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Perceived Factors that Influence Adult Learners' Persistence and Retention in Adult Basic Education

Evelyn Idoko
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Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
2018

Abstract

Perceived Factors that Influence Adult Learners' Persistence and Retention in Adult

Basic Education

by

Evelyn Idoko

MS, Herbert H. Lehman College, 1995

BA, Hunter College, 1990

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2018

Abstract

Retaining students, particularly in the 16- to- 24-year-old category, is a constant

challenge for adult basic education programs nationwide. Educators need to understand

factors that affect adult learners' experiences, have a better understanding of ways to

motivate adult students in a nontraditional school setting to enhance their engagement,

and apply research-based techniques and targeted, practical strategies to improve student

persistence. The primary objective of this case study was to investigate the perceived

factors that students considered influential on their persistence and retention in adult

basic education programs. Knowles's andragogy theory and Tinto's persistence theory

were the theoretical frameworks for this study. The research questions were designed to

understand the factors that motivate students to remain engaged in academic courses. Ten

students enrolled in a high school equivalency program in a large northeastern city

participated in semi-structured, individual interviews. Coding and thematic analysis were

used to identify, describe, and interpret the data collected. The findings indicated that

factors such as individual drive, the instructor's encouragement and high expectations,

relevant topics, and connection to school all contributed to sustain a learner's persistence.

A professional development project was designed from the findings to provide instructors

with research-based best practices and techniques to increase students' motivation and

persistence through active learning experiences in student-centered classrooms. The

project will impact social change by helping educators to have more insights on theories

about adult learning styles and a deeper understanding of current approaches to inspire

active participation, sustain learner motivation, and improve student academic

performance.

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Acknowledgments

It was an honor to have worked with all these great educators. I extend my deepest appreciation to Dr. Amy Booth, for the immense support, counsel, mentorship, and encouragement throughout the arduous research process. Thanks to Dr. John Johnson for the expertise and guidance. Thank you to Dr. Shereeza Mohammed and Dr. Lorrie Reed for the support and dedication. I also extend my gratitude to Dr. Karen Hunt for the valuable feedback. A special thanks to Dr. Amy White for the help rendered during the final stages of my research.

For the endless supply of inspiration and love, thanks to my amazing children Ronald, Nicole, Amanda, Lauren, Tiffany, Sera, and Afam. And to my entire family and friends, thank you all for cheering me on all the way. I could not have asked for a better team. I appreciate you all.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

In a competitive global economy, education has become even more vital for personal and national financial health (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The poverty rate is often higher among younger adults with no high school diploma when compared to their peers with additional postsecondary education (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). Other effects of poor education might include (a) less skilled workforce, (b) decreased tax revenues, (c) higher rates of crime and incarceration, and (d) increased reliance on welfare benefits (Bloom, 2010; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Finn, 2012; Lund, 2014; Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013).

In New York State, adults who do not possess a high school credential can attend, for free, any one of these programs including: "English as a second language (ESL), adult basic education (ABE), general education development (GED), credential and apprenticeship program, work-related courses, continuing professional education (CPE), higher education, and personal development courses" (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 10). However, student retention in the programs is a recurring problem and educators continue to explore ways to retain students once they enroll (Foster, Strawn, & Duke-Benfield, 2011; Petty & Thomas, 2014). ABE programs were initially designed for older, goal-orientated, and self-directed adult learners, but younger adults have recently been attracted to the program for various reasons, and that shift in the ages of enrolled students has become a challenge for adult education instructors (Horne, Rachal, & Shelley, 2012;

Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Perin, Flugman, & Spiegel, 2006; Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2012).

I focused my research on adult learners ages 18- to-21 years who are enrolled in classes to earn a high school equivalency (HSE) diploma and to gain job-readiness skills (Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010; Hossain & Terwelp, 2015). Many of these students, especially those with low basic skills, often drop out of the HSE courses before completion or before progressing from one level to the next (Foster et al., 2011). The instructors struggle with ways to support these adult learners' academic engagement, persistence, and retention in the program once enrolled (Davis, 2014; Garvey, 2011; Horne et al., 2012; Kerka, 1988; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2011). Sabatini, Shore, Holtzman, and Scarborough (2011) pointed out that poor student retention is a constant problem in ABE programs, with some experiencing an estimated 40% of students dropping out between the intake time into the program and the required 100 hours of instructional seat time. Student persistence and graduation rates impact the sustainability of adult education because administrators must maintain ongoing evidence of increased retention and strong student academic performance to meet annual federal funding guidelines and accountability measures (Foster et al., 2011; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013).

Adult learners sometimes face challenges that can impede their ability to complete learning program (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006; Hansman & Mott, 2010). Scholars highlight the importance of instructors having a better understanding of how and why adults learn (Knowles et al., 2005; Shaw, Conti, & Shaw, 2013). Because adults are

motivated to learn mostly to gain a new skill or for decision-making purposes, once an adult recognizes a need to learn something, that individual is typically capable of working diligently to achieve the desired goal. However, because most adult learning is a matter of choice, adults have the option of abandoning programs that fail to address their individual needs (Shaw et al., 2013), resulting in a high rate of student attrition in some programs.

Motivation, persistence, and the student's perceptions of the school environment impact retention and academic attainment (Petty & Thomas, 2014; Radovan & Makovec, 2015; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). It is imperative that ABE educators improve their awareness of the issues related to motivation and persistence to help increase and sustain retention rates of students. Instructors also need to (a) understand factors that impact adult learners' experience, (b) apply research-based techniques and targeted, practical strategies to improve student persistence, and (c) have a better understanding of ways to motivate adult students in a nontraditional school setting to enhance their engagement. My rationale for designing this qualitative study was influenced by the outlined needs and supported by the literature review of student persistence and attrition rates in ABE programs, the impact of curriculum and instructional practices, and the current trends in motivation and learning styles of adult learners.

In the following sections, I discuss the challenges of retaining students in an ABE program in a sizable northeastern urban community and explore probable reasons for the retention problem. I also present the study design and approach that I used to investigate the participants' perspectives on factors that impacted their motivation, persistence, and

learning experiences in the school for my research. I then use the study findings to design a professional development plan with research-based adult learning styles and best instructional practices that teachers can implement to improve student academic performance. By implementing the plan, educators can enhance their teaching methods by using strategies to improve existing curriculum and instructional practices to align with students' needs and interests. Through the effective implementation of the professional development plan, instructors can increase students' persistence and motivation to complete the courses and obtain an HSE diploma to participate in college and career options.

Definition of the Problem

The pursuit of an education is an expected and encouraged behavior in most nations. Younger adults who leave high school without acquiring a diploma tend to encounter a significant disadvantage and might experience a challenging transition into adulthood (Alfred & Guo, 2012; Kirk & Sampson, 2013; Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013). One national study included an estimate that over 3.5 million younger adults between 16 and 24 left high school before earning their credentials (Bloom, 2010; Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). Many of these dropouts only temporarily disconnect from education and eventually re-enter formal schooling by enrolling in ABE classes or other programs to earn an HSE diploma (Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010; Hossain & Terwelp, 2015). However, a high number of beginning adult learners who register in HSE preparatory classes leave the programs before finishing one educational level (Bean, 1989; Comings, 2007; Horne et al., 2012; Mellard et al., 2013). A primary

reason for some students' unsuccessful completion of the learning programs is persistence (Comings, 2007; Mellard et al., 2013).

Retention of students in ABE programs is an ongoing problem. Almost one in five students admitted in ABE classes are between 16 and 24 (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015). Instructors often struggle with meeting the unique interests of this population of students, some of whom are often overwhelmed with high academic challenges and personal adversities (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015; Treschan & Molnar, 2008; Wyckoff, Cooney, Djakovic, & McClanahan, 2008). Program leaders must maintain increased student academic performance and improved retention rates to meet federal funding guidelines and accountability measures for annual funding (Foster et al., 2011; Mellard et al., 2013; Sabatini et al., 2011). Title II of the Workforce Investment Act funded by Federal adult education earmarks an estimated $560 million annually to support essential skills instruction to undereducated adults (Foster et al., 2011).

I designed this qualitative study to explore students' views of individual learner's lived experiences and the perceived factors that promote students' motivation, academic persistence, and retention in an ABE program. Considering the importance of students' achievement and retention in adult education, I wanted to investigate the perceptions of students taking classes in an HSE program in a large northeastern city to understand the elements of individual and institutional practices they consider impactful in their motivation, persistence, and sustained engagement. It is vital that teachers employ research-based curriculum design and instructional techniques to enhance students' motivation and engage them in appropriate learning experiences. Instructors are able to

influence the academic persistence of adults looking to obtain an HSE diploma and gain essential academic and problem-solving skills necessary to be functional and competent in the workplace and higher institutions.

<div align="center">

Rationale

</div>

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

  Throughout this study, I use the pseudonym Gateway Adult Learning Program (GALP) to refer to the program that was the background for this research. GALP provides free academic and support services to students 17- to -21-years-old who have experienced some form of interrupted formal education to help them earn an HSE diploma and prepare for college and workforce options. GALP is located in a semi disadvantaged, low-income neighborhood in a large northeastern city with several other community-based programs that provide academic services to students of varied ages, including learners between 17 and 21 years of age. Therefore, maintaining high enrollment and student retention is an ongoing challenge for GALP leaders and instructors. However, by offering three functional levels of targeted instructional courses (literacy, pre-HSE, and HSE classes) and other nonacademic support and job-readiness skills, GALP is a unique program for younger adults who left high school early and under credited. GALP is part of a larger District for Alternative Schools and Programs, which for this research will be referred to as ABC District. Within ABC district, there are several programs designed for different student populations and all provide academic and wraparound services to students between 17 and 21 years old to help them earn an HSE diploma.

The district has six reengagement hubs called referral centers spread out in various sections of the city. All prospective students must go through one of the referral centers where each person can learn about the different program options and get connected to an appropriate setting, including traditional high school, based on the student's goals and circumstances. All students entering GALP for the first time or returning after a prolonged nonattendance must take a placement exam called Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) in literacy and numeracy to determine the student's academic functional level. Students who are reading at grade levels 0–5.9 take literacy level courses. Students on levels 6.0–8.9 are placed in pre-HSE classes whereas students on functioning on grades 9.0–12.9 levels take HSE classes (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015; McDaniel, Simms, Monson, & de Leon, 2014). Students placed in literacy level classes receive instruction in English Language Arts, math, and social studies, whereas pre-HSE and HSE students take five content area courses that are part of the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) exam.

Like in other ABE programs, GALP administrators have been experiencing recurring challenges with retaining students or maintaining high student attendance rates. According to GALP's internal annual program report card data from an ABC District Report in 2014, of the 2,145 students enrolled in the 2013-14 school year, the average daily enrollment was 776, the average daily attendance was 476, and the length of enrollment in instructional days (median) was 57. According to this same report, for the placement level and performance at intake, 43% of incoming students landed on the literacy levels, 27.4% at the pre-HSE levels, and 29.6% were HSE-level students.

Additionally, the program attendance rate among all students ($n = 1,886$) was 64.5%;

35.7% had an attendance rate of 70% or more whereas 23.2% had attendance rate of 80%

or more. Discharge outcomes for all students in 2013-14 school year indicated that at the

end of 2014 school year, the program had discharged approximately 1,367 students as a

result of graduation or long-term absence. In all, 393 students or 28.8% earned their HSE

diploma while 974 students or 71.3% dropped out of the program. Some students

disengage and reenter the GALP program several times before completing the

requirements for HSE diploma. Due to lack of classroom spaces in GALP building, most

of the pre-HSE and HSE classes are located in satellite sites that include community

centers, high school buildings, and community college campuses. Some sites are small

with minimal staff, including two instructors who teach all subjects, most of the time in

their nonlicensed areas.

Experts attribute student retention challenges in ABE programs to several factors

ranging from lack of a defined curriculum, mostly due to the rolling admission process, to

the transient nature of some of the students (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015; McDaniel et al.,

2014). The flexibility of the rolling admission means students can enter the program

anytime throughout the year and be placed in classrooms, most of the time with students

who have been in the classes for much longer. Scheduling might also impact students'

motivation, persistence, and retention rates because some students, when faced with

economic and daily family needs, would choose to go to work instead of attending

classes for any particular day (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006; Hansman & Mott, 2010).

The noncredit nature of the HSE courses might also be influencing the attrition rate of

students. Students in GALP program do not earn course credits toward their HSE diploma; instead, they receive instructions that primarily prepare them to pass the TABE tests and TASC exams, offered periodically. The teachers use TABE as a diagnostic and promotional testing tool, and the results measure a student's academic progress as the individual completes the required number of instructional hours or seat time and moves from one functional level to the next (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015).

Even though GALP administrators and instructors attempt to accommodate the students' schedules or on their time, some students still find it challenging due to school, work, and other commitments. These groups of students often have poor attendance and tend to disengage from the program before completion. The primary objective of this qualitative research was to investigate the perceived factors that students considered influential on their persistence and retention in ABE programs once they enroll.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Communities and the nation are greatly impacted by prevalent high school dropout rates, especially when a majority of those dropouts neither work nor attend school (Bloom, 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2006). Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012) argued that when young people do not make an appropriate transition from the educational system to the workforce, the adverse economic and social impacts affect not just the individual, but society as well. There are complicated reasons why younger adults might decide to leave traditional high school before obtaining a diploma. These might include academic challenges (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Horne et al., 2012), socioeconomic effects (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011), and poor academic self-concept and motivation (Khalkhali,

Sharifi, & Nikyar, 2013; Sikhwari, 2014). Other factors might include lack of school engagement (Bridgeland, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012), issues with the justice system (Kirk & Sampson, 2013), and a nonsupportive learning environment (Loera, Nakamoto, Oh, & Rueda, 2013; Lund, 2014). Additionally, a combination of individual and contextual factors can impact student dropout rate (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

Younger adults who abandon high school before graduating often reenter formal learning in ABE programs (Bloom et al., 2010; Davis, 2014; Hossain & Terwelp, 2015; McDaniel et.al, 2014). Nationwide, the influx of younger adults in ABE could be attributed to the "inclusion of 16-year-olds into adult education as specified in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act [Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA)]" (Davis, 2014, p. 63). ABE programs are both state and federally funded and instructors provide preparatory courses in necessary academic skills, GED/HSE test preparation, and classes in English as a second language. According to the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (2015), instructors in ABE programs "focus mostly on skills such as reading, writing, mathematics, English, language competency, basic computer skills, and problem-solving" (para 1). All the programs are available to adults over the age of 16 years, who are not in school, who have academic skills below the 12th-grade level, or who need help learning English (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2013).

Adult education encompasses various programs, but there is little agreement on what *adult education* is or what constitutes an *adult* (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). In discussions about adult learners and learning, there is no agreed meaning of *adult* because definitions vary depending on the funding and policy

guidelines (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). In the "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (WIA, 1998, Title II, Section 203)" adults are "individuals who have attained 16 years of age and who are not enrolled or required to enroll in secondary school under state law" (as cited in Davis, 2014, p. 63). According to Shaw et al. (2013), youth transitioning to adulthood exhibit more adult characteristics and the "major adult learning concepts that can be applied to them [the youth] are andragogy, self-directed learning, perspective transformation, real-life learning, learning-how-to-learn, and empowerment" (p. 36). Knowles et al. (2005) also provided four possible definitions of *adult* from biological, legal, social, and psychological perspectives. For instance, the authors stated that:

> Biologically, we become adults when we reach the age at which we can reproduce (i.e., early adolescence). Legally, we become adults when we reach the age at which the law says we can vote, get a driver's license, or marry without consent. Socially, we become adults when we start performing adult roles, such as the role of full-time worker, spouse, parent, or voting citizens. Psychologically, we become adults when we arrive at a self-concept of being responsible for our own lives, of being self-directing. (p. 64)

Experts suggest that adult learning can take place at any stage of adulthood development (Xie, Sen, & Foster, 2014). For statistical purposes as well as for policy and program grouping, youths are often categorized with both adolescents and older adults even though younger adults differ from both groups (Bonnie, Stroud, Breiner, 2015). Even with the lack of consensus on what constitutes an *adult*, it is essential for educators in adult education programs to understand how an adult's life circumstances and

experiences differ from that of a child and to be mindful of the implications those differences have for learning needs and styles (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

For instructional purposes in ABE programs, students are grouped into six academic functional levels with each approximating two K-12 levels (Sabatini et al., 2011). For instance, level one is equivalent to grades 1 and 2 whereas level six aligns approximately with grades 11 and 12 (Sabatini et al., 2011). As mentioned earlier, instructors use the TABE test scores to place the students in appropriate classes based on functional reading levels. Additionally, the TABE reading portion of the assessment is used to determine the functional reading and comprehension level as well as the grade equivalent of each new student (McDaniel et al., 2014). Every prospective student must take an initial TABE test to determine eligibility before registering the individual, and by the guidelines, the enrolled students must retake the TABE test after a minimum of 100 instructional hours or classroom seat time (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015). The structure of classes leading up to the TASC exam can last several months or years before completion. It might even take a longer time for the students who come into the program with very low functional literacy and numeracy skills. This prolonged stay can impact persistence as many students abandon the courses before completion or before they progress to the next level (Foster et al., 2011).

It is critical for instructors and administrators to be cognizant of the characteristics and learning styles of adult learners to meet their academic demands and provide support to help the students reach their goals (Cercone, 2008; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). Brown-Lerner and Brand (2006) pointed out the challenges of efficiently supporting learners

who dropped out from traditional education. For instance, the gap in time between disengagement and reengagement, learner's motivation and drive, and work-related sacrifices could impact a student's ability to complete the program (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006). Understanding who adult learners are and the contextual factors that promote their persistence in adult learning will help program administrators and educators support adult students' knowledge and increase their successful completion (Zhang & Zheng, 2013).

Most adult learners expect the instructors to be mindful of the students' desires and needs. Consequently, a majority of these students will often abandon their enrollment in programs if instructors do not address those needs, or if the teaching practices fail to meet the learners' standard of interest (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; Lindeman, 2011). Alhassan (2012) suggested that it is essential for leaders of adult education programs to periodically conduct some form of internal assessments to gauge the students' perceptions about their satisfaction with both the educational and program outcomes. When instructors understand who the students are and the institutional factors that promote each learner's motivation, persistence, and transformational learning, they are in a position to provide appropriate learning experiences and increase the students' chances of successful completion of the programs (Zhang & Zheng, 2013).

Definition of Terms

Some of the terms defined below were used often and interchangeably in this research study.

High school dropout: The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) referred to students as dropouts when they are neither engaged in formal schooling nor have obtained a high school diploma, a GED certificate, or a HSE diploma (Stark & Noel, 2015).

Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC): A "national high school equivalency assessment that assesses five subject areas including Reading, Writing, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. It measures examinees' levels of achievement relative to that of graduating high school seniors, as outlined by the College and Career Readiness standards" (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 2014, para. 1). In 2014, New York State adopted the TASC to replace the GED as the exam ABE students must take to obtain a HSE credential (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015).

Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE): "A tool designed to measure skills commonly found in adult basic education curricula. State and city agencies require administration of the TABE for students seeking entry into adult education and workforce development programs that receive government funding. The test includes a series of *locators* in three content areas (reading, language, and math) for use by programs that serve students at various levels of ability. The results of the locators determine which level of the TABE is used in each content area" (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015, p. 60).

Significance of the Study

Researchers have written on student retention and persistence in adult education for decades (Bean, 1989; Chapman et al., 2011; Comings, 2007; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Foster et al., 2011; Kerka, 1988; Sabatini et al., 2011; Wonacott, 2001).

Program leaders, through the central district, conduct annual quantitative data analyses of student and staff surveys to identify the impact of contextual factors such as engagement, high expectations, safety and respect, and support, which are available in the ABC District Report, 2014. However, I found limited qualitative studies with the students' perceptions about their lived experiences and the perceived institutional factors that impact their motivation, engagement, persistence, and successful completion of the HSE preparatory programs. When exploring students' perspectives on motivation and the quality of their learning environments, researchers need to incorporate the opinions of the learners in the evaluations of schools and student learning outcomes (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly, & Hall, 2009; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011; Zullig, Koopman, & Huebner, 2009). It is critical for educators to understand these learners' perspectives to plan better and implement targeted strategies to enhance students' retention, persistence, and increase their chances of successful completion.

Through this research, I examined the challenges of student persistence that affect retention and academic success of adult learners enrolled in HSE preparatory courses. I investigated the students' perceptions and beliefs about the individual and institutional elements that influence their persistence and retention in the classes.

My study findings highlighted several perceived individual, institutional, and social factors that motivate students to engage and remain in an HSE preparatory program long enough to earn a diploma. I used the participants' narratives of their experiences, research-based knowledge, and other best practices to shape the structure and contents of my project outcome. I designed a professional development (PD) plan to

offer the instructors some techniques and new approaches to involve the students in the

learning process in student-centered classrooms to improve desired outcomes for all

learners. The goal is to use the PD plan to enhance teachers' understanding of the

challenges experienced by adult learners through the perspectives of adult learning

theories, and to provide instructors current research-based techniques to motivate

students and improve curriculum and instructional practices. Through my research, I

addressed a local problem by recommending ways instructors can enhance curriculum

design and teaching methods to better support student learning and improve retention

rates.

Research Question(s)

I framed the research questions using the frameworks of Knowles's (1970)

assumptions about adult learners and Tinto's (1975) persistence theory. Knowles

suggested that adults are goal-oriented, self-directed, and driven to learn based on the

relevancy and applicability of the topics to accumulated life experiences. Tinto viewed

persistence as "not just the product of individual characteristics, prior experiences, or

prior commitments, but the outcome of interactions between the individual and the

institution" (Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 474). In my research, I explored the students'

perspectives about influential factors that sustain motivation, academic engagement,

persistence, and retention of students in ABE programs. I addressed these three questions

in this study:

1. What are the beginning adult student's perceptions about their engagement in
    the HSE preparatory classes?

2. What motivates the students in HSE classes to continue their enrollment in the program?

3. How do continuing adult students perceive the instructional practices applied in the HSE program, and how do such practices lead to student retention and learning success?

The data I gathered from this study provided me with insights on how instructors in ABE programs could support academic persistence and increase student achievements by using appropriate curriculum and instructional practices that incorporate the interests and expectations of adult students.

Review of the Literature

Historically, adult learners in the United States were a neglected segment of the academic population (Knowles et al., 2005) until a few decades into the twentieth century when the American Association for Adult Education was founded in 1926, bringing about two streams of inquiry into how adults learn. According to Knowles et al., in the *scientific stream,* adults seek to acquire new information through thorough investigative process whereas adult learning via the *artistic or intuitive/reflective stream* involves the learners constructing new meaning through instinct and by analyzing lived experiences (p. 37). Merriam and Brockett defined *adult education* as "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults" (as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 8).

Theoretical Framework

I used Knowles' (1970) theory of andragogy and Tinto's (1975) persistence

theory as the framework to guide this study. Knowles emphasized that adult learners:

- are inspired to partake in knowledge acquisitions if they see the need and
  value of what they are learning

- have acquired self-concept and self-direction that influence their decision-
  making

- have accumulated experiences that instructors could utilize as useful resources
  to support the learner fully

- want to learn if the topic applies to the real-life situations

- are goal-oriented and driven by an intrinsic motivation to learn

(Alhassan, 2012; Cercone, 2008; Knowles et al, 2005; Ozuah, 2016).

Tinto suggested that persistence is an outcome of combined factors such as personal

characteristics, prior experiences, ability to commit, and the relationships between the

learner and the institution (as cited in Petty & Thomas, 2014). Tinto also posited that

persistence happens when a learner effectively assimilates into the learning environment

both in academic and social aspects (as cited in Jenson, 2011). An individual's

"characteristics, goals, interactions with peers and faculty, and out-of-classroom factors"

can influence the person's ability to integrate into an academic setting (Jenson, 2011, p.

1). Other scholars defined *persistence* as adults remaining in a program for an extended

time, participating in self-directed study while disengaged in their classrooms and then

reengaging in schooling when life demands allow (Shaw, Tham, Hogle, & Koch, 2015).

Kerka (1998) described persistence as how long the learner attends class periods and absences might signal lack of persistence. On the other hand, Ponton, Derrick, and Carr considered persistence as the adult students' uninterrupted participation in a class, which means that persistence ends when the enrolled students decide to stop attending class sessions (as cited in Petty & Thomas, 2014). Tinto and Pusser (2006) stated that persistence could be a reflection of institutional practice.

Tinto's (1975) persistence theory has been used to study student retention or student persistence in higher institutions. However, during my research, I was unable to locate previous studies on student retention in pre-college or ABE programs in which the researchers applied Tinto's theory as a framework. Although various individual factors impact student learning and persistence, scholars of social-cognitive theory of motivation emphasize the relationship between a student's perceptions of the school community and his/her "motivation, interest, attitudes and confidence" (Radovan & Makovec, 2015, p. 101). The perspectives of persistence theorists support researchers' rationale for investigating learners in the contextual academic setting. The adult learners' work and living situations and the people around them can impact their academic persistence (Alhassan, 2012). Therefore, when teachers recognize the effects of learning environments on academic performance, it will provide an opportunity for better planning to improve adult learners' persistence (Alhassan, 2012).

Adult learning theorists support the assumptions that students who enroll in ABE programs have accumulated experiences, beliefs, goals, and aspirations (Greene, 2015; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Furthermore, experts on theoretical framework supported

the idea that knowledge construction is influenced by a learner's active participation, individual experiences, and sociocultural practices, and they suggested that instructors need to consider learner differences and prior experiences as valuable assets (Jonassen & Land, 2012; Patton & McMahon, 2014; Wilson & Peterson, 2006). Moreover, learning can be self-directed for goal-oriented learners, who, individually, are interested in learning about issues relevant to practical situations and are readily applicable (Alhassan, 2012; Knowles et al., 2005; Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007; Zhang & Zheng, 2013).

The extensive literature on the historical aspects of adult education has evolved mostly from Knowles' andragogy theory, which differentiates how adults learn from the way children learn (Knowles et al., 2005). Two instructional approaches, pedagogy and andragogy, feature prominently in the history of learning and schooling (Ozuah, 2016). *Pedagogy*, defined as "the art and science of teaching children," originated in Europe during the period of organized education popularized by what was known as cathedral schools (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 36). In the pedagogical model, the learning process is teacher-centered, and only the teacher decides what concepts students will learn as well as when and how they will learn them (Ozuah, 2016). The assumptions of the pedagogical model include:

- the student relies on the teacher for knowledge, implying that the learner is unaware of his or her own learning needs
- learning needs to be subject-centered and instructional curriculum needs to be designed around subjects

- extrinsic motivation is essential to knowledge acquisition, indicating that the learner is to be motivated by rewards and punishments

- Prior experiences of the learners were inconsequential (Ozuah, 2016).

Andragogy, referred to as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Cercone, 2008; Knowles et al., 2005), first emerged in 1833, with the term coined by a German scholar named Alexander Knapp (van Enckevort, as cited in Ozuah, 2016). Houle identified three key types of adult learners as "(1) goal-oriented learners who engage in education to meet specific personal or professional advancements or objectives, (2) activity-oriented learners who partake in learning for social contacts, and (3) learning-oriented learners who seek education as a way to satisfy their inquiring mind" (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005, p. 55). It is possible that a student might fit into all three categories.

The scholarly works I reviewed on adult learners were filled with theories of how and why adults learn as well as the influence of experiences and aspirations on adult learners. According to Merriam and Bierema (2013), learning theories offer explanations of how learning takes place and provide suggestions as to how educators and practitioners can transform those explanations into daily practice. For decades, five conventional learning theories—behaviorist, humanist, cognitivist, social cognitivist, and constructivist—have continued to impact adult education by providing a fundamental understanding of adult learning and by influencing approaches to teaching and learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Siemens (2014) pointed out that before the advancement of technology, behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism theories of learning influenced the design of instructional environments.

In the andragogical model, grounded on the humanistic theory of learning, experts emphasized the significant differences in the learning styles and needs of children and adults (Cercone, 2008; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).The view on adult learning principles was extensively written on by Lindeman, who suggested that instructors ought to approach adult education through situations and not subjects, with the curriculum designed to meet the students' needs and interests (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005). Influenced by Lindeman's writings, Knowles also encouraged instructors to be mindful of adults' learning styles and interests because a person's experiences and beliefs will impact how he or she will process or interpret new knowledge. Because an adult might be focused on seeking practical solutions to problems than just learning subjects (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), it is critical for adult educators to make coursework meaningful and applicable to students' real-life situations.

Most educational psychology scholars support the idea that learners construct their knowledge, not having it just transferred to them by their teachers (Siemens, 2014). Scholars define *learning* as "a persisting change in human performance or performance potential" often as an effect "of the learner's experience and interaction" with the global community (Siemens, 2014, p. 2). Because learners construct knowledge using experiences, prior knowledge, and ongoing social interaction and activation of background knowledge can "facilitate learning as it provides the interpretive framework through which new information is fitted into the patterns of the past" (Patton & McMahon, 2014, p. 303). Individual beliefs and previous experiences can also provide essential personal frameworks for new understanding (Jonassen & Land, 2012). For

example, a person's prior knowledge and experiences help to establish a frame of reference from which information is organized and adapted because learners' prior knowledge and beliefs can influence what they perceive and the meaning they infer (Jonassen & Land, 2012). Moreover, learning might entail "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation experience [as opposed to] absorbing and storing information in a cumulative way" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). This constructivist's perspective on the learning process shifts the traditional focus of power, responsibility, and control in the learning process from the teachers and towards the students (Kiraly, 2014).

Instructors can use the social constructivism approach to learning, the social-cognitive theory on motivation, and the idea of goal-oriented, self-directed learners to identify factors that influence adult learner persistence in ABE programs. Social constructivists emphasize, "(a) learning as a process of active engagement; (b) learning as an individual experience as well as a social phenomenon; and (c) learner differences as useful resources" (Wilson & Peterson, 2006, p. 1). This constructivists' approach to learning, embedded in Vygotsky's social constructivism, suggested that the learner's social context significantly influences learning (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). In constructivism theory, a learner's previous and current experiences impact new learning, and as such, support self-directed education through active learning techniques that assist learners in making meaning of those prior skills (Patton & McMahon, 2014).

Adult learning theorists emphasized the significance of adult learners' prior experiences and their ability to self-direct. Instructors need to be cognizant that adult

learners might benefit more from classroom environments that provide learning experiences that appeal to the student's sense of self-concept, autonomy, and their capacity to make effective decisions (Knowles et al., 2005; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). Dewey's viewpoint on adult education highlighted the significance of a learner's active participation in the knowledge acquisition and the recognition of learning as a continuous process (as cited in Alhassan, 2012). Adult learners come to school with varied learning styles and prior experiences that might have a positive or adverse effect on their subsequent successes in the school environment (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Lindeman suggested that the curriculum teachers design should highlight a difference in the learning styles of adults and young people (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005). For instance, in traditional education, younger students are expected to conform to the conventional curriculum, but for adults, the curriculum can be crafted based on the learners' interests and experiences (Knowles et al., 2005). Adult learners, equipped with prior experience, are often very pragmatic, self-directed, and are individually driven to learn relatable topics that are readily applicable to real situations (Alhassan, 2012; Knowles et al., 2014; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). As stated by Emerick-Brown (2013), adult learners possess a "plethora of background knowledge, experience, and personalities, making for an incredibly diverse population" and a wide range in the students' preferred learning styles (p. 128). Adult learners use background knowledge to "construct meaning" by connecting "what they already know to new ideas and experiences" (Hughes & Swab, as cited in Greene, 2015, p. 50). Therefore, it is important for instructors to be aware of students' background knowledge to avoid making any

assumption regarding students' prior knowledge (Greene, 2015). Furthermore, it is imperative for teachers to consider the varied learning styles when designing assignments because learning styles influence how individuals approach tasks.

Siemens (2014) suggested that teachers can integrate educational and work-related activities into the curriculum when possible because knowledge acquisition is a continual process spanning a person's lifetime. By being cognizant of how adult learners differ from young children, instructors can employ targeted support and techniques to assist students in ABE programs to increase the desired learning outcomes (Alhassan, 2012; Greene, 2015; Knowles et al., 2005; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). Loera et al. (2013) posited that students benefit when instructors successfully combine classroom learning with tangible work experience to provide urban youth with experience and exposure to real employment. In their case study on the emerging perspectives on adult learning, Conlan, Grabowski, and Smith (2003) argued that various theories can apply to adult education, and they suggest several factors that students bring to the educational environment.

Factors Influencing Adult Learners' Persistence and Retention

There are many challenges for the instructors, and the adult learners they serve, and those challenges can sometimes impede the learner's ability to complete the program (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006; Hansman & Mott, 2010). Caffarella and Merriam (2000) posited that individual and contextual perspectives on adult learning can provide better and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The authors also suggested that instructors should be aware of individual learners and how they learn as well as

understand how the learning environment impacts learners, instructors, and the learning process (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). In the theory of coherence, Stern explained the impact of the relationship between a person and his/her environment and described how the combined individual needs and institutional factors influence academic performance and student growth (as cited in Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Influential learning environments foster the growth of self-motivation and skills (Radovan & Makovec, 2015).

Individual Factors

Academic Performance and Struggle with Formal Learning

There are ongoing challenges of retaining enrolled adult learners or maintaining student persistence in ABE programs (Foster et al., 2011; Petty & Thomas, 2014). Even though students are provided with some advantages such as flexible scheduling and relatively smaller class sizes in ABE programs, some of these students may not be as effective in managing academic demands and struggle with academic pressures (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Many high school dropouts who return to schooling in ABE programs are significantly deficient in literacy and numeracy skills and do not qualify for most HSE classes, which are mostly designed for scholars with functional reading levels at or above eighth-grade (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015).

Adult learners returning to nontraditional schooling come equipped with personal knowledge, beliefs, sociocultural influences, goals, and aspirations (Greene, 2015). Those and many other factors, including the learner's background knowledge, familiarity with

various learning tools, numeracy and literacy language practices, social experiences, and self-awareness can impact an adult student's learning experience (Greene, 2015).

Vulnerable Youth and Transitions into Adulthood

Vulnerable youth can be defined as individuals who exhibit or have a history of psychological and behavioral issues, particularly in the learning environment and community at large (Xie et al., 2014). According to Howden and Meyer, "up to 10% of youth between 16 and 24—approximately four million youth nationwide—are vulnerable" [and they are mostly] "racial and ethnic minorities, come from low-income and unstable families, and have a higher risk of having poor academic performance and low employability" (as cited in Xie et al., 2014, p. 30). For these particular learners, instructors in ABE programs are important in motivating and preparing them for college and career options through appropriate and targeted interventions designed to meet their diverse, challenging needs (Davis, 2014; Murray & Mitchell, 2013; Xie et al., 2014).

Davis (2014) stressed the importance of adult educators recognizing how the effects of youth transitions to adulthood might impact programs, practices, and policies in a school community. Xie et al. (2014) pointed out that transitions into adulthood are critical stages that equip adolescents and young adults with physical, psychological, financial, and social experiences necessary for adult responsibilities. Arnett, Žukauskienė, and Sugimura (2014) discussed what it means to become an adult and identified some features that mark the passage to adulthood. For instance, the concepts of youths' maturity have shifted from focusing on milestones like younger adults leaving home to their slow realization of psychological indicators like becoming independent and

engaging in autonomous decision making (Arnett et al., 2014). Arnett et al. referred to these five characteristics as common during transition to adulthood: "identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities or optimism" (p. 570). Being more aware of adult learners' styles and motivation can prepare instructors better and assist them in designing targeted interventions to address these learners' unique needs (Xie et al., 2014).

Internal Motivation

According to Redding (2014) "motivation is attributed to extrinsic and intrinsic consequences of behavioral paths, such as the pursuit of a learning task" (p. 14). Educators often use external enticements such as test scores and rewards for academic performance to encourage a student's participation in the learning process; however, internal satisfaction of achieving desired objectives and a sense of independence are more enticing incentives for an individual to perform (Redding, 2014). Intrinsic motivation influences a student's persistence in academic endeavors, but successful completion can sometimes be hindered by environmental factors including challenges associated with program structure or class schedules (Alhassan, 2012; Emerick-Brown, 2013; Mellard et al., 2013; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Many ABE programs are short term, either as a result of funding restrictions or because of the staff's inability to maintain high retention of adult students over time (Wyckoff et al., 2008). Some ABE classes are structured in such a way that it can take some students months or years to complete the different levels before sitting for the required state exam to obtain the HSE diploma, and that lengthy process can impact learners' persistence in the programs (Foster et al., 2011).

Self-Directedness

Self-directed learning based on Knowles' theory of andragogy is the idea that students should take the primary responsibility and control of the learning process, especially as it pertains to goal-setting and evaluating learning outcomes (Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007). Lieb argued that because adult learners are more independent and self-directing, they could practice more independent learning whereas instructors, as facilitators, promote such effort by actively engaging the learners in the process (as cited in Cercone, 2008).

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Institutional Factors

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Learning Environment

There may be other factors impacting a student's persistence. For instance, the gap in time between disengagement and re-engagement in formal schooling, the learner's motivation and determination, as well as work-related demands can affect a student's ability to complete the program (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006). Additionally, adult learners must also deal with institutional impediments that might include the location of ABE programs, attendance, and reentry policies as well as the level of what is being taught (Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007).

The ethos of a learning environment can greatly impact a student's academic performance, behavior, and the culture of the school community (Allodi, 2010b; Chen, 2007; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; New York State Education Department, 2015). Allodi (2010a) suggested that a positive school environment conducive to learning is a place where all learners feel welcomed, valued, and supported

with essential resources for their learning. Learners who are encouraged to actively

participate and take ownership of their learning in a safe and nurturing academic setting

will consequently improve their academic performance (Allodi, 2010b; Cohen & Geier,

2010).

Sense of Belonging

Adults who dropped out of high school before completion can acquire essential

education and job-readiness skills through ABE programs (Murray & Mitchell, 2013).

Davis and Dupper (2004) recommended that educational leaders improve the

relationships between school staff and learners because one of the most influential

contextual factors that impact persistence is the quality of the interactions between

instructors and students. In addition to quality instruction, human connection is

fundamental in a school setting to encourage learners to take academic risks and improve

their self-concept in a supportive learning environment (Smith, Connolly, Pryseski, &

Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2014). Instructors are crucial in helping

younger adults to develop self-identity that will enable them to feel connected, healthy,

and participate in society as well as be able to sustain gainful employment (Wyn, 2014).

Fall and Roberts (2012) found that a learner's perception of the social context in

the form of teacher or mentor supports can impact the student's sense of connectedness

with the school environment. School connectedness means that students feel that staff

and peers in the learning community care about the students' education and them as

individuals (Cohen & Geier, 2010). A positive learning environment fosters a community

where each stakeholder is encouraged to share opinions and experiences without fear, and

where every member's opinion or point of view is valued and respected (Allodi, 2010a).

Students in a positive school community will have increased ability to learn because such

classroom environments will promote cooperative learning activities, leverage group

dynamics, and encourage all learners to exhibit mutual respect and trust for each other

(Cohen & Geier, 2010).

Instructor's Role in Student Engagement and Persistence

Many factors, particularly the level and quality of relationships between faculty

and the learners, as well as the varied events taking place in schools, can influence

favorable learning conditions and actions (Allodi, 2010b). The quantity, quality, and the

directions of these relationships will greatly influence the learner's self-concept,

motivation, and performance (Allodi, 2010b; Loera et al., 2013). Educators can create a

school culture that promotes interpersonal relationships, peer collaborations, learner-

teacher interactions, and teachers' supportive behaviors toward students (Allodi, 2010b).

Instructors' mentorship promotes student engagement and can significantly impact a

student's personal, academic, and social-emotional development. Consequently, students

with minimal strong connections with teachers are more likely to abandon school and

postsecondary planning (Loera et al., 2013). Therefore, it is essential that staff and

students perceive themselves as an integral part of the school community because an

increased sense of safety and connectedness will influence individual motivation and

enhance student learning outcomes (Cohen & Geier, 2010).

For some students, positive interactions with staff in a learning community school

can make a big difference (Lumby, 2013). Instructors sometimes focus more on the

demands of accountability measures, the heavy emphasis on student data, and on helping

students in pass the TASC exams. Consequently, school leaders and faculty might

inadvertently be focusing less on creating a conducive learning environment where

human connections and quality relationships between instructors and students and among

students are valued (Allodi, 2010a; Smith et al., 2014). According to Allodi (2010b), it is

imperative that school staff support the fundamental social and emotional needs of the

students by creating a classroom atmosphere where each learner can freely share opinions

and experiences and feel that his or her contributions and viewpoints are appreciated and

valued. By fostering such safe and nurturing positive settings, teachers will increase each

student's sense of inclusion, promote active involvement in the learning process, and

impact academic performance (Cohen & Geier, 2010).

Culturally Relevant Education

According to Drayton (2014), researchers of adult learners tend to focus primarily

on characteristics, motivations, and barriers to adult learning, and the application of adult

development theory to drive school and curricular enhancements. However, there has not

been a thorough exploration of how culture and motivation, and the challenges of

transition to adulthood impact learners in ABE programs (Drayton, 2014). Drayton stated

that culture can influence the way students view their experiences or relate to others as

well as the choices they make. So, in a classroom setting, culture can affect learner

expectations and how each individual engages in the learning process, including the

delivery of contents (Drayton, 2014). The author cautioned that school leaders and

educators must be mindful of the diversity in the demographics when attempting to

implement educational changes. Hawley and Nieto (2010) also posited that race and ethnicity are influential on teaching and learning because they both can impact how learners respond to instruction and curriculum as well as the instructors' "assumptions about how students learn and how much students can learn" (p. 66).

Transformational Learning

Students who enroll in ABE programs come from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds with different levels of English language skills, prior knowledge foundations, and accumulated experiences (Petty & Thomas, 2014). Educators can provide transformative learning that incorporates relevant topics representative of students' skills and present the concepts in a way that students can make direct connections to their daily life activities (Galanaki & Vassilopoulou, 2007; Gom, 2009; Kefallinou, 2009; Petty & Thomas, 2014). According to Tagg (2003), learning will take place when the challenges and supports are aligned. Adult students are more likely to persist when instructors provide high quality instruction and learners can monitor their progress (Comings & Cuban, 2007).

Transformative learning is at the core of adult education because it helps a student "to become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Alhassan (2012) suggested that critical reflection is vital to transformational and self-directed learning and if development is the product of transformational learning, then ABE instructors need to consider the students' personal development when designing learning experiences.

Curriculum and Technology

In the last two decades, with the evolving technological advances, people have reshaped how they live, communicate, and learn; and as a result, learning principles and processes should reflect the essential social environments (Siemens, 2014). The use of technology now influences how adults learn and teachers in ABE programs need to integrate technology into both the curriculum design and its implementation. Younger adults are equipped with attributes such as their "familiarity with technology, optimism, ability to multitask, diversity, and acceptance of authority" (Bennet & Bell, as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 4). Some youth who disengage from formal schooling perceived their inability to perform academically to be not as a result of their academic incompetence, but of a curriculum and teaching that was unsuitable to them (Lumby, 2013). According to Emerick-Brown (2013), ensuring purpose in the curricula through *multiple intelligences and purpose-based learning* (p. 128) can help to make learning relevant to the students' lives.

Implications

It is imperative that practitioners conduct frequent qualitative assessments to have a deeper awareness of the learners' perceived experiences and other institutional factors that support transformational learning, increase persistence, and enhance academic performance for adults in ABE programs. Understanding more about the personal and environmental factors that are impactful on the student academic experience and persistence will assist educators, administrators, curriculum leaders, and other stakeholders as they explore ways to increase desired learning outcomes and improve

student academic achievement. A student would most likely remain in a program and earn a diploma in a school environment with teachers who meet the students' needs and interests as well as promotes care, sense of belonging, and high expectations (Linder, Cooper, McKenzie, Raesch, & Reeve, 2014). Educators cannot control how the broader socioeconomic and cultural experiences will impact the lives of the students. However, instructors are in a position to enhance learning experiences by using effective instructional practices and appropriate curriculum to support the students' needs and learning styles (McGregor & Mills, 2012).

Literature Review Search Terms

The literature reviewed included peer-reviewed articles and scholarly works from sites such as Academic Search Complete, EBSCO, ERIC, ProQuest, Educational Database, SAGE Collections, Walden University Database and Library, and national databases. For the selection criteria, I identified appropriate articles using search terms such as *adult learner, high school dropout, adult basic education, learning theories, learning models, motivation, student retention, and persistence*. I also reviewed books and scholarly works on the conceptual framework of adult learning and theories as well as dispositional, situational, and institutional factors that impact student engagement, persistence, and retention.

Summary

Educators' quest to understand how students learn best have resulted in extensive research studies and immense resources in learning style inventories and tools (Cercone, 2008). No singular adult learning theory is exclusive to adult education; therefore, being

familiar with various learning theories might assist educators in better understanding their

students and in creating more meaningful learning opportunities for diverse learners

(Frey & Alman, 2003). Instructors who are aware of the diversity in learning styles can

better foster a student-centered method of teaching and support to motivate all learners

(Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004).

Nationally and locally, educators are witnessing increased number of younger

adults entering ABE programs, and recognizing the importance of improving academic

achievements for all learners. To better support the diverse student population in HSE

classes, it is critical that program leaders and instructors find innovative ways to engage

and retain enrolled students. There are many challenges for instructors because the adult

learners they serve may have factors outside of their control that can sometimes impede

the learner's ability to complete of the program (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006; Hansman

& Mott, 2010). Experts suggested that learners, especially younger adults, still need and

will benefit from institutional and environmental support to persist to completion of the

program (Alhassan, 2012; Emerick-Brown, 2013; Petty & Thomas, 2014).

In general, more adults in the United States are opting to further their schooling

because of the positive impact more education will have on their social and economic

prospects in life (Bonnie et al., 2015). ABE instructors provide a crucial step and

pathway for lower skilled adults and youth to advance into higher institutions and

improve their chances in the labor market. It is more difficult for individuals with

minimal educational qualifications to compete in the labor markets (Foster et al., 2011).

The data from my qualitative case study is insightful in identifying students' perceived personal and school based factors that influence learner motivation, persistence, and improve academic achievement in an ABE program. In this research, I further highlight how the use of andragogical approach, combined with socio constructivist and transformational learning techniques, can enhance adult learners' motivation, persistence, and improve desired learning outcomes for students in ABE programs.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

I conducted a case study to investigate adult learners' perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and opinions about the individual and institutional factors that influence students' persistence and retention in a nontraditional learning environment. I opted for a case study approach as an inquiry method that can be used to collect data via informal and formal interview protocols, a focus group, archived documents, and observational field notes (Creswell, 2007). According to Merriam (2009), a qualitative method can help a researcher to investigate a problem and understand better the lived experiences from the perspectives of the respondents.

My three research questions include:

1. What are the beginning adult student's perceptions about their engagement in the HSE preparatory classes?

2. What motivates students in HSE classes to continue their enrollment in the programs?

3. What do continuing adult learners think of the instructional practices in the HSE program, and how do such practices lead to student retention and learning success?

To help me investigate the questions, I first wanted to gain insights into the students' opinions, thoughts, and perceptions about what influenced them to enroll in the program. Then I examined the perceived factors that inspired students to remain in the program as well as their opinions on how instructional practices impacted their learning and their

retention. Because individual, social, and institutional factors can impact an adult

learner's persistence, my primary objective for this research was to help me better

understand the factors students perceived to be influential in their persistence in an ABE

program.

Research Design and Approach

Through my study, I aimed to gain deeper insights into the issues of low student

retention and to learn more about students' perceptions about factors that influence

persistence. Even though there are various types of qualitative research designs, I opted

for a case study methodology because my topic was problem-based, and through this

method, I can explore the problem through cases within a bounded system (Creswell,

2007; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Using a case study approach helped me to

understand the complex relationships between the factors in a particular learning

community (Denscombe, 2014).

Unlike in a quantitative study, a qualitative researcher does not have to start with

a hypothesis or assumed outcome but rather poses questions that will largely help to

discover the perceptions of a person, a group, or diverse groups (Agee, 2009). I had

considered using a quantitative methodology via survey design, but the anticipated data

would have been insufficient to yield meaningful, in-depth descriptions of the

phenomenon related to adult learners' persistence. Additionally, the administrators of the

program under study conduct annual several quantitative data analyses of student and

staff in the district. The quantitative survey questions they design focus on the impact of

contextual factors such as engagement, high expectations, safety and respect, and

support. I did not find any qualitative study where researchers had explored the students'

perceptions of their experiences or the perceived individual, social, and institutional

factors impacting learner persistence and retention in the HSE classes. In assessments of

schools and student learning outcomes, it is important for researchers to incorporate

learners' opinions when examining students' perspectives on motivation and the quality

of their learning environments (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly, & Hall, 2009; Zullig,

Huebner, & Patton, 2011; Zullig, Koopman, & Huebner, 2009).

The reason for this research was to examine and describe the issues related to

persistence and retention of students in ABE programs. As a result, I settled on a case

study approach as the best methodology to investigate students' thoughts, opinions,

beliefs, and perceptions about the topic. I used open-ended questions (see Appendix F)

and semi structured interviews for data collection.

Participants

I used a purposeful sampling methodology to select 10 students currently or

formerly enrolled in three separate program sites affiliated with GALP. As previously

explained, GALP is an ABE program with free academic and wraparound support

services for students 17- to 21-years-old who have experienced some form of interruption

in their formal education. The instructors help the students to earn an HSE certificate

while preparing for college and career options. Beginning and continuing students from

all three functioning levels of the program (literacy, pre-HSE, and HSE) were sought out

for participation in this study. I used pre-established criteria to select key participants

from the sampling pool and later scheduled individual interviews with the eligible

students who responded. I opted to use a purposeful sampling technique because of the minimal number of participants needed for the study. A representative group from the program community was sufficient as my study findings were not generalized to a more extensive population for external validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Moreover, random sampling technique would not have been appropriate because my study was focused on a particular ABE program.

Sampling Size and Rationale

There is no agreement between scholars and qualitative research experts as to what constitutes an adequate sample size in a qualitative study. According to Wolcott, a pioneer in the field of qualitative research, "in many qualitative studies, one respondent is all you need . . . [though] the old 4 rule seems to hold that you keep asking as long as you are getting different answers" (as cited in Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 4). Other experts suggest that qualitative scholars can choose a few cases from 1–40 because selecting a larger number of cases might present a challenge for the researcher, particularly with data management and analysis (Creswell, 2012).

Most qualitative study experts suggest data saturation as a significant factor to consider when choosing sample size (Dworkin, 2012). Saturation means the researcher has reached a point at which the data gathering exercise does not yield any new or pertinent information (Dworkin, 2012). Baker and Edwards (2012) added that in a qualitative approach, researchers often choose fewer participants to be able to dig deeper into the lives and experiences of the individuals, context, subgroups, and actions to better understand their perceptions, reflections, social roles, interactions, and interpretations.

Although most scholars cannot agree on the sample size in a qualitative research, experts suggested a number between 5 to 50 participants as sufficient (Dworkin, 2012). Consequently, I selected 10 participants for my study because I concluded the sample size was adequate to yield enough data to saturate the topic and establish patterns or themes during data analysis.

Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants

I took all proper steps to inform all stakeholders about the study to ensure transparency and clarity before establishing contact with the participants via e-mails and phone calls. Creswell (2009) stressed the need for a researcher to gain access to a research site by first obtaining the approval of persons at the research site who will be responsible for providing access to and sanctioning the research study to be conducted at the setting. I initially contacted the administrator of the program via e-mail to give a brief explanation of my research and later obtained a letter of cooperation from the administrator as required by Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I obtained the IRB approval to proceed with the study (approval # 0228170404423), I reached out again to the program administrator to arrange for a system of gaining access to the eligible participant pool for the study. A point person was assigned to me to facilitate the process.

The participant pool comprised of literacy-level, pre-HSE, and HSE students currently enrolled and had completed at least 40 instructional hours at the time of data collection, and a few former students who had graduated with an HSE diploma. Additional eligibility criteria required that participants be at least 18 years of age. I

worked closely with the staff designee who provided me with a list of possible candidates who meet my sampling criteria. The list also contained names of students who had completed 40 or more hours of instruction but had not completed the program due to chronic absences or low attendance rate. Because low student retention was prevalent in some of the service delivery settings that are offshoots of GALP, I selected study participants from classes in three different sites affiliated with the program.

Ethical Considerations

For this research, I observed all ethical guidelines for research standards as set forth by the IRB to ensure maximum protection of the research participants (Walden University, 2015). As a requirement, I completed a training course on protecting human research participants. Before data collection, I shared all pertinent information about my research—the purpose, nature, and scope of the study, and the data gathering process—with the program supervisor and the participants. I also informed all respondents ahead of time that taking part in the study was voluntary and they can end their participation at any time. I maintained the privacy of participants and ensured confidentiality by making sure that all the data gathered were secured throughout the research process. I safeguarded the names of all participants to ensure anonymity throughout the study, and each person was assigned a letter as in Participant A, B, C, and so on. Additionally, the information gathered through the interviews was secured in a locked file cabinet until it was time for data analysis. All identifying information about the participants, the program site, and the district have been removed entirely or given a pseudonym in this study.

Data Collection

For data gathering, I used one-on-one, semi structured interviews to investigate

the students' motivation for enrolling in the HSE classes and the perceived factors that

influenced them to remain in the program. Once I received the list of names from the

point person, I contacted the participants via telephone calls because I did not have access

to students' e-mail addresses. During the initial phone calls, I was able to provide each

possible candidate some background information about the study and what it entailed,

including the reason for the study, who was involved, what data will be collected, and

how their privacy will be safeguarded. Students who expressed interest in participating

gave me their e-mail addresses for the invitational e-mail. I then e-mailed each person an

electronic version of the consent form, which explained in greater detail the nature and

scope of the study as well as why and how the pool of participants was selected. Each

respondent reviewed the information included and electronically indicated consent before

the data gathering session. A paper version of the participant consent form was also

available as an option for participants. Because I did not invite students less than 18

years-old to participate in the research, there was no need to solicit or obtain parental

consent.

Initially, I did not get an adequate response from the e-mails, but I continued to

reach out to other students on the list until I got a sufficient number of participants. I was

unable to get participants from the pool of students who had completed 40 or more hours

of instruction but had not completed the program due to chronic absences or low

attendance rate. After a lengthy outreach, only participants from two separate program

sites made the final list. Only one graduate from the program volunteered to participate in the research. Altogether, I interviewed 10 students for this study, with each session scheduled around the participant's time of availability to accommodate their work and school schedules.

For each interview session, my data collection process included some pre-interview discussions with participants to share information about the study and to address any concerns they might have about confidentiality and privacy matters. Each interview, lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, was done in a quiet section of a mutually agreed upon place, which was mostly the public library. Being in this private setting minimized distraction and helped the participants to feel at ease speaking with me. The individual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, enabling respondents to discuss their responses on the topic as freely and honestly as possible (Creswell, 2012). I used prepared interview questions (see Appendix F) to guide the data collection.

With each respondent's consent, I audio recorded the interview sessions, which helped to catch the conversations with accuracy and minimal distraction from taking notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The use of an audio recording device to record the interviews also helped me to review participants' responses to the questions during the transcription process. I labeled the recordings and the data by the letters assigned to each participant for later use during the data analysis and discussion of study results. The audio recording device remained in a secured drawer except during the transcription process. Even though the interview was tape recorded, I took some notes that helped me to track information and to formulate follow up or clarifying questions based on the

participant's responses. To facilitate data gathering, I transcribed the recorded interviews within 24 hours of each session.

As part of the data gathering process, I created a Word document to track each participant's information such as the title of each audio recording, date, and place of data collection, and the letter assigned to the participant. The use of the document helped me with the organization of data for reference during data analysis. I secured the information collected on each participant in a separate folder labeled with each person's assigned letter. There were no follow-up interviews.

Role of the Researcher: Instrumentation Concerns

For a qualitative methodology, the researcher's role of primary data collection tool (Chenail, 2011; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Merriam, 2009) presents a challenge in ensuring rigorous instrument and managing researcher bias (Chenail, 2011), especially during the interview protocols. In this study, there was a potential source of researcher bias as a result of my role as a former instructor in one of the sites affiliated with the program that served as the study setting. No participants were recruited from my former program site. Additionally, I employed the important technique of bracketing my own experiences to ensure that they did not influence the respondents' experiences of the issue (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). Bracketing, in a qualitative study, allows a researcher to intentionally set aside personal beliefs and prior knowledge about the topic or phenomenon he or she is investigating before and throughout the data gathering process (Chan et al., 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Experts cautioned that, because of a possible relationship that might exist or develop between a researcher and the topic of

study, it is imperative that a researcher uses bracketing to ensure instrumentation rigor in the research (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Moustakas (1994) also suggested researchers use the epoche process to manage prior experiences and knowledge about the phenomenon or topic of the study. According to Moustakas, the epoche process entails setting aside presumptions, prejudices, and preconceptions about topics to effectively minimize the influence of the researcher's thoughts and prejudgments on the research topic.

My primary objective for this research was to discover as much about the participants and their circumstances as possible, and therefore, trustworthiness and data management were crucial. As a researcher, I exercised caution as well as set aside my beliefs, values, and experiences to ensure rigor during collection, presentation, and interpretation of data (Chan et al., 2013; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; White, Oelke, & Friesen, 2012).

Establishing Credibility

For a researcher to strengthen credibility in a qualitative study, Creswell (2012) recommended various strategies such as data triangulation and the use of an expert as a means of validating results from data analysis. Lodico et al. (2010) equated credibility to the ability of the researcher's methods in providing precise and in depth depictions of the participants' experiences. The authors suggested that to enhance credibility, a researcher should engage in meaningful discourse with the participants, use interview questions to probe the participants' experiences, and endeavor to present an accurate description of participants' accounts in the narratives. Because a researcher's thoughts could influence

the interpretation of qualitative data, Lodico et al. (2010) recommended that qualitative

researchers continue to examine their thoughts and feelings for the duration of the study.

As soon as I completed each interview session, I wrote down my thoughts and

other pertinent notes that proved useful during the coding of the data. The recordings

helped me reflect on the information gathered from the interviews and were notes used

during the coding process. Once my data analysis was concluded, I conducted a peer

review as a way of validating the results of the data analysis. An experienced educator

and researcher reviewed the data and findings and gave me scholarly feedback. The peer

reviewer, upon the completion of the review process, concurred with my results and the

subsequent conclusions.

Data Analysis Results

Even though I employed an inductive approach for the data analysis, I kept an

open mind throughout the process to enable me to discover the key themes that developed

from the participants' answers. As stated earlier, I interviewed 10 participants (see Table

1) and transcribed the recorded interviews within 24 hours of each session. Later, I

checked for errors by listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts.

Because this was a qualitative study with an interview as the principal mode of data

collection, a software program for data analysis was not necessary. The data were

analyzed using open coding during which I reviewed the transcripts and the notes written

during and after the individual interviews.

During the coding, I reviewed and highlighted the information from the interview

transcription to identify ideas from the respondents' answers that aligned with the

research questions. I then read the transcription thematically to see how participants described their experiences or responded to the various questions. I entered the concepts, as themes, in a spreadsheet and wrote quotes from the respondents to help me with further comparative analysis of the data.

Table 1

Demographics of Interviewees

Interviewee Code	Gender	Age
P- A	M	20
P- B	M	18
P- C	F	20
P- D	F	20
P- E	F	18
P- F	M	19
P- G	M	20
P- H	F	19
P- I	F	18
P- J	F	18

The collected data was later analyzed using a combination of Knowles' theory of andragogy and Tinto's persistence theory as the guiding framework for my research. I also examined the data using research-based information on factors that impact student retention (see Table 2). During my research, I investigated, from each student's perspectives, the reasons for enrolling in HSE classes, what motivated them to continue in the program, and their opinions about the instructional practices they have experienced

in their classrooms. The interview questions (see Appendix F) were framed to elicit responses that addressed the three research questions.

For the first research question, "What are the beginning adult student's perceptions about their engagement in the HSE preparatory classes?" I sought to understand the students' perceptions about their engagement in the HSE preparatory classes. The interview questions related to that concept allowed the participants to share how and why they chose to enroll in the program, their opinions about their engagement in the program, the types of available activities within the program, and whether or not each student had participated in any of the events.

Table 2

Factors Influencing Student Retention

Factors Influencing Retention*	Examples
Individual Level	
Academic Performance	High school GPA and academic performance, course load, academic self-discipline
Attitudes and Satisfaction	Positive attitude about academics, commitment to education, sense of belonging and social connectedness
Institutional Level	
Academic Engagement	Academic or school-related activities, school size, opportunities to participate in social or cultural activities
Social and External Level	
Social and Family Support	Faculty and staff support, family support, conducive learning environment, sense of belonging and community, sense of importance

Note. *As cited in Jenson, 2011, p. 2

The second research question, "What motivates the students in HSE classes to continue their enrollment in the program?" helped me to identify what motivated the students to continue their enrollment in the program and whether each participant's

motivation was mostly driven by individual, social, or institutional context. By investigating factors that motivated respondents to remain in the program, I was able to listen to their opinions and thoughts on the reasons why they chose to stay the course even when some of them shared that they had friends who had abandoned the program before completion. I also used a set of interview questions with focus on the participants' perceptions about factors they perceive to influence their motivation to persist in the program (see Appendix F).

The third research question was, "How do continuing adult students perceive the instructional practices applied in the HSE program, and how do such practices lead to student retention and learning success?" This question focused on the perceptions of students about the instructional practices used in the HSE preparatory courses and how such practices influence learning outcomes and student retention. I wanted to understand the students' perceptions of the learning process or teaching strategies they have experienced in their various classes, and what impact, if any, those experiences had on each student's retention or perceived success in the program.

Research Findings

The data collected highlighted the participants' perceived influence of individual, social, and school based factors on their persistence. Participants' responses underscored the importance of self-directedness, individual goal and drive, and familial support, as well as the instructor's role and the classroom environment on their engagement and persistence. The data indicated two central themes that participants considered important in influencing their tenacity in the learning – individual and institutional levels. Under the

theme of personal level are the concepts of self-directedness and self-motivation. Within

the theme of institutional context, academic engagement, specifically encouragement and

high expectations from teachers or staff mattered most to the participants.

Individual Factors

Self-Directedness and self-motivation

Self-directed learning based on Knowles' andragogy is the idea that students

should take the primary responsibility and control of their learning, especially in the area

of goal-setting (Knowles et al., 2005). According to the data obtained from the

interviews, most of the students stated that their individual drive to succeed was

fundamental to their persistence. Many of the participants cited intrinsic motivation as

one of the main factors why they enrolled in the program and have remained or continued

to attend classes even with some academic and personal challenges. Redding (2014)

suggested that a student could be motivated to learn based on the individual's mindset,

which the author described as a "person's attitudes, beliefs, and disposition relative to

particular realms of activity in life" (p. 16).

Participant A (P-A) shared that he was self-motivated enough to push himself to

stay the course. He explained that he had a friend in the same program who had confided

in him about her plans to stop attending classes. Even though he tried to talk his friend

out of dropping out, she eventually abandoned the program due to demands on her time

and family responsibilities. According to P-A,

> I wish my friend didn't have to drop out, but I can't make her do what she doesn't
>
> want to do. I know we all have to do what we need to do to survive in this

country. That's why I am committed to finishing the program because I feel GED

is a necessity. It's a gateway to college, and I must earn it to be able to pursue my

dream of getting a degree in computer science.

That sentiment was echoed by Participant H (P-H) who stated,

Everybody has a reason for coming to this program, but only the serious students

will stay. For me, self-motivation is very important because even if your family or

the teachers are encouraging you to come to school, if you are not motivated, you

are not going to come.

Learners' initial motivation might prove fleeting as they experience an increased level of

difficulty in academic work coupled with other challenges associated with family, work,

or financial demands. P-H also shared that after she joined the program, she has noticed

that several of her classmates have stopped coming to school. According to P-H,

Some students come when they have the time or when they want to. I know one

person who left the program because she said it was not for her anymore. I don't

believe she made the right choice, but it's her choice. I am determined to get my

GED diploma because no college will accept me without the diploma.

Motivation is being willing to start and continue the effort towards accomplishing an

objective, but persistence is the element that fosters and sustains such effort as motivation

begins to wane (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). Petty (2014) explained that very often, adult

learners eagerly enroll in a program highly motivated and with the intention to persist

until completion, but along the way, a student might experience barriers that diminishes

that motivation. However, most people are resilient in accomplishing a set goal and that

often sustains the individual drive to persist in overcoming any impediment to achieving personal goals (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013).

P-H stated that some of her friends are already in college and they have good things to say about their college experiences. P-H, a soft-spoken young woman, was working as a part-time cashier and attending school at the same time. She said she was doing well in school but wished she did not have to work so she can attend classes regularly, devote more time to her studies, and complete the program promptly. P-H also shared that she had taken the practice TASC exam and was waiting for results. She was very hopeful that she will sit for the actual TASC exam in the near future.

Attitudes and Satisfaction

P-A liked the atmosphere of the school community and has a few friends in the program. He believed it was necessary for students to socialize and support each other and he stated that the staff members in the program provide an opportunity for students to do so. However, he also felt that some of his peers "socialize too much" and that it was affecting their school work. Participant E (P-E) stated that she has a positive attitude about the school and was proud of herself for returning to school after the birth of her son. She reported that the support from the teachers and other staff members has helped her to remain in the program. "The teachers are so understanding; they know that we have our lives outside the school and they try to accommodate that," she added.

Participant G (P-G), almost 21 years of age, stated that he was very committed to schooling and will continue until he has earned his HSE diploma - even if it meant attending a different adult education program when he turns 21 and "ages out" of GALP.

So far, P-G has been doing well in all his classes; he has taken the TASC Readiness Test and was waiting for the results. As of the time of the interview, he was hopeful that he would take the actual TASC exam within a few months. He confessed that he was struggling with the writing portion of the test but appeared to be highly motivated and self-driven. P-G, working full time in the pharmacy department at a renowned chain store, shared that his ultimate goal was to become a pharmacist. GALP's flexible scheduling allowed P-G to work full time to support his family and himself.

<div align="center">**Institutional Factors**</div>

Instructor's Role in Student Engagement and Persistence

On the school level, many participants indicated that the frequent encouragement they received from some of their classroom teachers or support staff helped to keep them motivated or to want to do more work in class. According to Kafele (2013), an instructor's attitude towards the students matters so much because learners who are experiencing challenges and obstacles in their personal lives do not need educators to feel sorry for them; rather they need educators' "inspiration and encouragement to change their realities for the better" and teachers must continue to hold those students "accountable for nothing less than excellence" (p. 15). As Participant D (P-D) shared,

> My teachers motivate me a lot to stay in the program. They are always
> encouraging me to work hard to get my diploma. Because English is not my first
> language, they first placed me in ESL class, and the teachers took their time to
> explain things to us. I had to work extra hard to understand what the teachers were
> saying. At first, I struggled in trying to learn how to read and write in English, but

with the teachers always encouraging me, I did not give up, and now my English

has improved a lot.

A positive relationship between instructor and student impacts a learner's academic

achievement and school connectedness (Harlow & Olson, 2016; Hoffman, 2014; Pianta,

Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Several respondents reported that just by them knowing that the

teachers believed in their (students) ability to perform academically motivated the

students to believe that they can complete the program and earn a diploma. Seven out of

the 10 participants cited teachers' encouraging words as having motivated them to keep

coming to class.

As a result of the transient nature of adult learners, students could drop out or stop

out, or just exit and return to classes at any point in time (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014).

Some participants in my study suggested that teachers can promote student persistence by

conducting outreach to students who stopped attending classes and by encouraging

struggling students to overcome any and all obstacles and remain in the program until

completion. Participant B (P-B) expressed that the instructors were not doing enough to

support struggling students. He recommended that instructors should place follow-up

calls to students with poor attendance "to see what's wrong." P-B also suggested that the

staff should do more to "support students who might be dealing with peer pressure,

difficult home life, students with children, and undocumented students."

Motivation to Learn influenced by Relevancy

All the students interviewed discussed some level of academic engagement as a

recurring theme. Most participants suggested that instructors play a huge part in helping

students to remain engaged in the program. Adult learners expect their teachers to understand students' interests and needs, and a great number of students tend to disengage from educational programs if the teaching practices fail to meet the learners' interests and needs (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; Lindeman, 2011). Wiles (2009) encouraged teachers to be mindful when designing curriculum to ensure that it was purposeful and well defined with activities that shape the student learning experience. Participant C (P-C) posited that "teachers need to do more" to ensure that enrolled students do not drop out from the program. When I questioned further about the specific actions teachers can do to keep students in the program, the respondent suggested, "…they need to teach us all the subjects that we are actually going to take a test in instead of just reading and math; reading is important, but what about other subjects on the TASC exam?" P-B had echoed similar concern,

> Teachers should do more teaching instead of just giving us handouts and expecting us to learn the materials on our own. Maybe some students can do the papers on their own, but not everybody can learn like that. It gets boring and then the next thing you know, students will stop coming to class because they feel bored or think they are not learning anything.

Effective instructors are cognizant of how adults learn best and then endeavor to create learning environments that support the needs and requirements of adult learners (Goddu, 2012; Knowles, 1980; Lieb, 1991; Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Nowadays, tech-savvy younger adult students are demanding innovative instructional approaches for content delivery because of their capacity to acquire information faster than the generation before

them (Sheskey, 2010). Technological advances provide endless opportunities for

practitioners and students to create real world experiences in the classroom using contents

embedded with technology and collaborative learning (McClanahan, 2014). Sheskey

(2010) advised instructors to strive to make connections with students by adopting

appropriate strategies to suit the new age of students.

While some participants shared that their instructors have high expectations for all

learners, a few respondents disagreed with that assertion. In response to interview

question #5, "How do your teachers motivate you to succeed in classes?" P-B responded,

> I think some teachers just don't care. I have seen teachers letting students do
>
> whatever they want to do in class while the teacher pretends not to notice or care.
>
> And you know if the students think the teacher doesn't care, they are going to take
>
> advantage of the situation and play around. They are going to pull out their phone
>
> and play a game, text, or whatever until the class is over.

Academic Engagement

P-H also suggested that more direct instructions in subject areas are needed so

that the students are better prepared to take the rigorous TASC exams. She stated that the

instructors and staff "need to do more to keep the students coming, talk one-on-one to the

students who don't often come to encourage them to keep coming." Another participant

shared a similar suggestion that instructors should make time to reach out to a student

who suddenly stopped coming to classes to identify reasons for the student's withdrawal.

Learners are more inclined to persevere and complete their courses in a learning

environment where teachers exhibit caring attitude and higher expectation (Linder et al.,

2014). By conducting appropriate outreach efforts, the staff and faculty can offer additional support to the dropouts as well as obtain the students' perspectives as to why they abandoned the program and what the staff could do differently to reengage those students (Linder et al., 2014).

P-F shared that he has participated in several activities in school such as school-sponsored trips to learn more about the city, the internship program, and an award program for high-performing students. He commented that such activities help to keep students engaged in the program because "they will feel like they have other interesting things to do besides studying all the time." P-B also responded that staff in the program use incentives to encourage student retention. For instance, the teachers and staff sometimes reward selected students with perfect attendance with a trip on a boat ride. All students participate in an annual "picnic in the park" as a program wide trip. P-B also praised the program's flexible schedule for students who work but suggested that some students who are not working sometimes take advantage of the flexible schedule and leave early. At the time of the interview, he stated that he was looking for a part time job, but quickly added that he would choose school over job anytime. He also shared that he would prefer not to juggle work and school but needs to try working first because he wants to "help out in the family."

Social Factors

Familial Support

Another theme most participants' responses had in common was family support, although the influence of family had different effects for different students. Although all

the participants agreed that family support can motivate a student to go back to school or to get a high school credential, the level of appreciation for such support varied between students. Of the 10 participants interviewed, three live with both biological parents, two reside with one biological- and a step-parent, and five stay with family members other than parents. The three participants who live with both parents cited the encouragement from and support of their parents as influential in helping them enroll in the program. Of the three, two were brought from another country to join their parents here in the United States. Both participants credited their parents with helping them enroll and remain in the program with a clear goal of proceeding to the higher institution upon graduation.

Of the 10 participants, two of them attended traditional high school in this country before leaving early for various reasons. The other eight individuals emigrated from another country. The age of the students at the time of arrival in United States, coupled with the level of formal education they received in their home countries, disqualified the students from enrolling in a traditional high school to finish their secondary education. The only other option or path to secondary completion for the students was to enroll in a GED program to obtain their HSE diploma.

P-E, a young mother of a one-year-old, stressed the importance of her family's support in helping her enroll and stay in the program, particularly after the birth of her son. She stated that because her grandma was taking care of the baby during the day, she (the student) was able to stress out less about child care issues and this allowed her to focus more on her studies. She added that once the baby was old enough for the onsite

daycare center, she will enroll him part time in the daycare located in same building as GALP program so that the baby can get both daycare and home care experiences.

Discussion of Findings

My main aim for conducting this research was to look at the low retention rate of students between 18- to 21-years-old in one adult education program and to investigate the participants' perceptions about factors that impact student persistence and retention in HSE classes once they enroll. These learners had returned to formal learning after a brief or prolonged interruption in their formal education. Understanding who these learners are and the individual or contextual factors that promote their persistence in the adult education program will help program administrators and educators to support the students' learning and increase their chances of successful completion (Zhang & Zheng, 2013). Most of these students have a goal or desire to attend college but must first obtain the necessary high school credentials or HSE diploma.

The research questions were designed to explore students' perceptions about the complex factors that influence students' academic experience and persistence in a nontraditional learning environment. I conducted the study with 10 participants selected through purposeful sampling technique. The respondents participated in semi structured individual interviews to discuss why they entered the program and the perceived factors that inspired them to continue attending classes. Some students in this study suggested personal motivation, instructors' high expectations, teacher-student interactions, quality of instructions, and family support were influential factors on their academic success. According to my findings, participants who believed that their instructors had high

expectations for them reported doing well in the course. These students were motivated to

keep coming to school regularly, thereby increasing their attendance and retention rates.

Consequently, some participants believed an instructor's low expectations made students

less motivated to perform academically in the teacher's course. In their narratives, some

students suggested that instructors should improve teaching practices by incorporating

better strategies to motivate and address the needs of students, which would result in

retaining students longer in the program. Some participants even proposed that teachers

can improve students' learning experiences by ensuring a classroom environment that

engages students in the learning using an appropriate and relatable curriculum. Several

other themes developed from the data analysis.

Goal-Oriented Learners

Houle identified three main groups of adult learners as: "(1) goal-oriented learners

who engage in education to meet specific personal or professional advancements or

objectives, (2) activity-oriented learners who partake in learning for social contacts, and

(3) learning-oriented learners who seek education as a way to satisfy their inquiring

mind" (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005, p. 55). When asked, "What influenced you to

participate and become engaged in the HSE preparatory classes?" five participants cited

their personal goal of attending college or gaining employment as the primary deciding

factor or reason. One person said he joined the program based on the recommendation of

a relative who was already in the program. Four people said they returned to complete

their high school education to make their families proud. P-A credited his mother as his

inspiration for pursuing his high school credential because the mother had struggled to

bring her children over from the Caribbean. He added that his family values education

and he does not want to disappoint his mother.

P-E expressed that she was proud of herself for returning to school after the birth

of her son. She wanted to complete her high school journey and earn her HSE diploma

for her infant son, who will "someday appreciate that fact that his mom tried to better

herself by never giving up on school."

Instructor's Role in Student Engagement and Persistence

Experts suggested that how a student perceived social situations such as teacher-

interactions or mentorships could influence the learner's connectedness and sense of

belonging in the school community (Fall & Roberts, 2012). P-G, who at the time of the

interview was working full time while attending HSE preparatory classes, shared that he

liked the comfortable setting of his school community. He stated that even though he felt

connected to the school and staff, he thought the instructors could do more to challenge

the students. He believed some of his friends dropped out of the program because they

were bored or not impressed with the instructional techniques of the teachers. According

to P-G, his current class started with 28 students, but only 15 remained consistent in

attendance. He has a few friends in the program, and they support and encourage each

other all the time. P-H also juggled school and work but stated that if she had a chance

not to work, she would take it. However, she has been working for a year and felt the

support from her teachers and the staff has helped her to persist in her academic studies

and to remain in the program. Her friend recently dropped out of the program due to

difficulty in meeting school, work, and family demands. Even though P-H tried to encourage her friend to stay, she said it didn't work out.

Students who enroll in adult education programs come from varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds with different levels of English language proficiency, basic knowledge foundations, and accumulated experiences (Petty & Thomas, 2014). Educators could provide transformative learning by incorporating into the curriculum relevant topics representative of students' experiences. Additionally, content and concepts taught in a way that learners can make direct connections to their daily life activities will improve student engagement (Kefallinou, 2009; Petty & Thomas, 2014). Alhassan (2012) suggested that critical reflection is vital to transformational and self-directed learning and if development is the product of transformational learning, then instructors need to consider students' personal development when designing learning experiences.

Curriculum and Instructional Approaches

Adult educators cannot control the broader socio-economic and cultural influences on the lives of the students. However, teachers can influence certain aspects of the learning outcomes through effective teaching and by implementing a curriculum that incorporates the students' experiences, needs, and learning styles (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Some participants I interviewed expressed concerns that what they were learning did not meet their academic and personal needs. Some respondents stated that they were not impressed with the instructional approaches they experienced in some of their classes. According to some students, instructors provided some lessons using different strategies,

but most often, the lessons were teacher-directed. Some participants also stated that they

would have preferred the teachers to lead the lessons with some explicit instruction as

opposed to "just giving us handouts and expecting us to learn the materials on our own."

Pilling-Cormick and Garrison (2007) suggested that it is sometimes difficult for adult

students to deal with contextual impediments such as the rigor of what is being taught;

and subsequently, that can impact the student's motivation and determination to remain

engaged in a program.

Sense of Belonging

All the participants I interviewed expressed that they felt comfortable and a sense

of inclusion in the school community. Some of the participants reported having

participated in different events in school such as school-sponsored trips, the internship

program, and other social activities available to students. Experts posited that most

people have a rudimentary desire to belong and to be an important member of a group

(Allodi, 2010b; Chen, 2007).

Academic Performance and Struggle with Formal Learning

All the individuals I interviewed have varied life experiences, values about

education, social cultural backgrounds, as well as set goals and aspirations. The learner's

motivation and determination, as well as work-related demands, can affect a student's

ability to complete the program (Brown-Lerner & Brand, 2006). The different stages or

levels that students, particularly those with low literacy level, must go through to prepare

for the TASC exam can impact a student's enthusiasm to remain engaged in the courses.

Two respondents expressed concern that even though they have been in the program long

enough and have completed the required number of hours needed to take the promotional exam, the instructors have not allowed them (students) to sit for the exam. They shared their feeling of frustration of not being able to progress as fast as they would like to and lamented feeling like they are wasting time in the program. P-H stated that the structure of the promotional exams and the different levels of TABE tests to take could sometimes be frustrating to students; consequently, some students will opt to leave the program to go elsewhere to complete their HSE studies.

The perspectives that respondents shared during the interviews helped me to discover pertinent information about factors that motivate younger adults to remain in a HSE courses once enrolled. The data I gathered helped me design a professional development (PD) plan (see Appendix A) for instructors that might help them to improve curricular and instructional practices using targeted interventions and strategies to support all learners better. Educators have a huge impact in student retention and on the learners' persistence, especially in the first three weeks of enrollment (Quigley, as cited in Petty & Thomas, 2014). Loera et al. (2013) stated that students who felt supported by their instructors reported a better chance of being actively involved in the learning and were more inclined to pursue a higher education post high school.

Implications

A student's perceptions of the learning community along with internal motivation and tenacity influence retention and academic achievement (Petty & Thomas, 2014; Radovan & Makovec, 2015; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). It is imperative that ABE instructors improve their awareness of the issues related to motivation and persistence to help

improve retention rates of the students. Instructors can engage learners in student-centered classrooms using active learning experiences to increase students' academic persistence and improve performance. To improve students' learning outcomes, school leaders need to facilitate more PDs and growth opportunities for the instructors, especially on how to adopt more learner-centered approaches to increase self-directed learning activities.

ABE educators can engage in more job-embedded professional learning community (PLC) discussions around factors that impact adult learner experiences to better understand different ways to motivate the students. This frequent discourse will give teachers opportunities to examine student work products with team members and share research based techniques and strategies to increase the desired student outcomes. Through the practice of school wide professional learning, the administrator would promote shared responsibility for student achievement and foster a culture that promotes student success (Killion & Roy, 2009).

Limitations

Some possible limitations exist for this study. Even with bracketing or the efforts made to control it, the possibility existed that my biases may have played a role. I made strong attempts to limit the amount of researcher bias. Another potential problem could be that some students may not have been candid or forthcoming with their responses, or comfortable sharing their lived experiences during the face-to-face interview meetings. There was also a chance that some students, conscious that they were being studied, may have altered their responses during the interviews in order to please me or in a misguided

effort to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. This might inspire a possible future study in which qualitative data might be collected with questionnaires with open-ended prompts to ensure students can express freely their opinions and perceptions about the topic of study.

Summary

Educators in ABE programs strive to help students obtain their HSE diploma along with essential college and workforce readiness skills. However, most of these learners, particularly the 16- to 24- year-old population, encounter personal and contextual barriers that impact their motivation, persistence, and successful completion of the program once they enroll. I designed this research study to explore learner retention challenges through literature reviews, and to investigate the students' beliefs and perceived factors that impact their tenacity and capacity to complete HSE preparatory classes. Through a qualitative case study approach, I investigated three research questions using, as the framework, Knowles' theory of andragogy and Tinto's persistence theory to thoroughly understand the issues related to adult learners and perceived factors that influence motivation and academic achievement.

In other sections of this study, I have included a detailed description of the context of the research site including the participants, program, resources, policies, and other pertinent characteristics of the learning environment. As stated earlier, the ABE program, GALP, discussed in this research provides free academic and support services to students 18- to 21-years-old who have experienced some form of interruption in their formal education. The program, in a large northeastern city, is located in a semi

disadvantaged, low income neighborhood in with other community based ABE programs in the vicinity that also provide academic services to students of varied ages, including those under 21-years of age. GALP is structured to offer three functional levels of targeted instructional courses (literacy, pre-HSE, and HSE classes) as well as nonacademic support and job-readiness skills to help students earn an HSE diploma necessary for college and career opportunities. Due to rolling admission, new students are admitted into GALP on an ongoing basis. The flexibility of such rolling admission means that students can enter the program any time throughout the year and be placed in classrooms with students who have been in the classes for much longer. In addition, the required number of instructional hours or seat time before taking promotional exams tend to prolong a student's academic progress in the courses, resulting in low persistence and completion rates for some students.

Using the major themes that developed from the data along with the students' narratives, I designed a 3 full-day PD plan (see Appendix A) for teachers. I developed the activities in the plan using principles of socio-constructivism, transformational learning, and andragogical assumptions about adult learning. The workshops might help teachers to gain more insights into the various factors that impact adult learning experiences and persistence as well as provide instructors with tools and new strategies to plan engaging lessons that align with instructional outcomes to efficiently achieve the desired student academic performance. By participating in the workshop activities, practitioners can increase student achievement by reflecting on their curricular and instructional practices

and by using research-based approaches to design lesson plans that incorporate best

practices and engaging activities.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In my study findings, I highlighted several perceived individual, institutional, and social factors that influence students' persistence and retention in an ABE program. Using the results from this research study, I created a 3 full-day PD plan (see Appendix A) for the practitioners in the school that was discussed as the context for this study. Educators have the power to impact learners' persistence and increase their retention rate by creating classroom experiences that: (a) engage students in active learning using an appropriate curriculum, (b) exhibit care and high expectations for all learners, and (c) show recognition of each student's needs and learning style.

Description and Goals

Instructional leaders use PD workshops to not only offer instructors opportunity to grow professionally but also help educators to keep abreast of current trends and techniques to enhance their crafts. It is essential for educators to employ research based best instructional practices and methods to motivate students and keep them engaged in the learning activities. When planning a PD for teachers, it is imperative the planner make it as interactive as possible—considering the collective experiences, knowledge accumulation, and learning styles of the participants. In any group of participants, there are at least four key learning styles represented: *visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile* and like their students, instructors also learn through multiple styles (Tate, 2012).

Using principles of adult learning and constructivism theories, I was mindful to create activities that will incorporate participants' experiences, needs, interests, and

learning styles. Socio constructivists posited that learners actively construct knowledge via social connections with other people in an environment influenced by the learners' varied backgrounds (Mezirow, 1981; Parsons, Ankrum, & Morewood, 2016). According to Ellis (2014), because learning is a process that involves experiential and social interaction, instructors need to design classroom experiences that support learning.

For this project, I used the findings from my research and information from the literatures reviewed to create a PD plan titled Engaging Adult Learners in a Student-Centered Environment to Increase Persistence and Academic Success (see Appendix A). The workshops will be presented in 3 full days to enable the teachers to examine existing processes and then collaborate to create best practices, activities, and lesson plans that will incorporate some of the strategies presented to improve learning for all students. The PD plan incorporates PowerPoint slides, discussions of the presentations, and various activities to engage instructors in reflective and collaborative learning and sharing of ideas. One important principles of constructivist learning theory is that each individual comes to a learning environment with his or her distinctive experiences, views, and prior knowledge; thereby, making teachers valued assets in a PLC (Tate, 2012). In addition to reading materials, teachers will participate in individual, small, and whole group activities to review current teaching practices, examine researched based best curricular and instruction practices, and create lessons they can implement in their respective classrooms.

One of my goals is to use this PD plan to facilitate a positive impact on teachers' existing practices that can result in improved student learning (Parsons et al., 2016).

Through the implementation of the PD plan, educators can reflect on the needs and interests of the students, the teachers' needs and practices, and ways to improve existing curriculum design and instructional methods to align with the actual needs. One of the essential sections of the proposed PD plan will focus on how instructors could motivate students to increase their engagement and persistence in the learning process.

Furthermore, through the implementation of this PD plan, instructors will acquire better awareness of how adults learn and ways to enhance existing curricular and teaching techniques to promote student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and increase learner persistence in the school community. Teachers will complete Miller Curriculum Style Indicator (Miller, 2011) survey to determine their curriculum style. This survey is publicly available and Miller "grants permission to educators who wish to photocopy this survey for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that the author receives credit for the development and design of the instrument" (Miller, 2011, p. 36). As part of the PD activities, the instructors will create lesson plans and drafts of content curriculum that incorporate backwards planning method, strategies, and best practices learned from the PD workshops. I was mindful of the audience while designing the workshop modules and the PowerPoint presentations. Tate (2012) cautioned professional developers to be cognizant of adult learners' lifelong experiences when planning workshops because educators "place higher priority on internal motivators (such as increased job satisfaction, higher self-esteem, and improved instructional delivery) rather than external motivators" (p. 4). As professionals, teachers like to participate in presentations that are meaningful and concise (LaCursia, 2011).

Rationale

I created this project to address the issue defined in Section 1 and the findings highlighted in Section 2 of this research. Retention of adult learners, especially the 16- to 24-year-old group, is a constant challenge for ABE program administrators nationwide (Hossain & Terwelp, 2015). It is particularly problematic for the educators in the program that was discussed as the context for my study. My rationale for creating a PD plan for instructors was because teachers learning new strategies to improve instructional techniques can help produce tangible change in teaching practice and enhance students' academic achievement (Gulamhussein, 2013). Moreover, educational leaders often use PD to provide faculty and staff opportunities to engage in shared responsibility and provide a collective response to a school-wide problem or educational goal. Additionally, school leaders use PD workshops to encourage professional reflection and inquiry as well as recognize how instructors, as adults, engage in the learning (Light, Calkins, Luna, & Drane, 2009).

By participating in the workshops, the instructors will gain deeper insights on adult learning theories as well as concrete research-based techniques to enhance curricular and instructional practices. There are also some examples of classroom applications that instructors can employ to create effective lessons in student-centered learning environments. I purposefully designed the activities for these workshops to help teachers be active participants in the process (see Luft & Hewson, 2014). The discussions will include individual, social, and institutional factors that influence learner retention and best practices that promote student motivation and program completion. I also

created this project to assist teachers and staff in using data, current research-based

knowledge, and concrete strategies to improve practices and increase student academic

performance.

Review of the Literature

Some of the literature I reviewed included books and scholarly works with

authors who focused on the importance of PD in improving instructional practices and

student learning experiences. As educators engage in ongoing professional learning, their

knowledge is enhanced through discussions with their peers as they share best practices

and receive feedback from their colleagues (Parsons, Parsons, Morewood, & Ankrum,

2016; Prytula & Weiman, 2012). To improve adult learners' retention and success, school

leaders need to facilitate more PD training and growth opportunity for the instructors,

especially on how to use ongoing learner-centered approaches to support self-

directedness in their learners. From the multiple sources I reviewed, there is a shared

consensus amongst researchers, scholars, and educational practitioners that the level of

teacher development has a substantial influence on student learning and academic

performance (Bayar, 2014).

Literature Review Search Terms

I used various databases to search for articles that pertained to PD planning and

evaluation. Some of the search terms I used included but are not limited to *adult learning*

theory and professional development, adult learning styles, active learning, curriculum

best practices, motivating adult learners, planning effective professional development,

professional learning community, teacher effectiveness, and *workshop evaluation*. I

reviewed sites such as, EBSCO, ERIC, ProQuest, Educational Database, SAGE

Collections, Google Scholar, and Walden University Database and Library. For the

search strategy and selection criteria, I focused mostly on peer-reviewed articles and

books published within the last 5 years. I also read through some scholarly works from

the last few decades to help ground the constructivist and adult learning theories that I

used to frame the PD and learning activities for adult learners. Because the PD

workshops were designed for instructors, it was imperative that I employ research-based

knowledge and best practices to design activities that will incorporate participants'

experiences, needs, interests, and learning styles.

Impact of Professional Development

Experts view PD activities as forms of a continuous learning experience for

teachers (Luft & Hewson, 2014). Scholars have produced decades of study on PD

initiatives with focus on the improvement of classroom instruction and the effect they

have on teachers' instructional practices (Little, 2012; Martin, Kragler, & Frazier, 2017).

There has always been an emphasis on PDs as a means of enhancing teachers' skills,

awareness, and understanding of current trends. However, it is not uncommon for school

administrators to assume two things about PD: (a) that all teachers know what to do, so

they (leaders) just provide directions or one-time training and expect things to happen,

and (b) that all teachers do not know what to do, so they (leaders) provide a generic group

staff development or training, and then expect everyone to adapt and perform. Both

assumptions can produce tensions that impact school culture (Killion & Roy, 2009).

Effective PD must be targeted and meaningful for participants to fully appreciate new experiences and information presented in the training (Luft & Hewson, 2014). Killion and Roy (2009) also suggested that PD planners ensure that training align with rigorous state academic standards, professional learning standards, district standards, school improvement goals, and presented using best practices of effective adult learning strategies (p. 18).

For PD to be practical, the input of teachers should be sought or recognized to minimize the resistance that often results when instructors feel imposed upon with "meaningless" or "time-wasting" initiatives (Killion & Roy, 2009). Experts concurred that instructors' input is crucial when designing components of PD workshops, especially because teachers are not only expected to participate in the PD activities, but they are also expected to transform the knowledge and strategies gained into effective and sustained instructional practices that drive student achievement (Bayar, 2014; Tate, 2012). I also created a pre implementation plan (see Appendix B) for the PD to include a meeting with the administration, PD committee, and other representatives from the targeted audience for the workshops. This initial planning conference will be a great opportunity to share the key results from the study, discuss objectives of the PD series, schedule dates for the 3-day PD, gather additional information, resources, and materials for the workshop modules, as well as answer any outstanding questions about the project and the PD plan.

Engaging Adult Learners in Active Learning

Active student engagement impacts learning and improves academic performance (Chi & Wylie, 2014; Wyatt, 2011; Zyngier, 2008). Adult learners bring their accumulated

life experiences into new classes, and those prior experiences will influence how the students will process new knowledge. Instructors can tap into the varied cultural backgrounds of the students to plan activities that will enable students to share concepts and learn from their peers. Students are more apt to engage and remain actively involved in education that meets their goals and specific needs through the incorporation of their life experiences and relevant topics (Deci & Ryan, 2009).

Experts suggest that students actively engage in the learning process by taking ownership of their learning and by creating individual academic goals (Greene, 2015; Ping, Shu-Juan & Lin, 2016). Ellis (2014) posited that individuals learn best when presented with authentic tasks and options and held accountable for their learning. To successfully engage adult students in the learning, instructors must be conversant with the needs of these students as well as their learning styles (Varughese & Fehring, 2009). Most effective instructors have thorough understanding of their students' abilities and interests (Parsons et al., 2016). Adult learners, as self-directed and goal-oriented, are motivated to participate in the learning when their needs and experiences are recognized and incorporated in the learning process (Chen, 2014; Knowles et al., 2005; Knowles et al., 2014; Ping et al., 2016).

Zayapragassarazan and Kumar (2012) recommended some instructional methods that promote active learning in a classroom, including individual, paired, or small group activities as well as the use of cooperative learning grouping. These techniques incorporate varied activities like "conceptual mapping, brainstorming, collaborative

writing, case-based instruction, cooperative learning, role-playing, simulation, project-based learning, and peer teaching" (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012, pp. 3–4).

Almost every student who enters an adult education program has a goal for enrolling in the first place. For this study's participants, the most common motivation was a desire to earn a high school credential needed to proceed to college. Students who are returning to formal learning in a nontraditional setting have developed prior academic self-concept that might influence their academic persistence. Motivation is very influential on learning, and numerous researchers have investigated ways to design lessons that are not only motivating, but also incorporate learners' needs and interests to promote a higher level of learning (Radovan & Makovec, 2015; Wlodkowski, 2008). It is also essential that instructors recognize adult learners' perspectives and needs to plan and implement effective strategies to increase students' persistence and sustainable retention (Alhassan, 2012; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Zhang & Zheng, 2013). Understanding academic persistence is essential for instructors, and to better understand student persistence, practitioners must be cognizant of the factors that help adult learners sustain motivation and effort over time (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). The critical point for practitioners to remember is that adult learners possess extensive experiences, established mental models, biases, and assumptions that tend to influence a person's capacity to absorb new concepts or viewpoints (Knowles et al., 2005).

Impact of Learning Environment

The primary objective of any institution ought to be cultivating and sustaining a culture of learning for all learners (Hanna, Salzman, Reynolds, & Fergus, 2010; Petty &

Thomas, 2014; Tagg, 2003). The nature of the school environment impacts the level of

motivation (Wlodkowski, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2009). Improving the learning

environment can shape a student's attitude about school and the learning process (Kafele,

2013; Thapa et al., 2013; Smith, et al., 2014). For instance, the students in my study

indicated that they felt encouraged when the following elements were present in the

learning community:

- teachers who exhibited high expectations and believed students can learn

- classroom structure with engaging and relevant instruction

- support for students with personal and academic struggles

- appropriate curriculum with adequately challenging and relatable topics.

Kafele (2013) made a case that educators can significantly improve student

academic outcomes by being mindful of the instructor's relationship with the students,

the learning atmosphere, as well as the cultural relevance of the teaching. Students'

attitude about the learning environment can influence their academic performance

(Allodi, 2010b; Cohen & Geier, 2010). As such, Kafele (2013) advised teachers to

continually improve instructional practices by reflecting on what they are doing to

transform the students' attitudes so that every day that student enter classrooms, they are

excited and prepared to perform their best. My study findings showed that participants

desired to see more teachers set higher expectations for the students and provide constant

positive reinforcements to support them.

Additionally, a learner's sense of belonging in an institution improves

significantly when that student has one staff member as a mentor, thereby increasing that

student's chance of academic success and retention (O'Keeffe, 2013). Sparks (2012) also

suggested that students' academic achievement improved when teachers exhibited the

"seven C's of teaching practice" - meaning the instructor:

- Cares about students

- Captivates them by showing learning is relevant

- Confers with students to demonstrate their ideas are welcomed and
    respected

- Clarifies lessons, so knowledge seems feasible

- Consolidates knowledge, so lessons are connected and integrated

- Controls behavior, so students stay on task, and

- Challenges students to achieve (Sparks, 2012, p. 2).

Because adult learners have other obligations and life demands that present

barriers to learning, instructors can support learner persistence by discussing anticipated

hurdles with students, assisting them in monitoring their learning progress, providing an

orientation specific to perseverance, and by conducting targeted outreach to students who

drop out of the program (Kefallinou, 2009; Shaw et al., 2015). Teachers can also support

the students in creating time management tools that will help them to effectively carve

out time from their hectic schedule to dedicate to studying (McClanahan, 2014; Romero

& Barbera, 2012). When the instructors provide institutional supports along with

transformational learning experiences that promote students' motivation and persistence,

it will result in improved student outcomes and increase their chances of completion

(Shaw, et al., 2015; Zhang & Zheng, 2013).

Transformational Learning in Student-Centered Classrooms

Even though researchers, in decades of studies, emphasized the benefits of using instructional materials with relevant topics and a collaborative learning approach, most adult education instructors still favor teacher-centered classrooms with few original resources, and minimal student collaboration in the learning process (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). According to Ellis (2014), "active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning," (p. 49) and the author suggested that teachers should constantly endeavor to immerse students in such active learning opportunities in all contents or subjects. To achieve this objective, instructors must make conscious effort to move toward a more student-centered learning environment (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013). It is critical for adult educators to make coursework meaningful and applicable to students' real-life situations because adult learners are practical and tend to focus on things they consider important to them (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Adult learners are viewed as goal-oriented, self-directed, and tend to base their learning on experiences (Knowles et al., 2005). However, students, particularly younger adults, could still benefit from institutional support to increase their persistence (Alhassan, 2012; Emerick-Brown, 2013; Petty & Thomas, 2014). To enhance self-directed active learning in a student-centered classroom, teachers can provide a list of activities related to the lesson as part of the instruction. Students, given choices of activities to work on, could decide whether to work individually, with a partner, or in small groups. Through this process, the students take ownership of their learning, and the

teacher promotes active learning and community building, which improve students'

academic persistence (Gardner, 2011). Experts on self-directed learning suggested that

students should primarily be responsible and in control of their learning process and

instructors can support the learners in creating academic goals, identifying resources,

choosing appropriate strategies, and assessing their mastery of objectives (Pilling-

Cormick & Garrison, 2007). Garrison promoted the concept of learners taking charge and

assuming ownership for their educational experiences and activities, and to extend the

process to include cognitive checking and motivational processing (as cited in Pilling-

Cormick & Garrison, 2007).

Socio-constructivists emphasize cooperative learning, which Li and Lam (2013)

defined as "student-centered, instructor-facilitated instructional strategy in which a small

group of students is responsible for its learning and the learning of all group members"

(p. 1). The cooperative learning method promotes higher order thinking, increases

motivation, and enhances social interactions (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2014; Johnson et

al., 1998; Li & Lam, 2013).

Experts recommended that educators be cognizant of the positive impact that the

rapidly evolving technology can have on student-centered classrooms, which will

improve collaborating learning through the efficient use of existing technology (Sheskey,

2010). Whereas more mature adult learners might feel apprehensive about learning

independently or collaboratively with content heavily embedded in technology

(Sivakumaran & Lux, 2011), it is not always the case with their younger counterparts.

Although researchers and educators agree that there should be changes in what is taught

to students and how it is being presented in the technology age, few educators have been

adequately trained in the practical use of technology to aid instruction (Sheskey, 2010;

Panero & Talbert, 2013; Wiles & Bondi, 2010).

Designing Purposeful Curriculum and Engaging Lessons

The most important duty of a teacher as a curriculum designer is to create

curricular and learning activities that meet well defined objectives (Wiles, 2009).

Teachers also design assessments to diagnose student needs, to guide teaching, and as a

tool to assess learning goals and outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Wiggins and

McTighe (2005) underscored the importance of instructors, as curriculum designers,

being cognizant of their audience. One way for teachers to determine the effectiveness of

curriculum, assessment, and instructional design is by the students' achievement of the

desired learning outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). According to Wiles (2009), it is

imperative that educators review school data frequently to discover patterns and priorities

that will inform the decision making process. The author suggested that school leaders

engage members of the school community in reviewing "data such as the achievement

test scores, attendance records, and student work products to help identify strengths and

weaknesses in the curriculum" (Wiles, 2009, p. 15).

According to McTighe and Thomas (2003), effective lesson plans include clear

explanations of what students should understand and be capable of producing by the end

of the lesson. Educators using backwards design for lesson planning will need to identify

desired results, analyze multiple sources of data, and determine appropriate action plans

(McTighe & Thomas, 2003). In essence, for backwards design to be effective, the teacher

will first need to consider the desired results the learners are expected to accomplish, then anticipate the evidence that indicates the students have accomplished the expected outcomes, and finally create learning experiences to support the students in meeting the lesson's desired learning goals.

Instructors ought to use transformative learning to help a student "to become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Adult educators can provide transformational learning experiences by designing a purposeful and coherent curriculum that incorporates assessment and instructional strategies to ensure students achieve the desired learning.

Job-Embedded Professional Learning

According to Schlechty (2011), the goal of every school leader should be to make sure that all students are learning at higher levels; and therefore, evaluating the quality of student learning is a significant consideration and must be done on a continuous basis using many measures and tools (p. 230). Little (2012) posited that a solid school plan for student academic improvement must include professional learning as an integral part of a school wide approach for sustaining high levels of teaching and learning. According to DuFour and Mattos (2013), to increase students' academic performance, school leaders must emphasize the team analysis of evidence of student learning because the most effective strategy to "improving both teaching and learning is by cultivating a collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community" (p. 37). Experts suggest that educational leaders can foster transparency via open and

ongoing communications with all stakeholders about student learning and instructional needs within the school community (Killion & Roy, 2009).

As suggested by Waddell and Lee (2008), data and dialogue are the keys to effective professional learning, meaning that data ought to be used to examine current practices whereas dialogue is useful in engaging veteran educators (p. 19). Ultimately, there has to be a balance between the technical dimension of professional practice and human dimension of authentic engagement (Waddell & Lee, 2008, p. 19). It is crucial that practitioners in adult education continue to be mindful of the students' needs and use current research based strategies to increase the learners' persistence in achieving their academic goals. Equally important, school leaders can ensure that instructors have constant access to sound educational research as well as opportunities to apply those strategies in their classrooms. Little (2012) suggested that teachers should have opportunities to engage in ongoing PD that incorporates the "instructional triangle: the relationships between teacher, students, and content" (p. 3). Jackson (2013) also stated that instructors need access to innovative strategies and practice in applying the techniques in the classroom, as well as time and support to efficiently integrate a new approach into their instructional toolkit.

To foster a culture of collaboration in an effective and efficient PLC, a school administrator would need to identify the group's needs and then establish a team around a common goal and mutual respect (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). For instance, veteran teachers might be struggling with designing a curriculum that incorporates the desires and demands of tech-savvy students (Sheskey, 2010). The author pointed out that some

teachers might find it difficult integrating into classrooms the technological resources available for classroom use such as *interactive software, digital imaging, audio and video creation tools, on-demand video libraries, computers and LCD projectors, and web 2.0 tools* (Sheskey, 2010, p. 197). Sheskey (2010) suggested that teachers should participate in training on technology, including software applications. In addition to whatever technological resources are already available for use in the program, there are several free online supplementary academic programs and technical tools that teachers can use to support the students' learning experience further.

Summary

The data from my study findings and literature review indicate that most adult students juggle schooling with other life demands, including family, work, and other social commitments (Romero & Barbera, 2012). Practitioners need to be mindful of those various challenging demands and constraints that adult learners must cope with and the need for institutional support in helping them pursue academic goals (McClanahan, 2014). By sharing this research based knowledge and current trends with instructors during the PD series, educators can gain in-depth awareness of how adults learn, and ways to enhance existing curricular and teaching techniques to promote student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and increase learner persistence in the school community.

Implementation

The implementation of the PD plan will take place once I receive approval of my project study. After I secure the appropriate permission from the program's

administrators, I will be involved in presenting the professional development workshops,

preferably during the program's *Summer Institute* that takes place in 3 consecutive days

for 6 hours each day. By participating in the workshops during the summer, the faculty

will have the chance to incorporate any and all acquired new strategies and concepts as

well as implement the lesson plans and some of the instructional best practices they will

create during the workshop activities.

The implementation plan (see Appendix B) will include an initial meeting with

the program administration, PD committee, and other key administrative members of the

program to get support with implementing the project. The preimplementation meetings

with the cabinet and other representatives from the school will be a great opportunity to

share the key study findings, discuss objectives of the PD series, schedule PD dates,

gather additional essential information, resources, and materials for the workshop

presentations, and answer any outstanding questions about the project and the PD plan.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

There are some possible resources or in-house supports to aid the presenter in the

implementation of the PD plan. For instance, many school leaders understand the

importance of improving teaching and learning through professional learning

opportunities. As a result, program administrators have a built-in budget allocation for

PD or staff training workshops. With the ongoing focus on rigor along with the pressure

to raise test scores, school leaders often schedule wide-ranging PD activities for teachers

(Martin et al., 2017). In addition to a school-wide schedule that includes days and times

for in-house PD activities, there are also days and times built into the calendar for district

wide professional learning series.

According to Little (2012), a school structured for professional learning would

cultivate systematic approach to instruction and learning in various ways. One potential

resource is the built-in staff development periods in the program's school calendar.

Educators in GALP have the opportunity to participate in two district wide learning

institutes for 3 full days in the summer and winter, where teachers and staff from various

affiliated program sites gather together to share best practices and participate in

workshops to enhance teaching practices and professional growth. One of those institutes

might be an excellent forum to present my PD series.

Additionally, GALP administrators have an existing PD committee whose

primary goal is to use current data to plan and provide staff training and instructional

resources to support the students, staff, and school. In addition to the human resources,

there are some readily available technological resources such as computer labs, laptops,

iPads, interactive software, audio and video creation tools, and LCD projectors. There is

also technical support for the PowerPoint presentation modules created for this project.

Potential Barriers

As stated, the target audience for the PD workshops includes administrators,

faculty, and staff who all play critical roles in ensuring students' academic success in a

program. As with any new program initiative, the lack of teacher buy-in might impede

the implementation of the recommended project. Kwok (2014) pointed out that educators,

as agents of change, are key to the success of any implementation process and very often,

instructors demonstrate diverse reactions to new initiatives. According to the author, whereas some teachers may welcome a change in practice as an opportunity to make a difference in education, others may have a reservation about the practicality of the new initiative and consequently will see it as a threat to their jobs (Kwok, 2014). For this project, although some instructors may be willing to test out in their classrooms what they learn and create during professional development activities, poor implementation of the initiative or the strategies presented might lead to low outcomes.

Designing effective curriculum for ABE courses might be challenging for some instructors because of the low number of students who attend classes for an extended period. Many ABE programs have rolling admissions to meet funding requirements. As a result, new students enroll in the program on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis; and because of the variance in classroom population, instructors find it challenging to plan on students' day-to-day instruction (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). Unlike traditional schools where teachers use particular content standards or curricula, ABE instructors do not have solid curricula to anchor their instructions. Their curriculum mostly encompasses "commercially developed GED, pre-GED, or other test preparation materials and has had less engagement with authentic texts, narratives, or compositions" (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014, p. 10). In most cases, teachers who are content with using the commercially designed HSE preparatory instructional materials might not be too eager to embrace a new curriculum design that will incorporate technology and new strategies to be implemented in student-centered classrooms to improve student learning experiences.

Also, GALP has many veteran teachers who are not tech-savvy or who lack essential technological skills to fully take advantage of the available multimedia tools such as computers, laptops, iPads, Smart-boards, and web-based resources in the schools. Another potential barrier is the danger of the limited budget set aside by program directors specifically to compensate teachers who participate in PD activities. The *Summer Professional Learning Institutes* are offered outside of the school schedule, which means that all faculty and staff who participate in the workshops are compensated as per their contracts. *Winter Institutes* are held during the school year as part of a district-wide mandated professional learning series. If the school leaders do not offer the *Institutes* this year, then the workshop modules will be presented in 3 different built-in PD days that all staff members are mandated to attend. In such case, the workshops will not be given in 3 consecutive days but spread out through the school year.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

As soon as my project is approved, I plan to forward a proposal and an implementation plan (see Appendix B) to the administrator of GALP. Upon receiving the approval from the administrator, I will set tentative dates for preimplementation meetings and the actual days of the workshop series. This initial planning conference will be a great opportunity to share the key results from the study, discuss objectives of the PD series, schedule dates for the 3-day PD, gather additional information, resources, and materials for the workshop modules, as well as answer any outstanding questions about the project and the PD plan.

My recommendation to the program administrator will be to conduct the training or workshops during the *Summer Institute* before the start of a new school year. The workshops will be presented in 3 full days to enable the teachers to examine existing processes and then collaborate to create best practices, activities, and lesson plans that will incorporate some of the strategies presented to improve learning for all students. The PD plan incorporates PowerPoint slides, discussions of the presentations, and various activities to engage instructors in reflective and collaborative learning and sharing of ideas. In addition to reading materials, teachers will participate in individual, small, and whole group activities to review current teaching practices, examine researched-based best curricular and instruction practices, and create lessons they can implement in their respective classrooms. Also, as part of the PD activities, the instructors will create lesson plans and drafts of content curriculum that incorporate backwards planning method, strategies, and best practices that will be shared during the PD workshops. Teachers will get a chance to immediately implement some of the best practices, strategies, activities, and lesson plans they will create during their participation in the workshops.

Roles and Responsibilities

As the designer of the project deliverable, I will also be the primary person to plan, coordinate, and facilitate the PD workshops. I may collaborate with the program's existing PD committee to further align the workshops to what the program, faculty, and students need. Instructors and instructional coaches in the PD committee might serve as copresenters and facilitators for the learning series. The practitioners will be able to leverage their strengths and expertise to enhance their leadership skills while cultivating

the impact of the established professional learning community. Research shows that when members of an organization are directly involved in the initiation and implementation of a systemic change process, they are more receptive to change outcome that results from their involvement (Senge et al., 2000).

Project Evaluation

I developed this project in response to the research findings. It was essential to use data to guide decisions regarding the focus of the PD plan because presenting educators with collected student data might help them to understand better where needs exist and how to apply targeted instructional focus (Hayes & Robnolt, 2007). A well designed PD plan must utilize an evaluation method that aligns with the workshop goals as well as appropriate evaluation tools to gauge the impact of the workshops. Generally, PD planners use formative or summative evaluation methods to measure the impact the workshops. End of the workshop survey is the most essential evaluation tool in assessing the effectiveness of the workshop (https://serc.carleton.edu) because encourages participants to assess the workshop presentation and discuss what worked and what needs improvement. The participants' input helps the presenter in planning future workshops.

To assess the effectiveness of this project, I will use a formative evaluation form (see Appendix G) that includes open-ended questions and action plans for teachers' feedback. Informal discussions with participants and supervisors will also highlight what worked and what needs improvement. Participants will complete an evaluation form after each day's session to share their feedback about what they learned from the PD and how they plan to implement strategies learned and lessons created. The survey will also

include questions for which teachers will answer using a Likert-scale (Strongly Disagree

= 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly Agree = 5). The combined data will

help the presenter with future PD needs as next steps for training sessions should be

directly connected to the strengths and areas for improvement of the teachers and the

school community (Light et al., 2009). The information will also be used to amend future

planning and implementation of ongoing PD series.

The workshops could also be evaluated using the work products such as

curriculum and lesson plan drafts as well as the charted responses the teachers will create

during the workshop activities. Additionally, on Day 3, instructors will complete a Miller

Curriculum Style Indicator (Miller, 2011) survey to identify their preferred curriculum

style and such formative assessment might yield meaning information for the teachers

and the presenters. This survey is publicly available and Miller "grants permission to

educators who wish to photocopy this survey for nonprofit educational purposes,

provided that the author receives credit for the development and design of the

instrument" (Miller, 2011, p. 36).

According to Little (2012), one way to gauge the effectiveness of PD is "whether

teachers and other educators come to know more over time about their subjects, students,

and practice and to make informed use of what they know" (p. 2). Even though the

project is a 3-day PD series, further desired outcome will be for the instructors to engage

in ongoing professional practices using current trends and strategies learned from the

workshops to continuously increase student persistence and improve learning outcomes.

Educators ought to be willing to try new teaching and learning strategies in the

classroom, and implementing a new technique entails a shift in the minds of both instructors and learners. Teachers need to reflect periodically on their teaching effectiveness to ensure successful implementation of new procedures (Roehl et al., 2013).

Project Implications

Researchers of the scholarly articles I reviewed articulated the importance of teachers continually assessing the needs of the student and employing current research based strategies to increase the learners' persistence in achieving their academic goals. Equally relevant is the ability of the school leader to provide instructors ongoing access to sound educational research and opportunities to apply those strategies in their classroom environments.

As adult educators continue to look for new techniques to support the growing numbers of underprepared and overwhelmed students, I feel there is a need for more instructional strategies and tools that help teachers in making their instructions more relatable for the students (Ambrose, Davis, & Ziegler, 2013). I have used the framework of adult learning principles and persistence theory to design a PD plan to help educators reflect on current practices and learn new strategies to improve student learning experiences.

The narratives from the study participants influenced my decision to design a PD plan that might help participants gain a deeper understanding of current research based practices and techniques to sustain learner motivation, active participation, and overall improved academic performance. Sharing students' narratives of their experiences with the teachers will allow the instructors to reflect on their understanding or misconceptions

about the students (Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter, & Clapham, 2012). I hope that practitioners who work with adult students will be inspired to plan purposeful and relevant lessons that incorporate their students' interests and expectations. Another desired outcome would be for the school leader to continue to use data and methods from this project to support faculty and staff in inquiry based professional learning as they collaborate to create targeted academic and institutional support for students in their school community.

Local Community

Researchers have shown that ABE instructors who prepare adults to attain an HSE credential continue to experience challenges in ensuring that students meet that goal and successfully enroll in colleges (GED Testing Services, 2012; Murnane, 2013; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). The primary objective of program administrators ought to be cultivating and sustaining a culture of learning for all learners (Hanna et al., 2010; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Tagg, 2003). This important goal is often negatively affected by fundamental challenges that impact most adult education programs - student dropout and low retention rates. GALP and other ABE programs in the state are experiencing similar challenges.

Far-Reaching Implications

An estimated "39 million adults, or nearly 18 percent of the U.S. adult population" (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014, p. ES-1), are not able to fully engage in today's marketplace because they have not yet obtained a high school diploma essential for entry into college or workforce arena (GED Testing Services, 2012). Many low

skilled adults who enroll in ABE courses possess low academic self-efficacy. It is vital

for teachers of adult learners to find ways to support these groups of students to earn an

HSE diploma, and to empower the students to recapture and further improve their sense

of accomplishment and independence (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). When the national

GED exam was replaced with a computer-based TASC test, which aligned with the

Common Core standards, the exam's level of difficulty increased significantly,

particularly for the students with low functional reading and numeracy skills (O'Neill &

Thomson, 2013). For this and other reasons, there has been an ongoing increase in

national interest and research studies about adult education programs as researchers seek

to identify the strengths and challenges of adult learners to develop better strategies that

will leverage the learners' strengths to address their needs.

Conclusion

Because individual and institutional factors can impact a learner's capacity to

persevere in adult education, conducting this qualitative case study helped me to better

understand certain factors that students perceive to be influential in their persistence in an

ABE program. The PD plan created for instructors included workshop activities during

which the instructors will collaborate to examine their curricular and instructional

practices and use research-based knowledge and current trends to create best practices to

engage students in the learning process.

As a result of the changes in the national economic landscape and funding

accountability tied to student outcomes, educators are continually looking for ways to

improve student academic achievements through effective instructional strategies that

support student persistence and improve their learning outcomes. I designed the PD plan

to increase instructors' awareness about adult learning theories and learning styles, and

the current research-based best instructional practices that teachers can use to engage and

motivate adult learners in a nontraditional learning environment.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

My primary reason for conducting this study was to investigate students'

perceptions and beliefs about the individual and institutional factors that influence their

persistence and retention in a nontraditional school environment. The research questions

centered on perceptions and experiences participants perceived to be influential in their

motivation to enroll and persist in ABE program. It is vital that instructors of adult

learners continue to use research based knowledge, instructional best practices, and

strategies to cultivate student-centered, active learning environments to address the

retention challenges in ABE programs. The sections below highlight my reflections and

processes of project development, including my learning experiences, growth as a scholar

and practitioner, and the impact as a future leader in the field of curriculum, instruction,

and assessment.

Project Strengths

My motivation behind this research study was to deepen my knowledge of student

retention from the perspectives of adult learning theorists and students' perceptions about

their experiences and to identify influential factors that foster academic achievements. I

based my rationale for this study on the need to (a) understand factors that impact adult

learners' experiences, (b) identify research-based techniques and targeted, practical

strategies to improve student persistence, and (c) have a better understanding of ways to

motivate adult students in a nontraditional school setting to enhance their engagement. I

primarily used two frameworks to guide my study: Knowles's (1970) theory of

andragogy and Tinto's (1975) persistence theory. Knowles et al. (2005) stressed the importance of educators having a basic awareness of why and how adults learn as most adults will take part in trainings or courses that are of interest to them or ones they believe will boost their knowledge on a topic or concept.

One of the significant strengths of my project was that I gained a greater insight into the issue of adult learner tenacity and drive through the students' narratives of their experiences and perceptions and via the literature review. Another positive impact of my study was the influence the students' suggestions had on the structure and contents of the PD plan I designed for the teachers. Through participation in the workshops, teachers can increase student achievement by reflecting on existing teaching practices, and by applying research based techniques to design lessons that incorporate best practices, engaging activities, and learning experiences in student-centered environments. Although instructors cannot control the larger socioeconomic and cultural influences on the lives of the students, educators are in a position to motivate learners and impact learning through improved classroom environments and effective teaching (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Teachers can enhance learning outcomes by designing a curriculum that meets learners' needs and learning styles and by engaging students in daily active learning in learner-centered classrooms.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

For a project deliverable, I used the study findings to create a series of PD workshops for instructors. Although a proper implementation of the project might be impactful in helping teachers make necessary curriculum and instructional changes, there

are some possible limitations to the implementation plan, including potential competing

new initiatives in the school, proposed implementation time frame, and securing teacher

buy-in for the PD plan.

School leaders often present teachers with various new initiatives with the

intended goal of enhancing student academic performance; the frequency of such new

programs can be overwhelming for practitioners and might prove to be a limitation for

this project. Because ABE's generic curriculum involves "commercially developed GED,

pre-GED, or other test preparation materials" (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014, p. 10),

instructors typically do not have purposeful or engaging curricula to guide their

instructions. I will highly recommend that the school leader support the implementation

of this PD plan because it was designed using existing program data, narratives from

study participants, and research-based curriculum and instructional best practices.

Another possible limitation might involve the time frame and length of the

professional learning series, which I have planned to be presented either during 3 full-day

mandated district wide professional learning days or during the summer break with

optional participation for all faculty to be compensated as per their contracts. If the

administrator does not approve the implementation of the PDs for either of the two

options, my other options would be to present the workshop modules in 3 nonconsecutive

staff development days during the school year calendar. By doing so, all teachers in the

program will get a chance to participate in the PD series and collaboratively create lesson

plans and best practices for their students. However, even with the approval of the 3-day

implementation, the time frame may not be enough to effectively implement the project,

evaluate the outcomes, and make appropriate changes. In addition to being exposed to

new approaches and ways of incorporating those strategies in the classroom, teachers will

need time and support to successfully integrate a new technique into their instructional

tool-kit (Jackson, 2013).

My additional recommendation for the program administrator might include

making a provision for an ongoing PLC where teachers and staff can continuously

collaborate to plan, implement, assess, and reflect on curricular and program needs of the

students, faculty, and the school. There needs to be an established meaningful

professional learning opportunity, and the instructors have to be open to collaborate

further and share their instructional best practices and ideas (Jackson, 2013; Roehl et al.,

2013).

An additional limitation for the implementation of this project may involve

securing teachers' buy-in because they have a crucial role in ensuring fruitful and

effective execution of any new initiative (Jackson, 2013). Teachers may have several

personal and professional reasons for not embracing a new challenge and the uncertainty

that comes with implementing and evaluating a new program. The program's

administration should allay such unease and possible resistance by cultivating and

promoting collaboration and collective responsibility for learner success in a conducive

environment where teachers can freely share ideas and learn from each other to enhance

their personal and professional growth. According to Killion and Roy (2009), culture and

collaboration go hand in hand, and a school's culture will influence a teacher's attitude

toward collaboration. On the school level, in-house PD plan should include continuous

training and support with how teachers can participate in collaborative inquiry and data

analysis to improve teaching and learning (Killion & Roy, 2009).

The amount of training time a teacher receives does not dictate the success of any

new initiative; however, presenting a new concept in one workshop is not enough to

ensure that instructors will implement the learned idea (Gulamhussein, 2013). According

to Gulamhussein (2013), teachers need repeated exposure before they carry out

something new. Ongoing dialogues about student learning outcomes and the use of data

to plan instructions will not only help practitioners to improve practices but will also

evaluate the effectiveness of new strategies, thereby connecting educators' professional

growth to their practices with students (Hayes & Robnolt, 2007).

Scholarship

Doing this project study has helped to develop as a scholar and a practitioner in

the field of education. During the doctoral research, I improved my analytical, research,

and critical thinking skills. I also gained, from the in-depth literature review, knowledge

of current trends and best practices that impact curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Conducting a literature review on adult education and adult learners exposed me to

countless theories and assumptions on how and why adults learn as well as the impact of

experiences and aspirations on adult learners. Numerous peer-reviewed articles I read

highlighted prevalent individual and institutional factors that influence adult student

motivation, impact retention rate in ABE programs, and enhance academic achievement.

I explored the identified problem from the conceptual frameworks of andragogy,

persistence theory, and transformational learning lens. The data analysis yielded themes

that influenced the content, structure, and rationale for my project design. As a doctoral candidate, the entire research process has added significantly to my professional growth as a practitioner, researcher, and student. Ultimately, the most significant impact from this scholarship experience was the opportunity to share the knowledge and research-based best practices garnered with other educators and practitioners in the adult education field. During the research on how to design useful professional development plan, I gained valuable insights and learned relevant lessons that will help me, in my current role as an administrator, to efficiently support teachers and students.

Leadership and Change

Educational leaders can influence a sustainable change by providing essential information, resources, support, and time for faculty to collaborate in communities where all stakeholders share collective responsibility for school and student academic performance (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2002). Some essential skills an educational leader will need to influence effective professional learning community must include the ability to be inclusive, to collaborate, facilitate, coach, and mentor (Killion & Roy, 2009). In most school communities, instructors already have the essential tools needed to enhance teaching and learning continuously, but it is the responsibility of the school leader to help each teacher access those tools (Killion & Roy, 2009). Effectual PD should be ongoing, job-embedded, site-specific, and targeted to sustain desired improved student outcomes (Killion & Roy, 2009). With appropriate support, school leaders can influence practitioners to change from

individualized practice to a data-driven, collaborative professional learning community (Jackson, 2009).

As a current member of school administration, I intend to continue to grow professionally by using all the acquired skills, knowledge, educational trends, and research-based best practices to influence change in curriculum, assessment, and instructional methods in the school community. I opted to produce PD workshops for instructors not only as a way to address the problem identified in my study, but also as a means of furthering the discourse on the importance of PD in improving teacher practices and student learning outcomes. Hirsh and Killion (2009) highlighted the need for school leaders to provide educators with ongoing learning opportunities where teachers can share expertise with colleagues and engage in systemic problem-solving practices. School leaders can foster a collaborative and sustained change in the learning community by involving instructors in constant school data analysis and decision-making processes, and in the planning and presentation of professional developments (Hirsh & Killion, 2009).

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Analysis of Self as Scholar

As an adult learner, I have many personal and professional responsibilities that compete with the demands of adult learning, but that did not interfere with my desire to satisfy my cognitive interests. Houle suggested that learning-oriented students acquire ongoing knowledge to support their fundamental nature of continuing education (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005). Also, Jackson (2009) opined that most adults are incessantly

searching for new information, and, as explained by the humanist theorists, people have the potential to grow as well as the desire to improve through adult education.

As a first-time online student, when I originally enrolled in a doctoral program structured solely as distance learning, I was initially apprehensive. However, as an adult learner, I have a keen sense of being responsible for my own decisions, my education, and for my personal life, in general. Like some of the participants I interviewed, I found myself, at times, overwhelmed with juggling schooling with other life's demands, including family, career, and other social commitments. Periodically, I sensed my initial motivation to pursue a doctoral degree begin to waver as I experienced an increased level of pressure of combining intense academic work of a project study with existing social, familial, work, and community obligations. Ultimately, the supports and encouragements I received from family, friends, and the Walden community, particularly my committee chair, helped me to persist in completing this project study.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a practitioner, I have participated in and facilitated several PD workshops throughout my career as an educator. I struggled with how to efficiently structure this project to ensure that the workshops appeal to the participants' learning styles as well as leverage their skills and experiences to further their individual and professional growth (Hirsh & Killion, 2009). I have transitioned to a leadership role in a traditional school system since embarking on this doctoral journey. However, the knowledge, ideas, skills, and leadership best practices gained through my research, and while designing this PD, are invaluable and applicable in my current position. Educational Leadership Constituent

Council standards encourage educational leaders to "build a group vision, develop quality educational programs, provide a positive instructional environment, apply evaluation processes, analyze data and interpret results and maximize human and physical resources" (NPBEA, 2002, p. 8). These are all important concepts and best practices that I will use to enhance my growth as a practitioner in education.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Because I elected to create PD workshops for this project, it was essential for me to be mindful that teachers, as adult learners, are already equipped with a wealth of professional experiences, cumulative knowledge, and instructional tools that should be considered when planning and presenting the learning series. In essence, as a facilitator, I should be able to convey, through the workshops, the intellectual value of this new learning to each instructor's performance or quality of life (Knowles et al., 2005). PD should encompass an extensive, sustained, and rigorous approach to foster instructors' efficacy in improving student learning outcomes as well as inspire a community's sense of collective responsibility for improved student academic achievement (Killion & Roy, 2009). I was cognizant of the need to use best practices and PD standards to design workshop activities that might address the identified student learning needs.

While designing the professional development modules for this project, I had to be mindful of the intended audience, including the veteran and new teachers, who might already have developed mindsets around teaching and learning. By taking into account the audience's experiences, expectations, and possible biases as well as the adult learning principles, I was able to create a project that might help teachers in improving their

curriculum and instructional practices in a meaningful way. After all, "learning for educators leads to learning for students," and educators should not be seen as "passive recipients of information" (Mizell, Hord, Killion, & Hirsh, 2011, p. 11).

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

The project has a high potential to effect social change in that it provides the school administrator a chance to engage the faculty and staff in discussions around student needs as highlighted by the study findings. It is imperative that curriculum leaders have essential knowledge of how adults learn and ways to support instructors in incorporating appropriate curricular and teaching methods for all learning styles. Gradually, school leaders are transforming schools from a culture of isolation where each teacher does what he or she wants in the classroom to a collaborative culture of inquiry and a PLC (Jackson, 2009). I have used the frameworks of adult learning principles and persistence theory to create a PD plan to help educators reflect on current practices and learn new strategies to improve student learning experiences. By participating in the workshops, teachers can further enhance learning outcomes by designing a curriculum that meets learners' needs and learning styles, and by engaging students in daily active learning in learner-centered classrooms.

Current and future educational leaders continue to have the important task of helping to reform the way PD plans are determined, planned and implemented by incorporating knowledge of varied learning styles and adult learning theory when designing and facilitating workshops. This project will impact social change through the implementation of the workshops planned to deepen teachers' knowledge and access to

strategies that promote collaborative practices to improve students' learning experiences. Hirsch (2009) suggested that school leaders should always include instructors in the process of identifying the foci of professional learning within the school community because, through data analysis, teachers could determine what they need to learn to better support each learner's academic needs and interests. When leaders support instructors in identifying each teacher's teaching and learning needs, and then collaborate with the teacher to select appropriate training to address the needs, the approach might help the teacher to feel more valued, to become aware of the desire to know, and grow richer in professional experience (Hirsch, 2009)

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The implication of sharing with educators and practitioners the research-based assumptions around adult learning and persistence theories is that as more educators become cognizant of the younger adults' unique developmental characteristics, it will influence the designing of targeted techniques to address the academic and social needs of the younger adult learners who are returning to formal education. The implementation of this PD plan might involve the whole staff in the program of study. The impact of focusing on the entire faculty in this one program site is that it might help to further embed professional learning and improvements in curricular and instructional practices and activities school wide. It might also encourage collaborative inquiry and examination of school data via ongoing structured PD opportunities.

Adults engage in new learning when they know why they have to learn the content; therefore, it was essential for me, as a project developer and facilitator of the

workshops, to help the teachers understand the "need to know" (Knowles et al., 2005).

This project might also be useful in assisting other ABE program leaders in grounding

their in-house professional learning with qualitative data that highlight the needs and

interests of their students as adult learners. According to Hirsh and Killion (2009), a key

component of effective professional learning includes adequate time, collaboration, as

well as shared goals and responsibility for student learning and academic performance.

Time is an essential element in PD because for educators and administrators to

continuously improve their knowledge and practice, PD ought to be ongoing and not just

a single endeavor (Hirsh & Killion, 2009).

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The implications for future study might encompass three areas. Firstly, due to the

limited timeframe for my study, this research was conducted with only 10 participants

from two sites affiliated with the program under study. Further research might include a

larger sample of the student population, and perhaps, the researcher can select

participants from more program sites. Secondly, even though the current and former

students were invited to take part in the research, only one former student, a graduate

who is currently attending a two-year college, agreed to be interviewed. Future research

might incorporate the perspectives of more former students who have either graduated or

dropped out of the program. Narratives from this segment of the student population might

shed more light on how the faculty and staff of the program met or did not to meet the

students' expectations. Thirdly, my sampling pool included only students who are 18

years of age or older, and who are proficient in the English language. GALP provides

HSE preparatory courses and other nonacademic services to younger adults, ages 17- to 21- years old, including newcomers to the United States, English Language Learners (ELLs), students with interruption in formal education (SIFE), and students with disabilities (SWD). Future researchers can include a more diverse group that is representative of the student body. Also, future qualitative researchers on the topic of student engagement and persistence might also include the instructors as participants. By including the teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and opinions about the perceived factors that influence students' persistence, the researcher would be able to cross-reference the narratives of both the students and the instructors.

Conclusion

Educators in ABE programs strive to help adult learners acquire their HSE diploma along with crucial college and workforce readiness skills. However, most of these adult learners, particularly the 16- to 24- year-old population, encounter personal and contextual barriers that impact their motivation, persistence, and successful completion of the program once they enroll. This research study was designed to explore those challenges through literature review and via students' perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the individual and institutional factors that impact persistence and student retention an ABE program. Through a qualitative case study approach, I investigated three research questions using, as frameworks, Knowles' theory of andragogy and Tinto's persistence theory to understand deeper the issues related to adult learners' motivation, persistence, and academic achievement.

I used the overarching themes that emerged from data analysis along with the students' responses to structure the focus and contents of 3 full-days of PD modules for teachers. By participating in the workshops, teachers can gain more insights into the various factors that impact adult learning experiences and persistence as well as learn some tools and new strategies to plan engaging lessons that align with instructional outcomes to efficiently achieve the desired student academic performance.

During the 3 days of PD training, participants will discuss the perspectives of adult learning theories, barriers to adult learning, and the theories of teaching. They will understand the differences between andragogy and pedagogy and the importance of integrating adult learning techniques and instructional approach in lesson planning. They will take part in activities to explore how adult learn, factors that influence persistence, and ways teachers could improve motivation and persistence in adult learners. Participants will also work independently and in small groups and use research-based techniques and best practices to design purposeful lessons that engage students in active learning in student-centered classrooms. Instructors will learn how to use backwards planning method to design a curriculum for adult learners, and then create a curriculum outline using all the research based knowledge, best practices, resources, ideas from peers, and existing tools from their repertoire. Through the effective implementation of the PD plan, the instructors would increase the adult learners' persistence and motivation to complete the courses and obtain an HSE diploma to participate in college and career options.

Educators could provide transformative learning by incorporating into the curriculum relevant topics representative of students' experiences. Instructors have the power to impact learners' persistence and increase their retention rate by creating a classroom environment that (a) engages students in active learning using an appropriate curriculum, (b) sets high expectation for all learners, and (c) recognizes each student's background experiences and learning style. Students would be more inclined to actively partake in the learning process when presented with high quality instruction and a way for them to monitor their progress. Teachers can support learners' perseverance by discussing anticipated hurdles with students, assisting students in monitoring their learning progress, providing an orientation specific to perseverance, and by conducting targeted outreach to students who drop out of the program (Kefallinou, 2009; Shaw et al., 2015).

Adult learners might struggle with the challenges of combining schooling with competing demands from family, work, and other life obligations. Although educators cannot control the broader socioeconomic and personal influences on the lives of their students, teachers can motivate learners and impact learning through improved classroom environments and effective instructional practices. It is essential for adult educators to employ research based best instructional practices and strategies to help students remain motivated as active learners in student-centered classrooms. When instructors understand who the students are and the transformational learning experiences that promote each learner's motivation and persistence, it will help program administrators and educators to support students' learning and increase their chances of successful completion. To

gradually address the retention challenges in ABE programs, it is imperative that

instructors of adult learners continue to use research based knowledge, instructional best

practices, and concrete strategies to cultivate active learning environments to sustain

improved student persistence and academic performance.

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Appendix A: The Project

Professional Development Program

Engaging Adult Learners in a Student-Centered Environment to Increase Persistence and

Academic Success

Agenda

<u>**Day 1**</u>

8:30-9:00	Light Breakfast and Registration
9:00-9:20	Introductions and Ice Breaker Activity
9:20-9:30	Overview of the 3-day Workshop Modules
9:30-9:40	Assumptions about Adult Learners
	Quick Write/Share
9:40-10:25	Perspectives of Adult Learning Theories
	Characteristics of Adult Learners
	Turn & Talk Activity
10:25-11:10	Understanding How and Why Adults Learn
	Andragogy vs Pedagogy
	Media clip/discussion
	Activity 1: What's your learning style?
	Activity 2: Principles of Adult Learning: Implications for Our Work
11:10-11:25	Break
11:25-12:30	Breaking the Barriers: Motivating Adult Learners

                    Brainstorming activity

                    Factors that Influence Motivation and Persistence

                    Activity: "Seven C's of Teaching"

                    Media Clip/Discussion

12:30-1:15	Lunch
1:15-1:25	Reflection/Energizer Activity
1:25-1:55	Theories of Teaching and the Role of a Teacher

                    Activity: Reading and Discussion

                    Text: "Theories of Teaching"

                    Protocol: Four "A"s

1:55-2:45	Putting Theory into Practice: Lesson Planning Part 1

                    Reflections/Share

2:45-3:00	Wrap Up/Evaluation

Agenda

<u>Day 2</u>

8:30-9:00	Arrival and Light Breakfast
9:00-9:15	Welcome and Module Overview
9:15-9:30	Warm Up Activity
9:30-9:45	Quick Write & Pair Share
9:45-10:25	Active Learning

                    Small Group Activity

                    "Gallery Walk"

10:25-11:00	Student Engagement through Active Learning
	Reading and Discussion
	Text: "Active Learning Methods"
	Protocol: 3-2-1
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:15	Small Group Activity
	Discipline/Team Planning
	Chart Best practices for Active Learning
12:15-12:30	Reflections/Share out/ Gallery Walk
12:30-1:15	Lunch
1:15-1:55	Self-Directed Learning: The Role of a Teacher (contd.)
	Activity: Independent Reading/Practice
	Text: "The Conditions of Learning and Principles of Teaching"
	Handout: New or Existing Strategy Chart
	Share- Best Practices Outline
1:55-2:45	Lesson plan for student-centered classrooms
	Activity: Lesson Planning Part 2
	Share/Reflections
2:45-3:00	Wrap Up/ Evaluation

Agenda

<u>**Day 3**</u>

8:30-9:00	Arrival and Light Breakfast
9:00-9:15	Welcome and Module Overview
9:15-9:9:30	Warm Up Activity
9:30-10:00	What is Your Style: Curriculum Style Indicator

        Activity: Complete Survey

        Discussion

10:00-10:50	Reading and Discussion

        Texts: "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice"

           "Integrated Curricular Approaches in Reaching

        Adult Students"

        Handout: Notes/Thoughts Catcher

10:50-11:00	Reflections/Share
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:20	Planning for Desired Outcome: Backwards Planning

        Media Clips: "Understanding by Design" Parts 1and 2

           "Stages of Backwards design"

        Activity: Curriculum Outline

12:20-12:30	Reflections/Q&A
12:30-1:15	Lunch

1:15-1:55   Planning for Success: Backwards Design

                   Small Group Activity

                   Active learning Experiences

1:55-2:45   Designing a Purposeful Curriculum for Adult Learners

                   Curriculum drafting continued

                   Wrap up/Share/ Q&A

2:45-3:00   Closing and Evaluation

Facilitator's Notes

Day 1

  I.   Welcome and Program Overview (Slide 1)

  II.   Introduction and Ice breaker (Slide 2)

          a) Participants at each table will find four things they have in common with each other and share with the large group as an introduction. It cannot be anything about education (*example: at one table, they might all have an Uncle Bob they don't like).*

          b) The facilitator will use *postcards from the edge* protocol to facilitate this activity. Display on each table a collection of wild postcards, or pictures printed from online. Each person selects a postcard or image that relates to his or her experience as an educator and circulates the room to exchange reflections with three different people.

  III.   Module 1 Objectives and quick facts (Slides 3-4)

          a) The facilitator will review Module, Session 1learning outcomes and ask participants to jot down their responses to any two of the questions posed. This will help to activate their prior knowledge. Two to three volunteers can share, if time permits. Proceed with discussions on the slides that follow.

  IV.   Perspectives of Adult Learning Theories (Slides 5-7)

          a. Review the definition of an "adult." Adult learning can take place at any stage of adulthood development. Even though younger adults differ from

both adolescents and older adults, they are often categorized with both groups especially for statistical purposes and for policy and program grouping (Bonnie et al., 2015).

b. Discuss Malcolm Knowles' assumptions about adult learners: (a) they are goal-oriented and driven by intrinsic motivation to learn, (b) they will easily participate in the learning process if they see the need and value of what is being learned (c) adult learners have their sense of self-concept and self-direction and are competent in making effective decisions, (d) adult learners' life experiences are useful resources that should be tapped into to fully support the learner, (e) adults want to learn if the topic is applicable to the real-life situations, (f) unlike pedagogy, adult learning is learner-centered (Alhassan, 2012; Cercone, 2008; Knowles et al., 2005; Lindeman, 1926; Ozuah, 2016).

c. The facilitator will discuss the important characteristics of adult learners using excerpt from the research. Include a brief background on Knowles' adult learning principles and assumptions and the influence on adult learning theories.

d. Participants will engage in a *Turn and Talk* activity using this prompt: With an elbow partner, participants will discuss the following: (i) what is learning?

(ii) How do you learn best? Allow few participants/volunteers to share their responses with the larger group (no more than 5 minutes).

V.   How and why adults learn (Slides 8-10)

      a.   Review "learning" as defined by scholars.

      b.   Discuss the key differences between *Pedagogy vs. Andragogy*

      c.   Play the short media clip and allow time for discussion.

      d.   **Activity:** Ask participants to turn and talk to a partner to respond to this question: How does the andragogical method of learning align with your learning style? (No more than 5 minutes).

VI.   Activity and Reflection (Slides 11-12)

      a.   **Activity:** Ask participants to count off in an order using letters A, B, C, D. They will form groups of 4 based on their corresponding letter. Distribute the handout/chart: "Principles of Adult Learning" (see Appendix B). Each group will read the eight principles of adult learning and write the implication for future planning and practice. A representative from each team will report back to the whole.

      b.   Once the activity is complete, ask a representative from each group to share the group's reflection, or take-away with the larger group. Allow adequate time for the share out/reflections.

      c.   Wrap up session 1. Break Time: (15 minutes)

VII.   Module 2 Overview (Slide 13)

      a.   Introduce the focus for session 2's presentation

VIII.   Increasing motivation and persistence in adult learners (Slides 14-15)

a. Ask participants to brainstorm on the reasons why some students dropout or stop-out. Share out.

b. Discuss the barriers to adult learning listed on slide 14 as they could impact a student's ability to complete an ABE program. It is critical to better understand what impacts adult learning in order to plan targeted strategies to enhance their motivation, persistence, and increase their chances of successful completion.

c. Define motivation and persistence and discuss research-based data on each. Learners' initial motivation might prove fleeting as they experience an increased level of difficulty in academic work coupled with other challenges associated with family, work, or financial demands. With the myriad demands on their time, some students still find it challenging combining school, work, and other commitments.

d. Intrinsic motivation influences a student's persistence in academic endeavors, but a successful completion can sometimes be hindered by environmental factors including challenges associated with program structure or class schedules (Alhassan, 2012; Emerick-Brown, 2013; Mellard et al., 2013). Adult education students are more likely to persist when they are offered high-quality instruction and their progress is evident to them.

e. Persistence occurs when a student successfully integrates into the institution academically and socially (Jenson, 2011, p.1).

IX. Factors that influence persistence (Slides 16-18)

    a. One of the most influential school factors that impact persistence is the quality of the relationship between teachers and students. According to the social-cognitive theory of motivation, there are "connections between an individual's perceptions of the learning environment and his/her motivation, interest, attitudes and confidence" (Radovan & Makovec, 2015, p.101).

    b. For adult learners, the relevancy of what is learned has a more significant influence on adults' motivation to learn than its intellectual value (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017, p. 83).

    c. Socio-constructivists emphasize cooperative learning through "student-centered, instructor-facilitated instructional strategy in which a small group of students is responsible for its learning and the learning of all group members" (Li & Lam, 2013, p. 1).

    d. The curriculum should be designed to meet and support students' needs and varied learning styles (Wiles, 2009). Technology influences how adults learn and educators ought to be integrating technology into both the curriculum design and its implementation.

    e. **Activity:** Ask each participant to reflect on the Seven C's of Teaching Practice (slide 17) and select 4 ideas that align with their instructional practice and elaborate on what each looks like in a classroom. Tell participants that in addition to what they have been doing, they can create

additional list of "best practices" to enhance each of the 4 concepts in their

classrooms. Participants will share their lists with an elbow partner or a

group. (No more than 10 minutes).

 f. Play this short media clip, *Motivating Adult Learners*, as a recap of session

  2 slides. Allow time for questions and answers. Wrap up the discussions

  before participants break for lunch.

X. Reflection and Energizer (Slide 19)

 a. Use a chalk talk protocol for this activity as a silent way for participants to

  reflect on their current instructional practices. Display 5 blank sheets of

  posters with a question written on each (see slide 19). Explain briefly that

  chalk talk is a silent activity. No one may talk at all, and anyone may add to

  the chalk talk with words or graphics as they please. They can comment on

  other people's ideas by merely drawing a connecting line to the comment

  (*protocol adapted from School Reform Initiative*). If time permits, participants

  can share what they noticed or wondering about what the group wrote on the

  chart papers.

XI. Historical Perspective: Theories of Teaching and the Role of a Teacher (Slides

 20-21)

 a. Participants will form groups of four by counting off (1, 2, 3, 4). They will

  form a group based on like numbers and each group will read assigned pages

  of the text using 4 "A"s protocol (see Resources). A representative from each

  group will report back to the larger group.

b. **Activity:** Reading and Discussions. Distribute handout: "Theories of

Teaching" (Knowles et al., pp. 73-105). Assign pages to each group as

follows:

    i.   Group 1: "Principles of Teaching from Theories of Learning" pp. 73-

        75

    ii.   Group 2: "Teaching Concepts Derived from Learning Theories of

        Adults" pp. 84-87

    iii.   Group 3: "Teaching Concepts Derived from Learning Theories of

        Adults" pp. 87-91

    iv.   Group 4: "Concepts of Teaching Derived from Theories of Teaching"

        pp. 92-96

c. A representative from each group will share the synopsis of the assigned

pages with the larger group. At the completion of the reading and discussion

activity, participants will re-group based on their content areas to read the

remaining pages (96-105) of the text and continue to reflect on what they read.

Allow adequate time for this activity.

XII.   Putting Theory into Practice- Lesson planning part 1(Slide 22)

a. **Activity:** For this portion of activity, participants can work independently or

in discipline teams to reflect on current practices, and to create a draft lesson

plan that incorporates what they have learned so far about "teaching concepts

derived from learning theories of adults" as well as "concepts of teaching" as

per theories of teaching. Participants will be encouraged to bring the lesson plan draft created to the next day's session. Share out.

XIII.   Wrap Up and Evaluation (Slide 23)

    a. Allow for questions and reflections from participants. Ask each person to complete a feedback form to evaluate the day's presentation. Wrap up Day 1.

Day 2

    I.   Welcome and Module overview (Slide 24)

    II.   Warm up activity – Creating a Metaphor (Slide 25)

    III.   Discussion and Writing

        a. **Activity 1:** Quick Write and Pair Share (15 minutes)

        Once the warm activity concludes, participants will be asked to do a quick write and share using the following prompt: *Write down powerful learning experiences you had from when you were age 17 to 21.* Ask each person to share with an elbow partner or with group members.

    IV.   Small Group Brainstorming- Active Learning (Slide 26)

        a. **Activity 2:** Each group will be given a flipchart to record their responses which will be posted around the room after each group's presentation to the larger group. Participants will do a "gallery walk" later to review the charted responses and ideas.

    V.   Reading Activity (Slide 27)

a. Participants will read the assigned text, individually, and then use *3-2-1 protocol* with the prompts on the slide, to respond to the text. If time permits, participants will share out.

VI. Small Group Planning (Slide 28)

a. **Activity 3:** Discipline Team Planning. In this activity, participants will work in their discipline teams to review the contents they are planning to teach and create an outline of best practices and methods they will use to incorporate active learning in their classrooms. Teachers will use this later to work on the lesson plans draft they created on Day 1. The slide below will be displayed for the activity. Each team will record their outlines on chart paper for posting.

b. Once this activity is completed, teams will post their chart papers for "gallery walk" later share where participants will be free to peruse the ideas posted by their colleagues. Wrap up session 1and participants will break for lunch.

VII. Independent Practice: "The Role of the Teacher" (Slide 29)

a. **Activity 4**: Integrate new strategy and revise existing strategy. Distribute handouts: (a) "The Role of the Teacher: The Conditions of Learning and Principles of Teaching" (Knowles et al., 2005, pp. 93-94); (b) Integrate new strategy/Revise existing strategy (see Appendix C).

b. Participants will work individually to reflect on their current practices as related to the concepts discussed in the reading. This was part of Day One's reading activity. A few volunteers will be solicited to share their lists. Discuss the implication for future planning and practice.

VIII. Revisiting Lesson planning for student-centered classrooms

    a. **Activity 5**: Lesson Plan- Part 2: Participants will work together using the resources as well the strategies and best practices that have been discussed so far to revise the lesson plan each created in Day 1. If time permits, participants could share their drafts with the discipline team members or other colleagues for feedback. Participants will be asked to bring this current draft of lesson plan(s) to Day 3's meeting.

IX. Wrap Up and Evaluation

    a. Allow for questions and reflections from participants. Ask each person to complete a feedback form to evaluate the day's presentation. Wrap up Day 2.

Day 3

I. Day 3 and Module Overview (Slide 30)

II. Welcome and Warm-up (Slide 31)

    a. The quotes on slide 31will be displaced on chart papers posted around the room and participants will *use chalk talk protocol* (see Day 1) to respond to the quotes. If time permits, there will be a group debrief.

III. Curriculum Style Survey

    a. **Activity 1:** Participants will complete Miller Curriculum Style Indicator, developed by Donna L. Miller (see Resources on slide 37) to reflect on or determine their curriculum style. The different curriculum preferences will be reviewed and discussed after the participants are done with the survey.

IV. Reading Activity

a. Distribute handouts: "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice" (Mezirow, 1997, pp. 5-12). "Integrated Curricular Approaches in Reaching Adult Students" Emerick-Brown, 2013, pp. 128-130). Distribute: copies of Notes/Thoughts Catcher Outline (see Appendix D)

b. **Activity 2:** Participants will work independently or with partners/groups to read both texts and use the Notes/Thoughts Catcher to records best practices, new strategies learned, questions, wonderings, or just what resonates with them, especially around transformational learning, adult learner motivation, learner-centered environments, self-directedness, and integrating technology in curriculum. There will be a general group discussion to allow participants to share the reflections about the ideas discussed in the text. This will be followed by a 15-minute break.

V. Planning for Adult Learners: Backwards Planning (Slides 32-34)

a. The following slides will be used to guide discussions around planning. Play the three short media clips on "Understanding by Design" and "Stages of Backwards Design." Once the clips have been played and discussed, participants will complete a quick write activity.

b. **Activity 3:** Create a plan or an outline of a curriculum that you will implement in the near future. Share out; wrap up this session and break for lunch.

VI. Learner-Centered Approach- Backwards Planning

a. Activity: Small Group: In this small group activity, participants will share their reflections on the interrelationships between student intellectual engagement and the classroom environment, and then together make a list of best practices and strategies to support adult learners' intellectual engagement. They will collaborate to examine their individual practices while using what they have learned from the presentations so far to identify ways to engage students in classrooms. They can also plan lessons together with focus on active learning experiences for students. As they discuss, participants will become more knowledgeable on adult learning theories and styles as well as share ideas of interactive lessons that can enhance student engagement in daily lessons. Participants can also use this opportunity to share the lesson plan drafts they have created in the last two days' presentations to get input/feedback from their colleagues.

VII. Designing a Purposeful Curriculum for Adult Learners
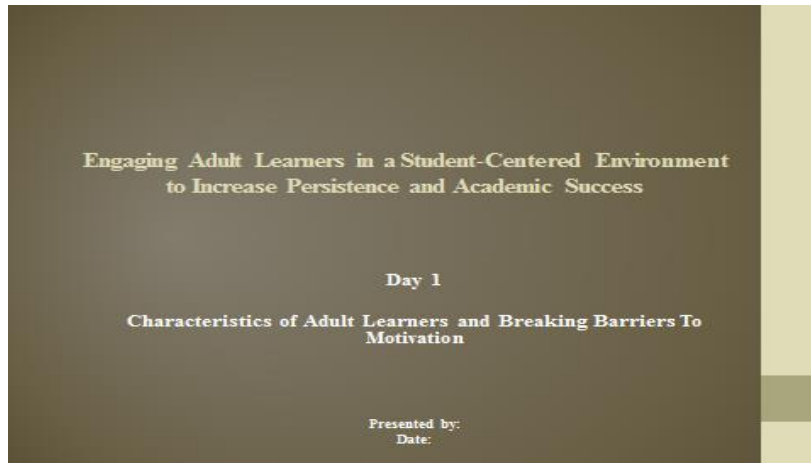
a. Participants will use this opportunity to work on drafting their curriculum using all the research-based knowledge, best practices, resources, ideas from peers, and existing tools to plan out a few content lessons they might implement immediately. Participants will have the option to work independently or with team members.

VIII. Wrap Up/Reflections/Evaluation

a. The last thirty minutes of Day 3 will be used to address participants' questions, concerns, wonderings, and next steps. They will also fill out a final

evaluation form for the presentations. This concludes the 3-day professional

development program.

PowerPoint Presentation Slides for the Modules

Slide 1

Slide 2

Slide 3

Slide 4

Slide 5

Slide 6

Slide 7

Slide 8

Slide 9

Slide 10

Slide 11

Slide 12

Module 2: Breaking the Barriers: Motivating Adult learners

- A large number of beginning adult learners who enroll in ABE programs or HSE preparatory classes often disengage from the programs before finishing one educational level (Bean, 1989; Comings, 2007; Horne et al., 2012; Mellard et al., 2013).

What do you think are some of the reasons students drop out once the program?

Slide 13

Barriers to adult learning

- Academic challenges
- Learner's motivation
- Lack of persistence
- The gap in time between disengagement and re-engagement
- Family, economic, and social obligations
- Work-related sacrifices
- Lack of school engagement
- Non-supportive learning environment
- Structure of classes

Slide 14

Motivation & Persistence

- Motivation is "the willingness both to initiate and to sustain effort towards a goal," but persistence is the element that supports and increases the effort as the initial motivation starts to subside (O'Neill and Thomson, 2013, p. 164).
- "Persistence is not just the product of individual characteristics, prior experiences, or prior commitments, but the outcome of interactions between the individual and the institution" (Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 474).

Slide 15

Factors that influence persistence

- **Internal motivation**
- **Self-directedness**
- **Learning environment**
  - *Sense of belonging*
  - *Instructor's role*
  - *Culturally relevant education*
  - *Student-centered classrooms*
  - *Transformational learning*
 - *Curriculum and technology*

Slide 16

Seven C's of Teaching Practice

Sparks (2012) suggests that students' academic achievement improved greatly when teachers exhibited the "seven C's of teaching practice" - meaning the instructor:

- Cares about students;
- Captivates them by showing learning is relevant;
- Confers with students to show their ideas are welcomed and respected;
- Clarifies lessons so knowledge seems feasible;
- Consolidates knowledge so lessons are connected and integrated;
- Controls behavior so students stay on task; and
- Challenges students to achieve (p. 2).

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Motivating Adult Learners
By Jasmine Gomez

Motivating Adult Learners
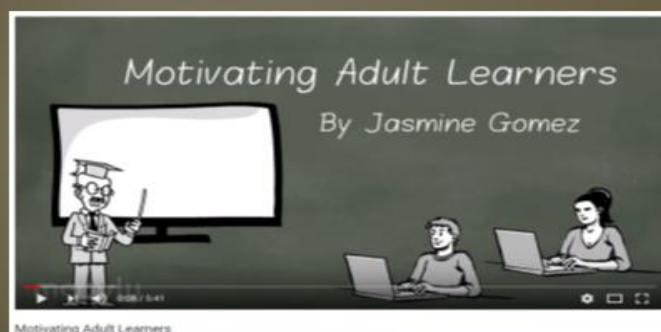
Slide 18

Activity

- 1. What do my students see in my classroom?
- 2. What do my students hear in my classroom?
- 3. What do my students feel in my classroom?
- 4. What do my students experience in my classroom?
- 5. How do I provide a learning environment that fosters the proper attitude for my students' success?

(adapted from Kafele, 2013)

Slide 19

Principles of Teaching from Theories of Learning

- Text:
Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., III, & Swanson, E. A. (2005). The adult learner: The definitive classic on adult education and human resource development (6th ed.). Oxford, UK: Elsevier. Handout: "Theories of Teaching". (pp. 73-105).

Slide 20

Four "A"s Text Protocol
Adapted from School Reform Initiative

Purpose: To explore a text deeply in light of each person's values and intentions

Roles: Facilitator/timekeeper (who also participates), participants

Time: Five minutes total for each participant, plus 10 minutes for the final 2 steps.

Process:

1. The group reads the assigned text silently, highlighting it and writing notes in the margin or on sticky notes in answer to the following 4 questions (they can also add their own "A"s).

   What Assumptions does the author of the text hold?
   What do you Agree with in the text?
   What do you want to Argue with in the text?
   What parts of the text do you want to Aspire to (or Act upon)?

2. In a round, have each person identify one assumption in the text, citing the text (with page numbers, if appropriate) as evidence.

3. Either continue in rounds or facilitate a conversation in which the group talks about the text in light of each of the remaining "A"s, taking them one at a time. What do people want to agree with, argue with, and aspire to (or act upon) in the text? Try to move seamlessly from one "A" to the next, giving each "A" enough time for full exploration.

4. End the session with an open discussion framed this question: What does this mean for our work with students?

5. A member of each team will report back to the larger group using the following prompts: What did your team want to agree with, argue with, and aspire to (or act upon) in the text? What is the implication for your work with adult learners?

Slide 21

Activity 3: Putting Theory into Practice

- Reflect on what your students are currently learning and create a draft lesson plan that will meet Bruner's four criteria as outlined in the theory of instruction or inquiry teaching (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 97).

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Reflection / Q & A

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Engaging Adult Learners in Student-Centered Environment to Increase Persistence and Academic Success

Day 2

How do we engage students?
Designing purposeful lessons

Presented by:
Date:

Slide 24

Creating a Metaphor

Fill in the blank: Being an educator is like being a(n)
_____. Write your metaphor on an index card.
On the back of your card, explain why you chose that metaphor
and what guidance the metaphor might offer you in tough
situations. In triads, present your metaphor to your colleagues.
Discuss the strengths of each other's metaphors and the impact
of such metaphor in future practice.
Each of the 3 presentation/discussion "rounds" takes about 3
minutes.

Slide 25

Active learning

- What does active learning look like? Feel like? Sound like?

- How does active learning influence and interact with student thinking?

- At your tables, please take a few minutes to discuss the questions and brainstorm on different types of activities you have used to engage adult learners in active learning.

Slide 26

Reading

- Text:
"Active Learning Methods" (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012, pp. 3-5).

- 3 Ways the methods discussed shape active learning for adult learners.

- 2 Ideas from the text that you might incorporate in your lessons.

- 1 Strategy you cannot wait to try out in your classroom.

Slide 27

Brainstorming

- "Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning" Ellis (2014).

- Methods that promote active learning in a classroom including individual, paired, or small group activities… activities such as "conceptual mapping, brainstorming, collaborative writing, case-based instruction, cooperative learning, role-playing, simulation, project-based learning, and peer teaching" (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012, pp. 3-4).

- Cooperative learning method promotes high-order thinking skills, increases motivation and enhances interpersonal relations (Barkley et al., 2014)

Slide 28

The Role of the Teacher

- Text:
"The Role of the Teacher: The conditions of learning and Principles of Teaching" (Knowles et al., 2005, pp. 93-94)

Using the chart provided to make a list of your current instructional practices or develop a new list of "best practices" for enhancing students' self-directed learning. You can also use the ideas from the text to revise the existing strategies you employ in your daily practices.

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Engaging Adult Learners in a Student-Centered Environment to Increase Persistence and Academic Success

Day 3
Fostering A Culture For Learning through Purposeful Curriculum

Presented by:
Date:

Slide 30

Warm Up Activity: Chalk Talk

1. "The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think—rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men." --John Dewey
2. "When teachers understand their own "curriculum style," they can make conscious decisions about incorporating other styles into their practice" (Miller, 2011, p. 32).
3. "With an equitable and rigorous curriculum design, teachers help students enter the world independently, preparing them for leadership" (Miller, 2011, p. 32).
4. "Authentic-real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or text-books that water down, control, or over-simply content ultimately disempower students" (Ellis, 2014, p. 49).
5. "The learning theory subscribed to by a teacher will influence his or her teaching theory" (Knowles, 2005, p. 73).
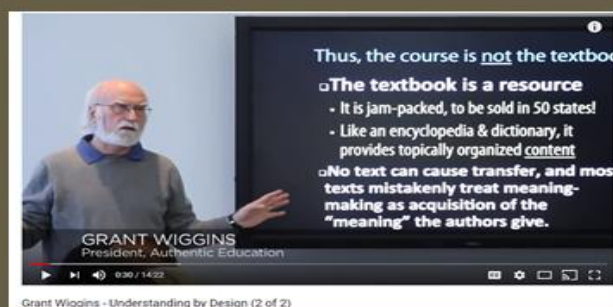
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Planning for Desired Outcomes

Slide 32

Planning for Desired Outcomes

Slide 33

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Appendix B: Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Title of the Workshop Series: Engaging Adult Learners in a Student-Centered Environment to Increase Persistence and Academic Success.

Purpose: My objective in creating this project is to present professional development workshops to help educators to examine existing processes and then collaborate to create best practices, activities, and lesson plans that will incorporate some of the strategies presented to improve learning for all students. Instructors will participate in individual, small, and whole group activities to review current teaching practices, examine researched-based best curricular and instruction practices, and create lessons they can implement in their respective classrooms.

Goal: The goal is to use this project to provide educators with a deeper understanding of why and how adults learn, and ways to enhance existing institutional structures to promote student engagement, learning outcomes, and persistence in the school community. By participating in the workshops, instructors could gain new knowledge on adult learning theories as well as concrete research-based techniques to enhance curricular and instructional practices.

Desired Outcomes: The desired outcome is to assist teachers and staff in using data, current research-based knowledge, and concrete strategies to improve practices and increase student academic performance.

Target Audience: The target audience includes administrators, faculty, and staff of an adult education program.

Length of Workshop: Three full-day sessions.

Session Activities: Specific activities include session materials, protocols, PowerPoint Slides, and evaluation tools.

Implementation Plan: The implementation plan starts with an initial meeting with the program administrator to get support with implementing the project. The administrator will convene a meeting with members of the cabinet including assistant principals, the dean, academic coaches, the student support team, department representatives, the professional development committee lead, and the information technology specialist. Once representatives have been identified, pre-implementation meetings will commence. Below is a suggested implementation time table:

Week 1: Initial meeting with the administrator

- Administrator seeks out key staff for the implementation meeting

Weeks 2 & 3: Pre-implementation meeting with the cabinet and other representatives from the school

- Present project study findings
- Discuss objectives of the professional development series
- Schedule dates for the professional learning series
- Gather necessary information, resources, and materials for the workshop modules
- Schedule follow meeting

Week 4: Follow-up meeting with workshop presenters and/or facilitators, possibly from PD committee

- Review notes from prior meeting

- Present data and information that will serve as the content for the professional development workshops

- Review PowerPoint modules

- Discuss additional materials and resources needed for the workshops

- Arrange for the needed technology

- Schedule final planning meeting

Weeks 5 & 6: Final planning meeting / pre-workshop training

- Review notes from prior meeting

- Conclude on all resources needed, including technology

- Provide training / support for presenters and facilitators

Week 7: The professional learning series take place for 3 full-days during the Summer Institute.

Appendix C: Principles of Adult Learning

Principles of Adult Learning	
Principle	Implications for work with teammates or teacher
1. Adults will commit to learning something when the goals and objectives are considered realistic and important to the learner. That is, perceived as being immediately useful and relevant to their personal and professional needs.	
2. Adult learners need to see the results of their efforts and need to have accurate feedback about progress toward their goals.	
3. Adult learning is ego involved. There is always fear of external judgment that we adults are less than adequate, which produces anxiety during new learning situations.	
4. Adults come to any new learning experience with a wide range of	

previous experiences, knowledge, skills, self-direction, interests, and competence.	
5. Adults want to be the origins of their own learning; that is, involved in the selection of objectives, content, activities, and assessment.	
6. Adults reject prescriptions by others for their learning, especially when what is prescribed is viewed as an attack on what they are presently doing.	
7. Motivation is produced by the learner; all one can do is encourage and create conditions which will nurture what already exists in the adult.	
8. Adult learning is enhanced by behaviors that demonstrate respect, trust, and concern for the learner.	
(from Judith Warren Little, cited in Lieb, 2005, p. 15)	

Appendix D: Strategy Chart

Current practices	Integrate new strategy	Revise existing strategy

Appendix E: Notes and Thoughts Catcher

Engaging Adult Learners in a Student-Centered Environment to Increase Persistence and Academic Success	
Text:	
Notes/Thoughts Catcher	Date
Best practice/new strategy learned	Questions/Wonderings
Motivation and persistence	
Learning Environment	
Self-Directedness	
Transformational Learning	

Student-Centered Classrooms	
Curriculum and Technology	

Appendix F: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What influenced you to participate and become engaged in the HSE preparatory classes?

2. How did / do you perceive your engagement in the HSE preparatory classes?

3. What do you perceive to be the factors that motivated / motivate you to continue your enrollment in the program?

4. Some students in this program drop out and don't finish the classes or get their high school equivalency diploma. Why do you think this is?

5. How did / do your teachers motivate you to succeed in classes?

6. What in general motivated/motivates you to perform academically?

7. How would you describe the quality of instruction you received or still receive in this program?

8. What are your perceptions on how the quality of instruction lead to student retention and learning success?

9. Is there anything we might have missed or anything you would like to add?

Appendix G: Evaluation Form

Workshop Title_____ Presenter_____ Date_____

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	The workshop was applicable to my interest and needs	1	2	3	4	5
2.	The workshop was well paced within the allotted time	1	2	3	4	5
3.	The presenter/facilitator was knowledgeable on the topic	1	2	3	4	5
4.	The materials were presented in an organized way	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The workshop activities engaged me in active learning related to its goals	1	2	3	4	5
6.	The design of the workshop facilitated exchange of expertise among participants	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I will use the resources from this workshop to help implement what I learned today colleagues	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I plan to share what I learned with	1	2	3	4	5

9.	What aspects of today's workshops were the most valuable for you? And why?

10.	What aspects of today's workshops were the least valuable for you? And why?

11.	How will you use or apply what you learned today when you return to your school?

Please return this form to the presenter or facilitator at the end of the workshop. Thank you.