•Memos: the writing up of ideas about data—memos build up

**Sorting:**
•Sort on an open "table-top" that is about 3' x 8'
•Create "piles of memos"
•Ask: where does it all go?
•If "empty spots," go back to field to fill in
•Bring literature in here

**Write-up:**
•Write up your "piles of sorts"
•Integrate ideas
•This is the point that you can begin to "talk to someone" and not fear the contamination/preconception of your data findings
•Make sure there are a sufficient number of variables to know what's going on
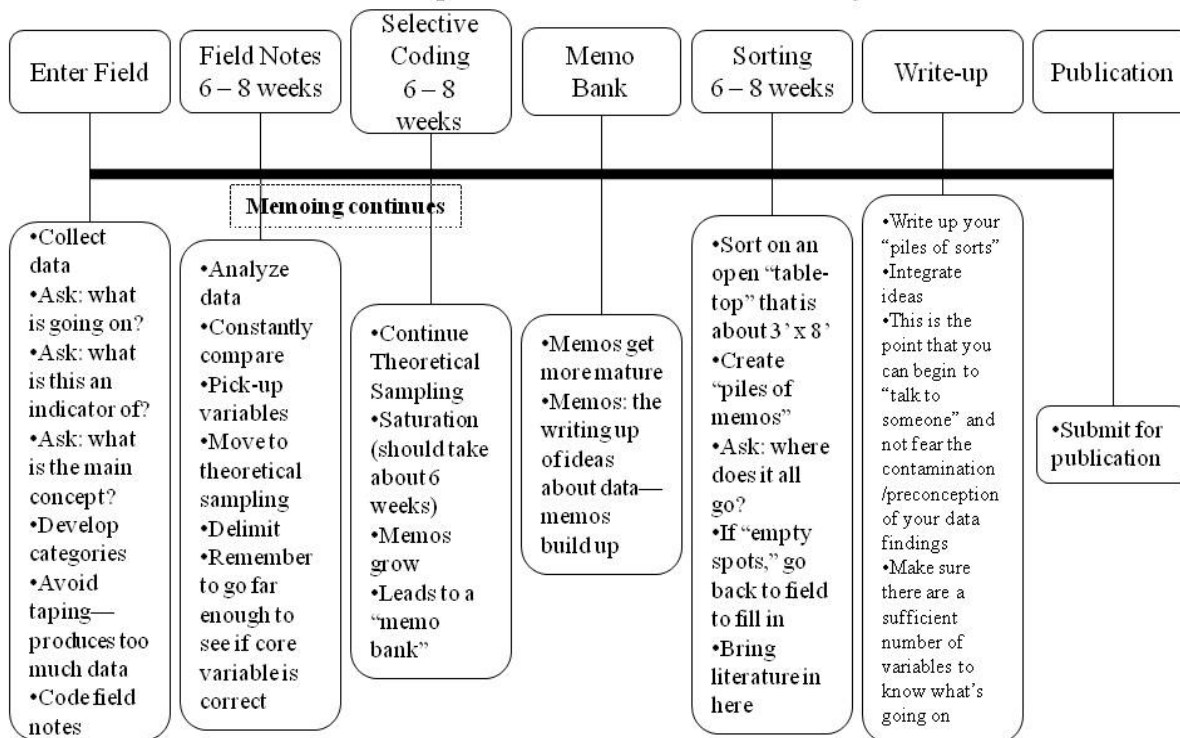
**Publication:**
•Submit for publication

*Figure 1.* This is the approximate timetable for a GT dissertation from beginning to end. Taken from "Driven Succeeding – The Serpentine Path of Adult Learning: A Grounded Action Study in Adult Education, M.M. Olson, 2006, p. 186. Copyright 2006, by Mitchell Olson.

### Methods to Address Validity and Trustworthiness

GT methodology should not be constrained by typical validity measures. I followed procedures inherent within the constant comparative analysis method in GT (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and ensures validity. Therefore, the theory that emerges is trustworthy because it emerges directly from the interview responses of the participants and is neither preconceived nor composed of best-guessed ideas that the researcher is trying to impose upon the

study (Simmons, 2010; Simmons & Gregory, 2003). Grounded Theory does not seek to prove or disapprove a theory; it simply follows a systematic process for inducing theory generation. In GT, "The goal of grounded theory is to generate a conceptual theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved. The goal is not voluminous description, nor clever verification" (Glaser, 1978, p. 93). The researcher pursues constant comparative analysis until no new properties and dimensions emerge; this is the point of saturation. The researcher, alternating between data collection, coding, and memoing, accomplishes saturation. Burgess (2011) explained that saturation can be seen when in reviewing the data, the researcher finds no new ideas emerging and the same concepts being repeated.

A GT study is evaluated by these five essential elements: *relevance, grab, fit, workability*, and *modifiability* (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In GT these elements are significant to substantiate the validity and trustworthiness that is established through the constant comparative analysis process.

**Measures for Evaluating a GT Study**

**Relevance.** In GT *relevance* occurs when a person reviewing the theory can relate to it because the properties and categories are true to the interest area. It answers or leads to closure on a significant research problem by narrowing the unknown gap under study. Because GT allows data to emerge through the inductive and deductive analysis, the data that saturates are relevant to the research problem (Glaser, 2008). Glaser (2009) wants researchers to avoid jargonizing the GT terms and stick to the true GT method of generating a substantive theory void of preconception and forcing.

Relevance is earned when the concepts that emerge can answer the true concerns of the participants in the area of interest and how it is continually resolved and evokes instant *grab* (Glaser, 1978, 1998).

**Grab.** *Grab* means to direct immediate attention and focus to the incident being studied (Glaser, 1978). Olson (2006) stated, "Is the theory compelling and interesting? Does the theory catch your attention because of its reach beyond the current area of study, demonstrating its impact and relevance across other disciplines?" (p. 20). He adds that *grab* occurs when a reader latches onto the theory and applies it to his or her own scenario. The explanatory theory that emerges has influence within other content areas outside of its own parameters. Grab can also be referred to as having a *nowism dimension*, whereby readers can see the categories applying to their present situation, wherever that may be (Glaser, 1998).

**Fit.** *Fit* means that the theory accurately reflects what the data have shown. "Fit is another word for validity, which means. does the concept represent the patterns of data it purports to denote" (Glaser, 1998, p. 236). Burgess (2011) stated that having been generated from the data rather than having proved or disproved a preconceived hypothesis, a GT's categories must verify what the data have shown and accurately represent what is going on in the interest area. The concept of *fit* means that the GT transcends time and place and may extend to another interest area, assisting participants in that interest area to recognize how it applies to them.

**Workability.** *Workability* refers to the development of theory that emerges from data systematically and is able to solve variations in the problem. If incidences occur in the area of interest, they should be able to be woven into the theory. Glaser (1978) stated that GT should

explain what happened, interpret what is happening, and predict what will happen. If GT works, it is relevant, understandable, and applicable to the situation and is more likely to be used to resolve problems (Glaser, 1978; Vander Linden, 2005). Raffanti (2005) stated, "Workability of a GT should answer the following questions: a) Does the theory connect the discovered patterns into coherent probability statements that account for how participants continually resolve their main concerns? b) Does the theory explain, predict, and interpret data in a useful manner?" (p. 18).

**Modifiability.** *Modifiability* refers to a GT's adaptability when presented with new data. Simmons (1997) stated that GTs serve to discover and understand variations in the interest area rather than providing absolute answers to a specific problem and are thus open to be modified rather than disproven. A GT can be constantly adjusted to new data that is relevant and fits, which gives it longevity (Glaser, 1998).

<div align="center">**Summary and Transition**</div>

Grounded Theory's aim is to generate a theory that emerges directly from data and explains the social behavior of the participants being studied. Grounded Theory's method reveals the theory by minimizing preconception and following the stages of data collection, analysis, memoing, sorting, theoretical outlining, and writing up. The coding procedure progresses from open coding, where the researcher transcribes the concepts conveyed in each sentence of the interviews, to selective coding, where the researcher looks for commonalities among the codes, and finally to theoretical coding, where the researcher looks for codes that saturate the data. Memos are theoretical write-ups about codes and their relationships to other codes. It begins with

raw memos and moves to mature memo writing. Memos become a data bank that the researcher sorts to find common concepts that saturate the data so that the theory can be written up.

The GT researcher looks for the core variable, a common concept that explains the variety of behaviors shown by the study's participants. The core variable of this study was preliminarily identified as *Enduring the Process*. Using Raffanti's (2006) concept of theoretical synergy, the researcher integrated it with Olson's (2006) interconnecting study on *driven succeeding*, and derived the theory *enduring driven succeeding* to explain the serpentine process learners undergo as they work toward their goal of completing a degree program. *Enduring* is adult learners' ability to persevere challenges while pursuing goals and balancing daily activities. *Driven* is what learners exhibit as they dig within and forge ahead toward succeeding. *Succeeding* is what occurs when adult learners complete their tasks and goals.

A GT study may be evaluated by its relevance, grab, fit, workability, and modifiability. Relevance occurs when a person can relate to the theory because the properties and categories are true to the interest area. Grab means that the theory is compelling and can reach others beyond the interest area that was studied. Fit means that the theory presents a true rendering of the concepts behind the data presented. Workability refers to theory's applicability to the situation and to variations that occur within the area of interest.

Section 4: Results

**Introduction**

The purpose of this GT study was to generate a theory that accounted for the main concerns of adult learners as they navigate an advanced degree while working in full-time careers. The study included fourteen participants and twenty interviews, as the first six participants were re-interviewed in order to achieve saturation of codes in accordance with GT methodology. Each interview was transcribed and coded. Grounded Theory uses the constant comparative analysis method of data analysis following these seven stages: preparation, data collection, analysis, memoing, sorting, theoretical outlining, and the write-up of the theory (Simmons, 2004). The result of following the seven stages of GT was the emergence of the theory *enduring driven succeeding*. *Theoretical synergy* (Raffanti, 2006) was employed midpoint in data analysis as the theory of *driven succeeding* (Olson, 2006) merged with the core variable, *enduring the process.*

Classic GT requires that at the beginning of a GT study, the researcher read only literature that is unrelated to the interest area or is from other fields. This assists in preventing the researcher from forcing preconceptions on the theory before it emerges (Glaser, 1978, 1998). Therefore, any literature in the substantive area of interest, graduate advance degrees, was not reviewed until the substantive GT had emerged during the sorting of mature memos, writing up of stages, and reworking of the draft outline of the theory (refer to Section 3 for full explanation). The literature reviewed in connection with this GT study was placed through constant comparative analysis, and any literature that gained fit and was relevant to the study was included and woven into the theory (Glaser, 1998, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Data Collection and Analysis Process**

In order to initiate the data collection process, a request letter was sent to MSD1's superintendent, and her written approval to conduct this study was received (see Appendix A). After superintendent approval was obtained, a request was forwarded to both the Midwest High School and Midwest Middle School (both names are pseudonyms) principals to conduct the study on their campuses (see Appendixes B and C). They both granted approval. Administrators and teachers were then provided an invitation letter that explained the purpose of the study and eligibility criteria (see Appendix D). Interested participants were able to respond by cell phone, in person, or by email. Each teacher who agreed to participate provided verifying documentation to validate that they had begun, were currently undergoing, or had recently been in an advanced degree program. After eligibility status verification, each interviewee selected a time, date, and location for their interview. Each participant completed and signed a consent form (see Appendix E) prior to each interview.

From Fall 2012 through Summer 2013 a total of twenty interviews with fourteen participants were completed. The digitally recorded interviews ranged between 16 to 45 minutes in length. Field notes were taken during each interview to ensure integrity and accuracy of all data. All interviews took place in the teacher's classroom and in some instances the administrative offices or conference rooms. The audio recordings were transcribed. After each interview had been completed and transcribed, I listened to the recordings and simultaneously read the transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy. Each participant was given an interview transcription to review for accuracy. In addition, if there was anything that the participants did

not want included from the transcriptions, they were given the opportunity to request it be removed.

The researcher utilized reflective journals, memos, memo banks and memo logs, interview notes, and an annotated bibliography to track all of the data. A recording log was used to track participant interview recordings. All documents and recordings were properly secured on a CD and properly secured in a safe at the researcher's home. The researcher's chair, Dr. Mitchell Olson, was provided copies of all documentation pertaining to this study.

<div align="center">**Coding Procedures**</div>

Throughout this study, the researcher adhered to the GT methodology by following the steps explained in Section 3, and as Glaser (1998) put it, "without forcing" (p. 81). As the interviews were completed, the researcher used open coding and coded the interviews line by line to capture concepts encased in the responses the interviewee had given.

Open coding is the first stage of constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1978; Olson, 2006). The goal of open coding is to generate emergent sets of categories and properties that fit, work, and can be integrated into a substantive theory. Open coding allows the researcher to view and guide theoretical sampling prior to selecting a focus on a particular problem (Glaser 1978). Open coding verified, corrected, and saturated phenomena of individual codes as the researcher went further into the research (Glaser, 1978). Substantive codes were generated and conceptualized the data that emerged. These codes were then compared through constant comparative analysis, conceptualized to theoretical codes as the substantive codes related as a hypothesis, and integrated into the emergent theory (Glaser, 1978, 2011).

After completing the first five interviews, the researcher conducted constant comparative analysis to funnel down to codes that were similar. Over the course of the research, these codes developed into a code bank. Each interview that was coded had a separate code bank in the initial stages of this research study. The code bank was reviewed for accuracy, signs of forcing, and any preconceptions (Glaser, 1998). If codes were found to be isolated occurrences or incidents, they were set aside in a suspended memo bank or fund (Glaser, 1978). After the eighth interview, all code banks were sorted into piles to develop emergent categories. During the sorting process, some codes were reduced and then subsumed to similar codes that had relevance or fit. The sorting process forced the researcher to integrate the memos in order of sections (Glaser, 1978). These sorts were then resorted as necessary until integrative fit was attained (Glaser, 1978). As the last several interviews were conducted, the researcher funneled down to selective coding of relevant data (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2011). Selective coding allowed the flexibility of searching for identified codes in previous interviews and new codes that fit the emergent theory.

The core variable became evident by the beginning of the fifth interview. Initially, the core variable was given a provisional label, *Enduring the Process*. Using theoretical synergy (Raffanti, 2006) another study on *driven succeeding* (Olson, 2006) had several categories that fit nicely with the *enduring the process*. After scrutiny, the researcher integrated these two core variables through theoretical synergy (Glaser, 1978, 2007; Raffanti, 2006) and began combining and merging the theories. The result was the provisional core variable *enduring driven succeeding*.

**The Theory of *Enduring Driven Succeeding***

**Enduring**

*Enduring* is an adult learner's ability to persevere challenges while pursuing goals and balancing daily activities. Enduring occurs when adult learners embark on a challenging goal regardless of the sacrifice required to achieve it. The kinds of activities and challenges adult learners often endure are the lack of time, funding challenges, and sustainable professional and/or personal support. In enduring, adult learners find a way to balance their resources and time in order to make progress towards degree completion. Obstacles like institutional policies, learner disposition, and a challenging learning environment can also serve to impede progress and promote discouragement and frustration. Learners are able to thrive in *enduring driven succeeding* when they are passionate, persistent, and resolute. Learners who endure are also motivated, press on toward reaching learning goals, and lean on support structures that are available to them. Enduring oftentimes includes overcoming personal, physical and mental barriers like family and personal time. Fulltime working adult learners often discover challenges when balancing work with job duties and responsibilities. Enduring may also require the learner to take on personal risks like financial debt, diminished personal or family time, or the strain of added study time in order to succeed in achieving a goal.

**Driven**

A learner exhibits *driven-ness* as they dig within and forge ahead toward succeeding (Olson, 2006). Driven-ness does not usually occur by accident but is often a purposeful reaction to a motivating person or even an internal prompt (Olson, 2006). Driven-ness can often be

prompted by interaction both social and collegial, external crisis, self-regulation, or previous experiences (Olson, 2006).

**Succeeding**

Succeeding occurs when an adult learner completes a task or series of tasks or goals (Olson, 2006). The goal attained may be intrinsically (driven or motivated by the student or individual) or extrinsically (driven by an outsider like a teacher or coach) motivated to achieve that goal or mark an accomplishment (Olson, 2006).

**Serpentine Path**

*Enduring driven succeeding* is a process that is not always sequential but may be more of a serpentine or winding path (Olson, 2006). While the learning path may be cyclical, spiraling, or even winding, each learner will find their own story somewhere in one or more of the four categories represented within the theory of *enduring driven succeeding*. While this theory is a good representation of the participants of this study, it does not represent every variation possible in *enduring driven succeeding* (Olson, 2006).

## The Four Categories of *Enduring Driven Succeeding*

*Enduring driven succeeding* emerged through the strategy of theoretical synergy (Raffanti, 2006), which merges two or more GT core variables. Theoretical synergy is based upon Glaser's (1978, 2007, 2008) strategy of *cumulative design*, which allowed for merging the theory of *driven succeeding* (Olson, 2006) with *enduring the process.* The resulting GT, *enduring driven succeeding*, provides an accurate account of what participants in this study were working on. Theoretical synergy extended *driven succeeding* (Olson, 2006) into the theory of *enduring the process* by integrating three of its five major categories: *visioning*, *investing*, and

*clicking.* The resulting GT, *enduring driven succeeding*, includes the following four categories: *visioning experiences*, *investing experiences*, *clicking experiences*, and *reflecting experiences*, articulated below and found in Appendix G.

**Visioning Experiences**

The first category of *enduring driven succeeding* is *visioning experiences* (Olson, 2006). Visioning is a process one may use to arrive at a compelling image or clear mental picture of a desired outcome (Miller, 2009; Olson, 2006). It is through *visioning experiences* that adult learners consider pursuing a program of study toward attaining an advanced degree (Fairbanks et. al., 2010; Fawcett, 2009; Regmi, 2013; Robert & Petersen, 2013).

During visioning experiences, adult learners consider the level of commitment they are willing to dedicate toward the completion of a particular program of study. The level of commitment or ability to invest in a course of study may be restricted and/or limited due to available time, finances, or resources like available transportation. The adult learner's progress and sustainability depend upon access to these resources and may impede the ability to invest if unavailable. Those learners who decide to suspend a decision to invest often do so to accommodate their busy lives or until funds are available to support investment. Some learners who are visioning consider their current capabilities to succeed in a program of study by analyzing pros and cons of different programs in order to decide on making a choice on what actions to pursue. An important property of visioning experiences involves successful *planning*.

**Planning.** Most adult learners who enter or reenter a program of study begin visioning experiences through *planning*. Planning involves gathering critical information about the program of study, evaluating and reviewing this information, and then determining which

program or course of study that might best suit their needs. Further, they may also develop a course of action that they feel will ensure success (Gardner, 2009, 2010; Ravo, 2004). Sometimes planning can be a delayed response for some adult learners who decide to jump in a program of study. These adults will often make decisions based upon experiences, resources, available time, and desire.

Planning can also be found in Olson's (2006) *driven succeeding* in Stage 5. One possible difference between planning in *driven succeeding* and *enduring driven succeeding* is that adult learners at the graduate level are planning while simultaneously balancing other professional and personal responsibilities. Learners during *enduring driven succeeding* are often planning during investing, clicking, and reflecting experiences.

**Self-Examination.** Once learners feel they have gathered adequate information during planning, they shift into *self-examination* to evaluate their current position while considering any past academic experiences. Part of this reflection process often involves self-examination about whether they possess the required skills and disposition needed to endure an educational endeavor. Once the adult learner has completed self-examination, they may move back into *planning* or may decide on *choosing to invest*.

**Developing a Plan.** Another important consideration for promoting successful progression through *enduring driven succeeding* is in *developing a plan*. This is often the stepping-stone where learners begin their educational journey. Further, learners must have good *time management skills* and maintain a flexible-enough schedule to balance daily activities with expectations (Baldwin, 2013; Bosch, 2013; Schniederjans, Schniederjans & Levy., 2012;

Vryonides, 2008). When learners *mismanage time,* a *derailing experience* may result that may force suspension or termination of the learning endeavor.

Planning provides adult learners with a framework from which they may identify the best methods to complete the degree process in e*nduring driven succeeding.* Ravo (2004) stated, "...planning demands increased time, critical thought, and a recurring cycle of assessing and reassessing" (p. 70). Planning and time management promote *scheduling* and *considering options* in many learners.

**Scheduling.** *Scheduling* helps adult learners promote effective planning and assists them in balancing and configuring their daily activities such as career activities and workload, academic requirements, social activities, family, and personal needs. Adults who have a handle on their scheduling are more apt to negotiate obstacles or unexpected interruptions that may occur during the day, including breaks throughout the workday. It is through scheduling that adult learners make decisions and select the best option based on how it fits into their life situations. Vander Linden (2005) stated that scheduling is the individual's process of determining on what, when, and for how long he or she will attend to a particular task. This process uniquely reflects each person's particular needs, desires, and pace. Adult learners may also use schedules to maintain quality of focus by balancing career, personal life, and studies. Proper scheduling assists adults in maintaining orderly progression and transition from one activity to the next. Adult learners who plan their schedules and follow through on them often display *with-it-ness* behavior (confidence in knowing what to do next) (Kounin, 1970; Ravo, 2004; Woolfolk, 2013).

During the scheduling process, adults may confront specific events, emergency deadlines, or tasks that trigger *schedule negotiating* (Vander Linden, 2005). Learners also negotiate their schedules or adjust priorities in order to complete assignments or to meet a specific deadline. Scheduling may occur throughout the learning career of an adult learner. One interviewee said,

> I have to create a calendar at this time of the year because I'll have people, and I already have people lined up, I've got a brother needing his, plumbing done, I've got a teacher who needs new siding put on their house; and a couple of other small jobs, so I say, "Look this is how long it's going to take me to complete these tasks!"

Learners discover that having a flexible schedule is essential when successfully negotiating a learning career. Having a flexible schedule is also useful for getting school or work tasks completed when deadlines compete with nonnegotiable events like worship or family time.

**Balancing Time.** *Balancing time* also assists learners in accomplishing tasks on or before due dates (Walsh, 2008). Learners are more apt to distribute equal attention to all objectives simultaneously or attend to multiple tasks that affect their daily routines. Ellis (2013) argued, "Everything mentioned about time management can be reduced to three main ideas: (1) Know exactly what you want, (2) Know how to get what you want, and (3) Go for balance" (p. 65). Olson (2006) stated that the ability to successfully balance life and studies is one of the characteristics of a succeeding student. If adult learners fail to find balance, they are at risk of losing relationships with family members and friends (Holmberg, 2013). One participant said, "Balance! That is probably the key to everything. You've got to make sure that everything in your life has time dedicated and allotted for it!"

Adult learners balance time in order to negotiate reaching goals as they simultaneously begin to master juggling priorities, shifting tasks, handling overload, and negotiating unforeseen obstacles. Another participant stated,

> The hardest part for me was trying to balance teaching full-time and then going to school, taking many hours during the week. I was also a coach as I said, during part of the time and then trying to balance the ability to coach and do what you've got to do there and still attend classes.

Adult learners balance time in order to bring order to their busy lives and promote reaching their goals.

**Considering Investing Options.** In *considering investing options*, adult learners make decisions through a considering process that includes evaluation and by weighing which options best suit their needs and desires. During considering investing options, learners consider the cost and time required as well as their current academic capability (Bosch, 2013; Fatima, 2009; Vryonides, 2008). If adult learners feel confident, they may decide to advance to choosing to invest.

Learners also evaluate which academic program(s) best suit their career goals and resources and may begin by choosing to invest. Holmberg (2013) stated,

> Once I found the best fit, it was time to finalize my specialization...Most schools have similar degree specializations, but my new school had a few more. This simply meant that I was a kid in a candy store! (pp. 120-122)

There is often no determined timeline for determining that a program or course of study is a good fit. Some learners may reach a decision and just decide to jump into a program without much

consideration. Considering investing options consists of an adult learner considering courses of action, choosing to invest, or suspending.

**Considering Courses of Action.** When adult learners go through the process of considering options, they weigh the best course of action they need to complete the degree process. Learners analyze each program and select the option that best fits their professional and personal needs (Bosch, 2013; Holmberg, 2013; Meyer, 2002; Vryonides, 2008). Learners may take into consideration the resources available to support the various options available to them. After adult learners have considered a course of action, they may be ready to choose to invest.

**Choosing to Invest.** In *choosing to invest*, adult learners decide on what educational program to pursue by following their passion and enrolling in their selected program (Gardner, 2009). Several options, such as a career change or pursuing a different degree program or level, may guide the learner to either suspend or pursue their current degree program. For example, one participant said, "It wasn't feasible for me to get another bachelor's degree, so I just went on and applied for a Master's of Education, which was another ten classes and a capstone." When adult learners choose to invest, they may do so for several reasons: following the example of someone else or to be a role model himself, desiring to climb the corporate ladder, wishing to attain a credential, or choosing to just jump in. These are often important reasons why adult learners pursue graduate degrees. Even though learners choose to invest or enroll, this does not guarantee that they will successfully complete their perspective graduate programs.

**Suspending.** *Suspending* may occur during considering investing options when the adult learner choses to stall or put off the pursuit of an educational program of study. Suspending can

also occur if the adult learner does not have adequate funding, resources, transportation, or even access to childcare. Suspending may occur at any point in the adult learning career.

Suspending is not always negative but can be a means by which learners take time to recover from obstacles like stress, financial shortages, institutional disruptions, critical crisis (sickness or death of a loved one), or other dispositional or situational barriers. One interviewee said, "I did not have a budget that would allow me to attend summer semester, so I took the summer off until the next semester then I could afford to enroll in my next core course." Suspending may allow learners much needed time to reinvest or reclaim important priorities before making a decision to reenter a program of study when the timing may be more appropriate for them (Baldwin, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011; Olson & Aelong, 2013).

**Investing Experiences**

The second category of *enduring driven succeeding* is *investing experiences* (Olson, 2006). *Investing experiences* occur when a learner decides on following a course of action toward accomplishment of a goal. Learners decide on being committed to a particular process or goal and are willing to take risks and sacrifices in order to achieve a specific objective they have established. Investing experiences consist of three subcategories: *skill development, trying-out experiences*, and *derailing experiences*.

**Skill Development.** In *skill development*, learners begin to invest in areas where they may lack knowledge or in areas where they need to develop higher levels of proficiency. The learner may also gain confidence through new proficiencies, which now replace old habits or practices (Conner, 2004). Skill development may also occur in learners through trial-and-error experiences and practical application (Honigsfield, Connolley & Kelly, 2013). Skill development

consists of three sub-subcategories: *building-on experiences*, *tooling-up* and *supporting structures*.

**Building-on Experiences.** *Building-on experiences* occur in learners when they discover something new that enhances and increases their knowledge or skills. The process of adult learners comprehending new ideas and learning extends the principles and theories they have learned prior to entering their current program of study and causes a scaffolding effect (Austin, 2009; Honigsfield et al., 2013; Phillips & Pugh 2010). Each building-on experience enhances adults' knowledge and skills as they integrate and internalize these new ideas (Mezirow, 1978, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Olson, 2006). One participant said,

> I think a lot of it has changed with the people that I work with. I am very low-key and I say to myself, I got to start working on becoming an administrator. That [old habits] does not work anymore. I need to come out of my office and learn to know all my colleagues. I need to know about them personally and what is going on in their classroom. So that was the big switch for me that I needed to make sure to be a little more social out there, and that I know the people that I work with and let them know that if they ever need anything that my door is open and that I'm there for them.

As learners navigate building-on experiences, they may discover they have to make adjustments and learn new roles as they experience a change in their responsibilities. Building-on experiences often occur in one of three ways: *a critical assessment of assumptions*, *disorienting dilemma*, and the *reintegration of new perspectives and transformation.*

**Critical Assessment of Assumptions.** A *critical assessment of assumptions* is a concept borrowed from Mezirow (2009; 2000; & 1978) and occurs when learners challenge old habits

and familiar patterns of behavior. The challenging of assumptions often occurs through fact gathering, questioning, and testing something out. Learners may then decide to unlearn their previous knowledge and accept a new way of thinking and acting (Conner, 2004).

Adult learners may also collaborate with colleagues or peers to expand their knowledge during critical assessment of assumptions. During this collaboration, knowledge may be gleaned that may assist and motivate them to excel toward their goal (Ellis, 2013; Meyer, 2002; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Ravo, 2004). This constructive interaction enhances adult learners' drive throughout each building experience.

**Disorienting Dilemma.** A *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 1978, 2000) occurs when learners encounter a new way of doing something that is contrary to a former way of knowing. This dilemma suspends their way of thinking until learners have clarity in the new method and reconcile this new knowledge with the previously held belief. Mezirow (1978, 2000) theorized that all adult learners face disorienting dilemmas throughout their careers. One interviewee said, "My professor insisted that the way they were taught years ago is the way it should apply today. If it was good back then, it is good enough today!" If learners cannot accept new ways of thinking and new methods in disorienting dilemmas, they may experience a derailing experience that may result in suspending or delaying completion of their program of study.

**Reintegration of New Perspectives and Transformation.** *Reintegration of new perspectives and transformation* (Mezirow, 1978, 2000) occurs when adult learners have accepted that learning is not concrete and is subject to change. Learners practice the skills of integrating new ideas into their previous knowledge in a way that changes their approach in thinking and learning. The ability to think creatively with unobscured vision and critical thinking

skills become evident as adult learners begin to transform new knowledge into understandable schemes and combine it with previous knowledge (Clerehan et al., 2012; Platow, 2012; Watkins, 2011). Once learners achieve this ability, they can often begin to master new skills (Ellis, 2013).

  **Tooling Up.** *Tooling up* (Olson, 2006) occurs as adult learners realize their need to expand their knowledge and skills. These learners practice mastering these new skills and begin to integrate them into their daily practice. They often develop repertoires of skills with different methods and strategies that support their development into expert stewards of their trade (Walker et al., 2008). Tooling up also may occur in adult learners as they encounter new knowledge, skills, or dispositions (Olson, 2006). Adult learners may begin to display expert stewardship (Walker et al., 2008) as they are tooling up and as they sharpen their skills or narrow their career path. One participant said,

   You attend your college class and talk about theories on how to handle specific

   disabilities and then you come into your classrooms the next morning and apply what you

   learned the night before. You feel refreshed because you have new ideas and innovative

   ideas of how to breach those challenges!

Adult learners may apply what they have learned if given the latitude and freedom to negotiate failures and successes in experiencing the use of new methods. As adult learners experience tooling up, they may find themselves sharing their knowledge and skills with others. Adult learners often receive gratification when they find success applying a specific skill. Colleagues who observe adult learners applying their expertise may provide verbal acknowledgement and compliments for their acquired abilities, skills, and knowledge. This acknowledgement may also provide motivation (Weimer, 2010).

**Strategizing.** *Strategizing* is the process of developing a technique to resolve a problem or gain a clearer understanding of a new situation. It is through strategizing that adult learners implement actions to deal with specific dilemmas to find logical resolutions (Meyer, 2002; Olson, 2006; Ravo, 2004; Vander Linden, 2005). Vander Linden (2005) stated that a person engaged in strategizing is determining and implementing strategies to handle factors and conditions that arise. Adult learners strategize according to their personal and professional needs. Strategizing can provide a structured approach to achievement of goals and provide the learner with a clear focus.

**Supporting Structures.** In order for adult learners to be successful in pursuing goals, they must also have adequate *supporting structures*. Supporting structures offer foundational support that nurture learners to grow throughout their academic and professional lives. There are four major supporting structures that promote investing experiences: (a) family (spouse, children, siblings, parents or pets); (b) colleagues, mentors and peers; (c) administration and/or supervisors at work (includes college attended and current employer); and (d) technological support (both personal and institutional) (Bosch, 2013; Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Gardner, 2008; Holmberg, 2013). One participant remarked, "The work relationships during those years, I developed a really good relationship with, the people in my department. They were very helpful because they, most of them had already been there (complete masters or doctorates degree)." The support provided by the supporting structures can be an important part of providing support and motivation throughout the learning career.

When supporting structures understand their importance in the success of adult learners through provided support, they may begin to strengthen and formalize this relationship.

Attributes like accountability, respect, encouragement, confidentiality, and accommodation may begin to deepen. These attributes are often reciprocal and strengthen trust within the relationship. One participant stated,

> If I needed help with creating lesson plans that would fit specific needs, but I did not have access to those types of students, I was given assistance. That has helped me a lot, and to this day, we still have that connection. We still have a mutual relationship and respect and trust each other. I can now come in and use experiences that I have in Special Education in a classroom and say, "Well what about this?" and we have built that kind of relationship, which is good!

Supporting structures that nurture trust assist in sustaining and promoting succeeding (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Richards, 2013).

**Trying-out Experiences.** *Trying-out experiences* occur when learners engage in testing-out and/or practicing new learning methods and skills until they gain proficiency (Olson, 2006). Adult learners often experiment with learning, including conducting a mental rehearsal of tasks (Klenowski et al., 2011; Richards, 2013; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Learners may also experience anxiety and frustration with a new learning task, and through trying-out experiences they either develop confidence to progress, quit, or try another direction. One interviewee said,

> At the time, I had some experiences working with children and discovered that's where my heart was. After a couple of years, I noticed that I liked working with kids, in the school setting.

Key elements in trying-out experiences are increased motivation, a desire to learn, and a driven-ness that may lead to further investment.

Trying-out experiences may have a starting point driven by life circumstances, for example, a desire to advance in a career, an interest in seeking further credentials or certification, curiosity, or just to see if they can do it. This kind of *jumping in* occurs when an adult learner enrolls into a program without a clear plan, but they just decide to do it (Olson & Aelong, 2013; Walker, 2008). One interviewee said, "I enrolled in one course just to see how it would go. It went well so the next semester I enrolled in one more to make sure I could do it. Now I'm almost finished with the program. Wow!" Sometimes trying-out experiences are an unmeasured risk where adult learners have no idea why they are there but enroll to just see if they can do it.

**Derailing Experiences.** *Derailing experiences* are incidents that may cause learners to stop or stall in the learning process (Olson, 2006). While some derailing experiences may be regarded as negative experience or failure, they may also result in positive outcomes. For example, one adult learner had to take a leave of absence, which allowed her some much needed time off and to come back with a renewed attitude and motivation. Derailing experiences may also provide negative outcomes that result in suspending their participation or ending it altogether (Bosch, 2013; Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Cleary et al., 2013; Clerehan et al., 2012). Learners who derail may experience a mismanagement of time, stalling out, feelings of overwhelm (Olson, 2006), treadmilling (Olson, 2006), stress, or find themselves in insurmountable situations.

**Clicking Experiences**

The third category of *enduring driven succeeding* is *clicking experiences* (Olson, 2006). As learners move into clicking experiences, they began to understand their learning and begin to apply it in meaningful ways (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Clerehan et al., 2012; Richards, 2013).

These learners oftentimes transition into master scholars and stewards of their discipline (Ellis, 2013; Gardner, 2010; Walker et al., 2008). When learners are clicking, they may face a transformation in their role as a learner to teacher or mentor.

**Mattering.** *Mattering* occurs when learners experience the personal touch or caring from a teacher or mentor. Likewise, mattering occurs when learners respond to a teacher with similar caring, appreciation, or endearment. Learners may also experience mattering when accepted in a small group or work team (Forsyth, 2010). Mattering may enhance motivation or spark them on to higher levels of achievement. One study participant said,

> I really like it when I make excellent grades and progress on my dissertation. It makes my chair excited, and I hear it in his voice. I really feel good when this happens.

Mattering may also manifest itself as increased learning energy or renewed confidence.

**Awareness.** *Awareness* is the ability to "understand what is happening while it is happening" (Isaacs, 1999). When adult learners become aware of new knowledge, they may reflect on the content in the new knowledge, enabling them to integrate the new knowledge into paradigms or schemes that have been previously established (Conner, 2004; Mezirow, 2009; Munby, 2000). When adult learners have mastered awareness, they communicate their new knowledge to others with confidence.

**Getting It.** *Getting it* occurs when learners puts the pieces of learning into a sequence that clearly works every time they apply it. As learners enter getting it, they may be still refining new skills and learning whether they will work. If a particular skill works, learners make the connection with their previous knowledge until the skill becomes second nature. Learners begin

to experience a sense of pride and confidence in their newly mastered skills (Bayley et al., 2012; Clerehan et al., 2012; Watkins, 2012).

Adult learners' reaction to *getting it* may vary. They may experience mental exhaustion or supercharging of energy where they explode into celebration, or they may be even melancholy where they reflect on the hard work and sacrifices it took to reach this particular point. Getting it may provide the extra spark to drive learners toward further success. During getting it, learners adopt *new viewpoints* and undertake *provisional trying of new roles*.

As adult learners begin to apply new learning without fear of failing or being embarrassed, they begin to *adopt new viewpoints* (Mezirow, 1978). They begin to understand that theories and methods can only be mastered through trial and error and being open to new ways of thinking. They become energetic, enthusiastic, and attentive to the introduction of new information. Their demeanor displays a positive open-minded attitude, especially when they observe new skills work. These learners fuel their organizations with new ideas and theories that have a positive impact by shaking out the status quo out of the system.

*Provisional trying of new roles* (Mezirow, 1978, 2000) occurs when adult learners apply their learning toward performing a new role in a trial-and-error manner. The adult learner's behavior may appear to be apprehensive until they gain a comfort level in the new role. This trial and error learning scaffolds knowledge that was learned in the classroom environment and assists the learner in applying theory to practice (Austin, 2009). The adult learner is exposed to the reality of what occurs in their new roles and how to resolve daily issues faced. For example, one participant said,

It's been very busy, very helpful, and the entire experience I've had so far is you've kind

of been a teacher, and you've taken the administration classes, and it kind of helps you

understand and think about how they (administrators/principals) kind of think. You get an

opportunity to experience what they go through and you are still a teacher. So, it kind of

helps your understanding of maybe why they do some things they do; it helps understand

why you do some things you do in the classroom. It really just gives you a good example

of how the two (teachers and administrators) tie together with that. It is a very busy

process.

During provisional trying of new roles, the learner strives to master the skills in the new role by

exploring different approaches and methods until they discover and develop their own niche that

best works for them in their new role.

**Mastering.** *Mastering* occurs as learners develop proficiency and expertise with new

skills and new theories. This new sensation is invigorating to the learner and ignites self-esteem

within them. They realize that they are experts in what they have learned. They develop a desire

for continuous growth in knowledge and dexterity in their abilities (Olson, 2006). This desire

may lead to the pursuit of lifelong learning (Klenowski et al., 2011). Adult learners who reach

mastery may eventually develop into mentors for others.

Adult learners who have mastered learning display *managing control* and *awareness*. As

adult learners begin to master new theories and tasks, they begin to feel the power of knowledge

and can control their learning environment in and outside of the classroom through increased

accuracy in planning (Baldwin, 2013; Richards, 2013; Rotter, 1966, 1989; Weiner, 2010, 2000).

They have mastered the skills of planning schedules, developing plans, teaching, critical thinking

with application of theories, and on-the-spot adjustments to plans. With this awareness, learners

have the knowledge to help students, colleagues, and peers with the new tools that they have

mastered. For example, one participant said,

> As an administrator, you are able to affect so many more kids because you affect the
>
> teachers, who affect all the kids that they work with. Instead of going from just being able
>
> to work with your classes six hours a day, you are now working with every teacher in
>
> your building for seven hours a day; so you are able to affect more kids as an
>
> administrator.

Learners understand how to manage control in their daily routines through a well-developed

understanding of where the *locus of control* lies and by employing mastery in their daily routes.

   *Locus of control* is a concept borrowed from Rotter (1966, 1989) and Weiner (2010,

2000). Adult learners may view successes and failures as either internal, where learners attribute

themselves as being responsible for their successes and failures (Rotter, 1989), or external, where

learners view forces outside themselves as contributing to their successes and failures (Rotter,

1989). Adult learners must be able to balance the *locus of control* in order to endure the learning

process, especially when obstacles occur to block progress that are beyond their control

(Holmberg, 2013; Rotter, 1989; Weiner, 2010).

   Activities in life are often unpredictable; therefore adult learners need routines in place

that work to guide planned and unplanned activities. *Routinizing* occurs when adult learners

develop helpful habits and patterns to follow to accomplish tasks in their new roles and required

activities (Vander Linden, 2005). For example, one interviewee said, "You need to set your

priorities and follow that routine and get into a routine!" Routinizing enables the adult learner to

follow a set plan or effortlessly alter a plan. It also assists in aligning thought processes to adjust strategies in order to complete tasks that are urgent, unplanned and disrupt the normal flow of a schedule (Conner 2004; Meyer, 2002; Vander Linden, 2005).

**Reflecting Experiences**

The fourth category of *enduring driven succeeding* is *reflecting experiences*. *Reflecting experiences* occur as adult learners rethink on experiences of their successes and failures to provide a mental replay of their current abilities to move forward in daily life (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Miller, 2009)*.* This reflection may provide sound positive motivation as well as negative memories of situations in adult learners' life or career (Austin, 2009; Regmi, 2013). Adult learners may experience apprehension, anxiety, or doubt from past failures and may even question the validity of positive achievements during reflecting experiences.

Reflecting experiences may occur at any time during *visioning, investing,* and *clicking experiences*. Vander Linden (2005) calls reflecting "the cognitive examination of various aspects of a new experience and or the experience as a whole" (p. 146). She added that most often reflection happens in one's mind, but it can sometimes be generated through conversations and writing exercises. During reflection, learners may focus on new ways of thinking, inquiry, questioning, and discovery (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Regmi, 2013). Adult learners reflect to analyze their level of commitment and the quality of their performance on a particular task to a desired outcome (Ravo, 2004). During *reflecting experiences,* learners are free to predict how new and past learning can affect a change in their knowledge (Admed & Al-Khalili, 2013; Conner, 2004; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009).

**Self-examination.** In *self-examination*, adult learners reflect on their ability or likeliness to achieve a task. This evaluation consists of analyzing their weaknesses and strengths of performance (Oktay et al., 2013; Vander Linden, 2005). During self-examination, adult learners may make a mental or written note of weaknesses, strengths, or preconceptions and strategize on how to improve in those specific areas (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor 2009).

**Inventorying.** Adult learners reflect and assess their performance as they navigate reflecting experiences. Through this reflection period, they often take an inventory of their performances from a more objective point of view (Calvert, 2011; Richards, 2013). *Inventorying* also helps learners develop and synchronize routines and schemas that may assist in making learning easier. Learners may take less formal, impromptu inventories of their classroom practices and study patterns to assess their mastery of new skills learned in their respective degree programs. During inventorying, adult learners may reflect on gaps in their knowledge or misconceptions that may be hindering their progress. Holmberg (2013) provided an example of inventorying: "Better yet, do I know what I am doing? The answer at the time was a confident yes, but in reality; a big fat NO was the true answer" (pp. 142-143). Adult learners may return to inventorying as budgets get tight or when an unexpected expense occurs.

**Choosing to Reinvest.** *Choosing to reinvest* may occur as learners find solutions to restart their program of study through renewed commitment and sustainable resources (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). When choosing to reinvest, adult learners often inventory available assets, resources, and support structures. Based on the outcome of this reflective assessment, learners may decide to choose to reinvest and continue their progress toward degree completion.

**Reordering of One's Life.** *Reordering one's life* occurs through a change in adult learners' normal routines such as a career change, a change in educational programs, having a newborn, getting married, health and family issues, an economic crisis, or a change in social activities. These events can be the catalyst for learners in reordering of one's life. Reordering of one's life may also have a positive impact on adult learners (Bosch, 2013; Klenowski et al., 2011; Robert & Petersen, 2013; Vryonides, 2008). One participant stated, "I began to change directions on my educational planning; I still chose to finish my degree, my bachelor's in Psychology." Learners may experience helplessness and fear, or even appear frustrated or confused as they are accomplishing a task or reordering their lives.

Sometimes reordering of priorities may occur when learners are reflecting and beginning to reorder their lives. This reordering may also occur when life priorities are required to be reorganized based on their importance and urgency (Klenowski et al., 2011; Vryonides, 2008). One participant said,

> I think that almost every day you have to look at what has to be done, the important things go to the top of the list, and the things that you might be able to do tomorrow or put off for a day go towards the bottom of the list. However, as far as big priorities, I knew that my long-term goal was that I wanted to complete my Master's degree.

When a shift of priorities is required, reordering allows adult learners the ability to maintain a balance with urgency being given to those tasks that are most important at that time. This order is subject to change at any time due to the urgency and desires of the learner.

**Evaluating Commitment.** When learners reflect on their motivational drive to continue the process, review and reflection help to sustain the drive required to endure continued

succeeding. Several questions often arise when navigating *evaluating commitment*: (a) Did I spend, or am I spending, the amount of time required to accomplish assignments?, (b) Do I have enough funding to continue my program?, (c) Do I have the required motivational energy to continue the pursuit of my goal?, (d) Is completing this goal significant enough to sacrifice my personal time in order to attain the degree?, and (e) Did I follow through with meeting all the requirements to make positive progress? As learners conduct this kind of self-inquiry, they may discover areas in which they need improvement (Ennis, 2011; Robert & Petersen, 2013). Likewise, learners may also discover that they are doing just fine in all or most areas. Ultimately, learners must decide to continue to pursue their program of study or possibly face a derailing experience.

**Weighing the Loss.** Adult learners may reevaluate their circumstances by reflecting on the possible impending failure of a course and the consequences of taking on more debt. This piling-up fear may also trigger a derailing experience or add to current stress levels. Adult learners often reflect on the ramifications associated with not completing a course of study or program. Some learners also may consider whom (themselves, others, or both) they will let down if they choose to drop out or end up failing a program. This mental anxiety may also lead to apprehension and/or additional levels of stress and disappointment.

**Adaptation Energy.** *Adaptation energy* (Selye & Fonder, 2013) is self-initiated energy that serves to redirect negative thoughts and may be realized as positive motivation or driven-ness. Some adult learners find adaptation energy through exercise, gardening, taking a break from studies, hobbies, or other activities. This positive energy may even provide a much-needed recharge. One participant remarked,

I need time to myself to just regroup, recharge, I mean, and refresh, you know just to be

able to kind of get away from certain things and let loose in others. I mean, it is very

refreshing, it is very healthy.

Selye (2013) asserted every person has certain amount of genetically determined adaptation

energy and believes that learners can draw upon this energy either thriftily for long periods of

time while living a boring existence or bountifully during critical, stressful moments. Adult

learners may take time off to recover from a stressful workload by participating in activities that

are enjoyable and refresh them. These activities act as catalysts to regenerate their drive to

progress toward accomplishing the goal. Some adult learners may experience adaptation energy

by removing themselves for temporary breaks to reenergize and reflect on experiences, then

reengage reinvigorated.

**Resiliency.** When learners face numerous odds such as past failures, disorienting

dilemmas (Mezirow, 1990), or stressful challenges that are beyond their control (such as job loss,

divorce, or death of a loved one), many are able to maintain self-composure and weather

hardships and obstacles due to their *resiliency* (Borman & Overman, 2004; Klenowski et al.,

2011; Selye & Fonder, 2013; Sullivan & Pagana, 2012). Resiliency often allows them to

continue under difficult circumstances and stimulates their fortitude to resist accepting failure.

This kind of stress can be healthy, and like passion, it provides the motivation to keep

progressing (Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Selye, 1974; Selye & Fonder, 2013). One participant

commented,

...thankfully, this time around my wife is also a teacher and someone that had attained her master's degree; we were at a position where we had time, we had the finances that would allow me to commute.

Adult learners who have resilience behave as if they believe in themselves and in those supporting structures to assist them in succeeding.

## Discrepant Cases and Nonconforming Data

No discrepant cases or nonconforming data were identified during this study, as all participant data were considered, coded, and integrated into the theory using the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A GT study does not have findings, as do most qualitative studies; rather, the ending product is a conceptual theory (Glaser, 2009; Merriam, 2002) founded in saturated conceptual categories generated directly from the interview data.

## Evidence of Quality

Since in GT data collection begins by conducting and transcribing interviews, it is important that the transcriptions of the interviews be accurate. The researcher employed a professional transcriptionist to type up the recordings of each interview. The researcher then double-checked the interviews against the recordings for accuracy and provided each interviewee a copy of their transcription for verification. Once the interviews were completed and accepted as accurate by each participant, strict procedures were maintained by employing the constant comparative analysis technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Summary of the Theory of *Enduring Driven Succeeding***

The substantive GT *enduring driven succeeding* explains how the participants of this study resolved their concerns as they progressed through advanced degree programs while working full-time and simultaneously attending graduate school. *enduring driven succeeding* was the core category that emerged from comparative analysis of data and functioned as the foundation for the theory. It recurred frequently, linked relationships with various data, and allowed for maximum variation in accounting for behaviors of the adult participants involved in this study (Glaser, 1998, 2011).

*Enduring driven succeeding* emerged through *theoretical synergy* (Glaser, 1978, 2007; Raffanti, 2006) between *driven succeeding* (Olson, 2006) and *Enduring the Process*, a core variable that emerged in the initial stages of the constant comparative analysis of this study. Similar to *driven succeeding*, *enduring driven succeeding* is also a serpentine process (Olson, 2006). Through *theoretical synergy*, four categories emerged: *visioning, investing, clicking*, and *reflecting experiences*. It was through *enduring driven succeeding* that these adult learners resolved their concerns in pursuing advanced degree completion.

Section 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

**Overview**

The purpose of this research study was to generate a GT from teacher experiences who were working in full-time careers and pursuing advanced degrees as graduate students. The intent was to gain a better understanding about how the participants resolved problems faced while working toward completion of their advanced degrees. The environment in which this research study occurred was within MSD1's high school and middle school classrooms and administrative offices, all of which were educational settings located in rural, southwest Missouri.

**Study Overview**

GT methodology was selected because it could provide a theory grounded in the data to understand what these adult learners were working on and what one may experience given a similar situation (Glaser, 1978, 1998, 2005, 2007, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The resulting theory is modifiable and may be applicable in many different professional fields or organizations (Glaser 1978, 1998, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Unlike most qualitative research methodology, which often requires specific research questions and a thorough literature review up-front prior to conducting the research, GT only looks at a general area of interest with no preconception as to what may be found (Glaser, 1998).

The core variable that emerged from this GT study was *enduring driven succeeding*. Through the GT process of collection of data, coding, memoing, and constant comparative analysis, theoretical synergy (Raffanti, 2006) was employed to integrate the theory of *driven succeeding* (2006) with *enduring the process*, resulting in *enduring driven succeeding*.

Each interview began with the following grand tour question (Burgess, 2011; Olson, 2006; Olson & Aelong, 2013; Simmons, 2010): "Tell me about your experiences as both a full-time educator and a graduate student." All other questions were developed from the responses to the grand tour question (see appendix G for examples). The interviews were recorded, coded, and memoed. Constant comparative analysis occurred throughout this process.

## The Theory of *Enduring Driven Succeeding*

### Visioning Experiences

*Visioning experiences* explain how some adult learners initiate advanced degree programs as they engage in the process of selecting and planning their programs of study prior to entry. It is through visioning that adult learners evaluate the possibilities of embarking on an advanced degree program. This effort helped increase their intellectual capacity as practitioners and improve their opportunities to be competitive in their career fields.

Through visioning adult learners investigate degree programs, institutions of interest, and the required support needed to initiate *enduring driven succeeding*. When the adult learner has entered visioning experiences, they begin the process through *planning* and its properties *scheduling* and *considering options*. Once the adult learner has decided on a program, they invest time and resources into it (see Section 4 for a full explanation).

### Investing Experiences

It is through *investing experiences* that adult learners begin to unravel the ambiguity of *Enduring driven succeeding* in a graduate program. During investing experiences, adult learners are actively engaged in learning new theories and skills from their curriculum. It is in this category that adult learners experiment with new instructional methods and roles through *trying*

*out* and *skill development*. During investing experiences, adult learners experience learning through trial and error and adjust mistakes that would enable them to progress into *clicking experiences*.

During investing experiences, adult learners face new skills and theories that will enable them to become masters within their career fields. Adult learners' previous beliefs are challenged, which creates disequilibrium in the learning process, or as Mezirow (1978, 2000, 2009) calls it, a disorienting dilemma occurs. All learners experience progressing through all three subcategories of investing experiences: skill development, trying out experiences, and derailing experiences (see Section 4 for full explanation). Derailing experiences were the most challenging of all the subcategories of *Enduring driven succeeding* for the learners involved in this research.

**Clicking Experiences**

*Clicking experiences* could be termed the eureka! category of *enduring driven succeeding*. It is during clicking experiences where adult learners maintain the process toward lifelong learning through *mattering*, *awareness, getting it*, and *mastering*, the subcategories of clicking experiences (see Section 4 for a full explanation). During clicking experiences, new skills, ideas, theories, and sacrifices completed in the earlier categories all come together. The adult learners scaffold new knowledge and master the skills of their trade to become master students (Ellis, 2013) and experts of their discipline (Walker et al., 2008).

Adult learners experience becoming mentors to their peers, transitioning to different roles, accepting added responsibilities with authority and control, and becoming a seasoned cadre in their work environments. In this transformational role, adult learners had to make decisions on

whether to accept or reject the new role. If the transformational role were rejected, adult learners still completed the process but did experience some derailing implications, which they overcame during *reflecting experiences*.

**Reflecting Experiences**

During *reflecting experiences*, the fourth category of *enduring driven succeeding*, adult learners used critical thinking routinely in moments of deep rehearsal, envisioning their past, current, and future performances. Through reflection, adult learners critically evaluated their successes and failures in order to progress through the *enduring driven succeeding* process. Reflecting experiences may occur in all three of the previous categories while the learner is actively engaged in the process as a point of reference during mental rehearsals and can be helpful to the adult learner as immediate feedback (Bright, 1996; Meyer, 2002; Miller, 2009; Regmi, 2013; Woolfolk, 2013). Reflecting experiences support recharging learners' disciplined focus and energy and assist them in readjusting their efforts during critical points in the process of navigating derailing experiences and discouraging circumstances the learner may face.

During reflecting experiences, adult learners evaluate how well they performed certain skills and integrated new knowledge and skills. Reflecting experiences are also important to reenergize learners from derailing experiences and get them re-motivated to endure the process of *enduring driven succeeding*. The adult learners of this study reflected through self-examination, adaptation energy, and reinvesting, the subcategories of reflecting experiences. Clearly, adult learners would not choose all of these responses, but would often choose one or more and open the door for a newfound perspective to advance or drive them to continue on with

forward progress. Similarly, those reflecting experiences could also trigger frustration, apathy, overwhelm, or even despair, which may result in suspending or ending the learning journey.

## The Interpretation of the Findings

This study commenced with participant interviews using the same grand tour question, "Tell me about your experiences as both a full-time teacher and a graduate student." Follow-up questions were not pre-determined, but founded only in each of the original participant's responses (see appendix G for some examples). The substantive GT that emerged in this study revealed an abundant amount of information about what adult learners experience while working in full-time careers and attending graduate school. This theory is limited to only interview data and the thoughts expressed by the interview participants. This theory represents an accurate account of what one might expect to find in a similar school situation. The four categories of *enduring driven succeeding* emerged: *visioning, investing, clicking, and reflecting experiences*. Any literature that was integrated into the theory had to earn its way into the theory exactly as did participant interviews, using constant comparative analysis.

The conceptual framework utilized in this study was Mezirow's (1978, 2009) theory of transformative learning (TL). Since GT is an inductive method that has clear procedures, it was difficult to select an appropriate conceptual framework only knowing the interest area of adult graduate students in full-time careers. Using a conceptual framework that focuses on the transformative changes of adults seemed like a logical choice since all the participants were not only adults but were also experiencing the challenge of engaging in an educational pursuit. One example from Mezirow's (1990) work included his concept of the "disorienting dilemma" (p. 22), which earned its way into the theory under the category of investing experiences. This

category aptly names a specific experience or event that jars an adult student as they progress in their job and/or schooling. Sometimes a disorienting dilemma can be the loss of a job or the failing of a course or exam. In navigating *enduring driven succeeding*, the theory may inform, inspire, or drive the student, or may stall or disrupt progress depending on whether the student accepts the experience objectively or sees it as a defeat. If the student uses the theory to name and interpret the disorienting dilemma as only feedback and not failure, there may be hope for reinvestment with a newfound perspective.

Only after the framework for the theory had emerged, was relevant literature considered for integration into the theory, and only then if it earned its way in through the constant comparative analysis method like any other data. *enduring driven succeeding* may be useful as a guide that predicts what may occur for anyone engaging in or planning to enter an advanced degree program while also employed (Bosch, 2013; Planty et al., 2009; Stegman & Glaser 2009; Wendler et al., 2010), or the instructors, recruiters, and administrators that work with and support them.

### The Implications for Social Change

The theory of *enduring driven succeeding* may be useful perspective to adult learners in various career fields as a predictor of the kinds of issues and behavior they might expect upon navigating an advanced degree program. Administrators within organizations may also find this theory useful as a tool that may provide more knowledge of the challenges faced by the adult students they manage or supervise who are navigating advanced degree programs. This theory could also have a positive impact on the attrition rate of graduate-level students who use it to help resolve issues they are experiencing throughout their educational career.

## Recommendations for Action

The theory of *enduring driven succeeding* may be useful when developing a Professional Development Plan (PDP) in MSD1. Getting this theory into the proper hands would also be an important action step. Any scholar-practitioner who is considering entering a graduate school program should be aware of this theory, as it could assist future candidates with the awareness and challenges of navigating an advanced degree program while trying to balance work and home obligations. Departmental heads of college institutions and enrollment counselors could benefit from the insight of this theory, and when applying grounded action, may lead to resolving the main concerns of working adults, thereby reducing attrition rates.

## Recommendation for Further Study

A Grounded Action (GA) study would be advantageous for this particular area of interest (Simmons & Gregory, 2003). Olson's (2006) research study, which revealed the theory of *driven succeeding*, is an example of GA research. Since *enduring driven succeeding* is an extension of *driven succeeding*, it would be a natural next step in producing GA. GA focuses on the development of meaningful and sustainable action initiatives that will resolve participants' main concerns (Simmons & Gregory, 2003). GA is a paradigm transcendent methodology that relies on a generalizable theory that can be modified and used in other processes other than the process in which it was discovered. GA is also capable of providing a unique conceptual understanding of a problem by generating an operational theory and specific actions that will resolve and address the specific problems of an individual, group, or organization (Olson & Raffanti, 2006). (An example of this is articulated below).

The theory of *enduring driven succeeding* found that students often invest for one or more of the following four reasons: (a) following the example of someone else or to be a role model himself, (b) desiring to climb the corporate ladder, (c) wishing to attain a credential, or (d) choosing to just jump in. In GA, solutions and recommendations can be developed to resolve these problems and may be useful when working with a student is unsure why they want to enroll in a graduate program. Questions can be fashioned to promote and discover why a student is interested in an advanced degree, such as:

- Has anyone inspired you to pursue this advanced degree? (addressing reason 1 above)

- Who would be proud of you if you obtained this degree? (addressing reason 1 above)

- What will having an advanced degree like this mean to you and your family? (addressing reason 1 above)

- How might obtaining an advanced degree open career doors you might be interested in pursuing? (addressing reason 2 above)

- Have you ever just wanted to see if you can obtain and advanced degree like this? (addressing reason 4 above)

When someone like a college advisor or recruiter can apply the insights of *enduring driven succeeding* like this, they can be confident that their questions are going to be relevant and meaningful when realized within a grounded action context (M. Olson, personal communication, December 18, 2014). At the very least, the college representative is coming from a more informed position and can adapt the action to the larger context of choosing to invest and visioning.

## Reflections on the Researcher's Experience

The most challenging task I faced during my time as a graduate student at Walden University was learning GT methodology and trying to figure out the ambiguity of the dissertation writing process (Gardner, 2009; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). My dissertation chair, answered all my questions no matter how elementary I thought they were. His knowledge of GT combined with his superior mentorship helped me through my many *derailing experiences* that I would not have been able to overcome by myself.

The area of interest, progressing through an advanced degree while maintaining full-time employment, was chosen because of my concern for colleagues in advanced academic programs and the impact that these adult learners have on society. After completing a review of the literature in this interest area, research revealed a problematic attrition rate for master and doctoral level students and showed that there was little research on while undergoing graduate programs.

Another factor that guided the selection of this specific area of inquiry was the barriers faced by graduate students attempting the completion of graduate programs while working full-time. For many years, I continually heard colleagues complain about not having enough time to complete their tasks and coursework. Now I had the opportunity to provide assistance in an area where there was little research. The outcome was the emergent, substantive GT *enduring driven succeeding*, which provides adult learners with a preview of what may occur during this process.

## Summary

*Enduring driven succeeding* is a GT that accounts for the main concerns of adult learners navigating a graduate program while working in a full-time career. A GT can be useful because

as an inductive method. The categories and codes emerge directly from participant interviews, providing a familiar landscape of what one might expect in a similar setting. Many readers will experience the grab of a GT study and as a result, adult learners may resolve to manage their resources, social lives, and personal affairs with less chaos and stress. The serpentine nature of the theory will help learners locate their own interests and may avoid the pitfalls of *disorienting dilemmas*, which may derail their efforts along the way. Graduate students, administrators, professional learning groups, and enrollment specialists may find this theory useful as a model for understanding the challenges adults experience as they navigate full-time careers and graduate education.

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Appendix A: Approval Letter from District Superintendent

**Midwest R-VI School District**
Office of the Superintendent
10 East Drive
Elmo, Rome XXXX

Dr. Jack Horseshoe                                    Phone: (111) 100-4444
Superintendent                                        Fax: (111) 100-3333

July 14, 2011

Mr. Charles V. Slider Jr. EdD (candidate)
116 Sawmill Rd.
 Elmo, Rome XXXX

Dear Mr. Slider:

On behalf of the Midwest R-VI School District, I am pleased to approve the research project,
which is a requirement for your doctoral dissertation through Walden University.
This approval is granted based upon your letter of request, which provided a description of the
project, titled "How do Teachers Navigate Through Advanced Degrees While Working in
Careers". I look forward to the findings of your project and discussing how they may benefit our
district and others.

Educationally,

Julie Stubborn, Ed.D.
Superintendent

*"Educating individual students for 21st century challenges."*
*Accredited with Distinction in Performance by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary*
*Education.*

Appendix B: Letter of Approval from Midwest High School Principal

**Midwest High School**
**Midwest RVI School District**
Office of the Principal
Midwest, Rome XXXXX

December 3, 2011

Dear Mr. Slider,

Per your request and Dr. Horseshoe's approval, I give permission for you to conduct the study "How do Teachers Navigate Through Advanced Degrees While Working in Careers" within Midwest High School. I authorize you to interview teachers for the purpose of data gathering.


Sincerely,


Courtney Doe
Principal
Midwest High School

Appendix C: Letter of Approval from Midwest Middle School Principal

**Midwest Middle School**
**Midwest RVI School District**
Office of the Principal
Rome, About Blvd, Rome XXXXX

November 30, 2011

Dear Mr. Slider,

On behalf of the Midwest Middle School, I am pleased to write this letter of cooperation, which is a requirement for your doctoral dissertation through Walden University.
This approval is granted based upon your letter of request, which provided a description of the research, titled "How do Teachers Navigate through Advanced Degrees While Working in Careers." I look forward to the findings of your research and discussing how they may benefit our district and others.

Educationally,



John Doe
Principal
Midwest Middle School

Appendix D: Participant Letter of Invitation

Invitation to Participate in an Advanced Degree Process Research

All MSD1 teachers who are currently enrolled in an Advanced Degree Program are invited to participate in a voluntary research, which will be focusing on what teachers are going through during this process.

**Criteria for participants:**

- Teachers teaching in grades $7^{th}$ through $12^{th}$ grade
- Currently enrolled in a fulltime graduate program Master, Specialist or Doctoral programs
- Those practitioners who just recently completed an advanced program within the last six months
- Concurrently working as a fulltime teacher and fulltime graduate student
- Each volunteer must provide certified documentation of enrollment from their perspective institutions.

**Confidentiality:** All personal information will be held as confidential and your identity will not be revealed.

**Time Frame:** This research will take place in the months of December 2012 and May 2013.

**Length of Interviews:** Interviews will not exceed one hour unless the volunteer participant(s) chooses to go longer.

**Decision to Participate:** If you decide to participate, please contact Charles V. Slider at a suitable time by either telephone or email. It will be required to provide your name and a contact number to arrange a brief meeting prior to your qualifications assessment.

**Point of Contact:** Charles V. Slider Jr.

**Telephone:** XXX-XXX-XXXX **Alternate:** XXX-XXX-XXXX

**Email:** Charles.slider@zoo.com

Appendix E: Letter of Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study of advanced degrees while maintaining a fulltime career. The researcher is inviting all the teachers of MSD1 who are currently enrolled as fulltime graduate student or have just recently completed an advance degree program of study. This population was selected because it would provide the riches data based on the area of interest in this research. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Charles V. Slider Jr., who is a doctoral student at Walden University. Mr. Slider is currently an adjunct professor with Drury University and works as a substitute teacher for MSD1.

**Background Information:**
The purpose of this study is to understand the concerns of practitioners as they progress through the completion of an advanced degree while working fulltime within MSD1. The goal of this study is to generate a substantive theory that expresses the lived experiences of the participants as they resolve their main concerns in this process. This explanatory theory will provide a voice for these participants to express their concerns and provide predicted or expected behavior in practitioners when placed in a similar situation. This study may provide positive social change for the field of education. Because there is very little inductive research in this area of interest, there is a gap in what happens to teachers during the navigational process.

**Procedures:**
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a face-to-face interview. Mr. Slider will contact you and arrange a date, time, and location that are most convenient for you.
- During discussions, we will converse on your experiences in navigating an advanced degree as a fulltime student while working in a fulltime job.
- If necessary, Mr. Slider will contact you for follow-up interviews, which may consist of clarifications from the initial interview or a more in depth discussion on a critical idea under development.
- Interviews may vary in length, but will not extend more than one hour. If more time is required for additional questions, Mr. Slider will request to schedule an additional follow-up interview.
- All interviews will be recorded unless the participant objects to this procedure.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at the Waynesville School District or Walden University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time. You may choose not to

answer any questions during the interview that are personal to you in nature. If you prefer to write them down instead, this is fine. If you choose not to answer at all, it is completely up to you.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**
There is minimal risk that may be encountered in this study. Some of these risks may include daily life experiences, such as fatigue, stress, or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose a risk to your safety, physical health, or mental wellbeing. The benefit of participating will assist in providing informed knowledge to fellow colleagues that may endeavor the process of advanced degree programs. This is an opportunity for you to assist in providing needed insight on the experiences practitioners face in the district by addressing ways that may support professionals navigating advanced degree programs.

**Compensation:**
No compensation will be offered.

**Confidentiality:**
        Any information you provide will be kept Confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. In addition, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secured by locked safe with only the researcher having access. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by Walden University.

**Contacts and Questions:**
You may ask any questions you have now. Alternatively, if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via telephone at 573-528-XXXX or email Charles.slider@waldenu.edu. If you wish to speak to Mr. Sliders' supervising chair, you may contact Dr. Mitchell Olson by telephone at 815-877-XXXX or by email mitchell.olson@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

**Statement of Consent:**
I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I am agreeing to the terms described above.
Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of consent _____

Participant's Signature _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix F: Sample Coding

Parenthesis indicate which parts of the text were coded and codes follow

Interview A: I had some experience (working with children) (that's where my heart was), but within a matter of a couple of years I did notice that (I liked working with the kids) in the school setting and that was something that (I wanted to make more permanent).

Code = Following the calling

Interview B: I (love teaching), I (love working) with kids, especially students who struggle, students who have a learning disability.

Code = Following the passion

Interview C: (I love Education. My first love, as far as passion), was (History), and I always wanted to go back through and get that (Doctorate in Early European History).

Code = Following the passion          Code = Credentializing

Interview D: I (really) do (like) the (administration) program and I (like) the (administration) side of things, so I guess it has changed a little bit; but that was (my true motivation).

Code = Passion

Appendix G: Sample Follow-up Questions During Interviews

Once the grand tour question was asked, "Talk about your experiences as both a fulltime educator and graduate student." The following were some actual follow-up questions, triggered by the specific responses from each participant, founded through informal coding and theoretical sensitivity. These questions were not preconceived prior to the interview, but triggered by something the participant offered or mentioned in response to the grand tour question:

**(1) Follow up question, "Talk about balancing, from your perspective."**

Interviewee 14: It's very busy. Balancing the two hasn't been the easiest. My organization has gone downhill. Honestly, I think that I've been on auto pilot with some…I think it's helped because this is my fifth year of teaching the same subject and some of it has honestly gone on auto pilot; I haven't, maybe, done some of the lesson…like some of the stuff has been recreated…I recreate it year to year. I've used a lot of the same stuff from previous years this year, just because I don't have time to research new lessons, find the new things. It's kind of been nice because I know next year we're switching over to the common core, which I know everything is going to be revamped, anyways; so I've just kind of let this year cruise along and…I mean, we're doing all of the objectives, all of our course level expectations, but I'm just not creating some of the newer activities that I like to every year; because it's been an eighteen-month program so I started it in January of last year. So, just finding, you know, time has, to do both – I mean, I've done all the stuff; I just feel that sometimes I should be doing more here at school. I still have a 4.0 in my Master's classes, and we take six to nine hours a semester. I don't sleep very often. I find myself doing a lot. My kids are very involved, so I have that aspect, too. Yeah, I just, I don't sleep.

Interviewee 2: Balancing. That's hard when you have family and a job and you're trying to go to college to get your Ph.D., but if you are determined to do it, then you will find time to spend time with your family but then also find time to complete your studies. It's hard, but so far, I've been able to do it.

Interviewee 3: Balancing? That's real good. I mean, you know, it's, balancing, you know, for me is ideal; it's something that I always ideally strive for. It is definitely something that is desired, but, you know, still today remains a challenge. You know, trying to balance and, once again, figure out, you know, what is more important or what more of a sense of priorities is. So, I mean, I feel in my experiences that I'm getting better at balancing my time, balancing my workload, you know.

**(2) Follow up question, "Talk about a time where you failed."**

Interviewee 2: Well, the most recent one would have been a couple of years ago after I started my Ph.D. I had a class that I ended up having to retake due to family issues, health issues, that caused me to get behind in my class and I ended up with a grade that was not high enough for me to pass the class. The following semester, I retook the class and passed it with an 'A'.

Interviewee 3: I don't mean it in any form of pride or arrogance, I mean, over the past few years, you know, outstanding events that I can think of that, you know, there's a few, there's a few moments in college, a few courses that gave me, perhaps, a lot of trouble or struggle. Some of that had to do with, you know, even though I may have been planning, perhaps there were flaws in the planning. Some of it has to do with, you know, re-evaluating my commitment and making sure that it is a true commitment.

**(3) Follow up question, "Talk about your time management? What is that like?"**

    Interviewee 14: I'm a procrastinator, so the last two weeks before big assignments are due, probably the last week is, like, crunch time and I work on it, you know, any free time that I have, whatsoever is spent working on homework. I probably become a very hateful person, I know I do during those times; more at home, I think, because during the school day you try to stay in that happy mode, so when I get home, I think my family suffers the most from it, because I'm trying to cram everything in and still do everything that's needed at home.

**(4) Follow up question, "Talk about your experiences where it was chaotic or hectic."**

    Interviewee 7: The two big ones, at the end of my Master's you have a capstone portfolio/thesis, basically, is what it is, uh, you know, getting that together. A lot of people around me I hear, "Use mine." "Hey, I did one." I discredit no one. They all did their own system and style. I'm very specific in the way I like to do things. I don't take things very lightly, so the redoing, making it perfect process, even though I knew full well that he was just gonna look at it and say, "Alright, you did it," you know, at that level, you know, just for something to hold in their hands. And then at the end of the Specialist, you've got your, basically your Specialist project, Specialist thesis, which leads you into a path for your Doctorate if you do it properly, and knowing that I was gonna do my Doctorate, I took that approach in designing my Specialist project and put a significant amount of time and attention into that project, and it has paid off because a lot of the research and a lot of the detail work that I put into that, so far, has been of use to me in my Doctorate; whereas a lot of people are like, "Oh, I gotta start all over!" But those

are those times there that the crunch time at the end to get those done for quality, not just the

sake of getting them done.

Appendix H: Enduring Driven Succeeding Theoretical Outline

Core Variable: Enduring Driven Succeeding
With Categories and Subcategories

| **Category 1**<br>**Visioning Experiences** | **Category 2**<br>**Investing Experiences** |
|---|---|
| **Subcategory:**<br><br>• Planning<br><br>**Sub-subcategories:**<br><br>o Scheduling<br><br>o Considering Investing | **Subcategories:**<br><br>• Skill Development<br><br>• Trying Out Experiences<br><br>• Derailing Experiences |
| **Category 3**<br>**Clicking Experiences** | **Category 4**<br>**Reflecting Experiences** |
| **Subcategories:**<br><br>• Mattering<br><br>• Awareness<br><br>• Getting It<br><br>• Mastering | **Subcategories:**<br><br>• Self-Examination<br><br>• Adaptation Energy<br><br>• Reinvesting |