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A Qualitative Study of Adult Students' Experiences with Persistence Support

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ADULT STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PERSISTENCE

SUPPORT

by

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ABSTRACT

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by

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This qualitative study examined the perspectives of young adults on their experiences as participants in a General Education Development certificate and high school diploma program with persistence support. The perplexing issue of persistence has prompted the efforts of similar adult basic education (ABE) programs serving at-risk populations to identify means to encourage and support sustained participation and credential completion. The literature on persistence reveals the importance of positive disposition and social context on participation decisions in these efforts. Social context is the foundation of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory. In this study, participant experiences were analyzed against the conceptual framework of Bandura's theory. The goal was to understand how social contexts factored into the participants' experiences and how they impacted their persistence. The findings confirmed the impact of social contexts on persistence and underscored the importance of dispositional approaches to support persistence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Family has been the greatest support factor during this extended academic journey. I dedicate this study to them: my sister Denise, who has been steadfast in her readiness to help me in any way; my daughter Kim who pushed me forward and lovingly and attentively supported my progress; my son Jon, who while growing up, sacrificed "mom time" so his mother could pursue her goals; my grandson Anthony and my granddaughter Jade for whom I hope to be an inspiration for their academic pursuits; and lastly, my parents, Harvey and Susie, whose immigrant dreams of success for their daughters I hope to have fulfilled.

Chapter One: Introduction

According to a 2009 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2003 an estimated 1 in 7 or about 32 million adults in this country lacked basic literacy skills (White, Krenzke, & Sherman, 2010). A 2010 report by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy states that only 2.4 million of this country's approximate 50 million low literate adults engage in federally funded programs each year (Greenberg et al., 2012). In that same year, the U.S. Census recorded that almost 40 million adults aged 16 and older lacked the secondary credential of a high school diploma or GED certificate (GED Testing Service, 2014).

Yet, these numbers attesting to the nation's large, illiterate population fail to elicit an urgency, forecasting social and economic consequences, indicators of which portend problems of great magnitude and complexity. The societal cost of adult illiteracy has been slow to materialize in the public mind, but its insidious impact on this country's future is being revealed tangentially, in lost earnings to the economy, unemployment, underemployment, exacerbation of poverty, escalating crimes rates, increased prison populations, family dysfunction, and burdened social services. These realities are being perpetuated generationally and stigmatize the lives of many marginalized peoples (McLaughlin, Sum, & Khatiwada, 2007).

Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs have had to reconcile their approaches and re-align their work within the context of the country's current political and economic climate. Public sentiment, driving national priorities, is less inclined to respond to the personal struggles of adult education's learners and the needs of programs that service them, preferring instead to rely on quantitative data upon which to base policy and legislative action. The result of this perspective is performance-based funding.

In July of 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was passed and reauthorized the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The new legislation maintained basic WIA funding structures for adult basic education but created a single set of common measures against which programs receiving federal funds would be assessed (Hanks, 2014). These performance measures and required outcomes for funding have generated great concern across ABE programs, particularly those that serve low literate, at-risk learning populations.

Positive outcomes cannot be achieved without consistent student attendance (retention) and consistent effort toward the achievement of a specific goal (persistence). Persistence correlates with educational gain and credential completion, providing literacy programs with documented outcomes for funding. However, the criticality of persistence for learner success and program survival is equaled only by the enormity of the challenge to sustain it with at-risk adults.

Studies show average ABE participants enter literacy programs below a fifth grade level (Comings, Cuban, Bos, & Taylor, 2001). One hundred hours of instruction is needed for a student to increase one grade level on a standardized test (Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999). However, most adult literacy learners participate for only about 70 hours in a year, and attrition is as high as 80% within the first 12 months of participation (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005).

The literature on ABE has probed the inconsistent, incomplete, and elusive issue of persistence and its related variables from perspectives of the institutions, programs, classrooms, instruction, and learners. The sabotaging factors to adult persistence have led to numerous studies on the barriers to sustained engagement that result in high attrition rates in ABE programs. Studies have examined countless data on institutions, programs, classroom practice, practitioner perspectives, and participant viewpoints in hopes of identifying areas where

intervention could have the greatest impact to stem the student exodus. The concentration has focused on the factors—the barriers— that force individuals to leave ABE programs.

Of the three major categories of barriers identified by Cross (1992)—situational, institutional, and dispositional— the primary cause for student attrition is situational barriers: the main deterrent to persistence (Comings et al., 1999; Porter et al., 2005; Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Glass, 2011). Though the dominant factor in attrition rates, situational barriers represent the one area over which ABE programs have the least power and ability to address. The second category, institutional barriers, being operational or policy-based, often prove immutable and prevent enactment of measures to modify issues related to student services and participation needs (Comings, Cuban, Bos, & Porter, 2003).

However, according to Quigley (1997), the one factor over which practitioners and programs can exert major influence is on the dispositional barriers: the attitudes and perspectives that determine direction and action. What individuals feel, experience, and internalize can mold their disposition, attitude, and subsequent behavior toward education and goals. Context or environment influences these experiences, and the interactions of individuals with their environment can determine behavior (Bandura, 2001; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006). Therefore, the context of an educational experience can impact behavior, which in turn can impact persistence. What individuals experience during their participation in an educational activity and how they respond to specific aspects of that environment could inform practice on strategies to sustain persistence. Therefore, the focus of this study was to understand how interactions with contextual elements in and surrounding program participation supported student persistence.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the life experiences of individuals in the context of secondary program participation to identify the factors that supported their persistence decisions. Persistence in adult basic education programs is a universal, ubiquitous, vexing problem, prevalent in the discourse and examined in the research on adult literacy. The need to identify and implement persistence strategies has greater urgency now with funding for program sustainability contingent upon program accountability. Moreover, the transition of individuals to improved economic and social circumstances depends largely on education, the completion of which necessitates program continuance. But program progression is stymied by the barriers to persistence. Studies agree that the complexities of multiple situational barriers are the leading cause for program departure (Comings et al., 1999).

Beyond their capabilities to address the situational needs of at-risk adults such as child care, mental and physical illness, transportation, unemployment, and homelessness, providers and practitioners seek other, more viable means to sustain learner persistence. A number of studies related to institutional barriers examined the logistical issues related to location, enrollment and registration processes, class schedules, counseling and advising, and instruction. However, mediation efforts had only modest success for enactment in large policy-driven institutions (Comings et al., 2003). Where some instituted efforts had potential for participant support, these attempts at institutional change were frustrated by participants' tenacious situational barriers.

Other programs focused on the individual, using incentives as motivation in their approach to support persistence. Several studies detailed offers of scholarships, paid internships, and cash awards to students who met established criteria as incentives to encourage attendance

and persistence. The outcomes, however, were mixed and some countered the expectations of the initiators (Bangser, 2013; Brooks et al., 2008; Ziegler, Ebert, & Cope, 2004).

These programs incorporated dispositional approaches to persistence through incentives designed to motivate individuals to continue participation. The disposition of individuals and the motivation to act, however, can also be influenced by how they view a task and as they weigh all factors required for successful completion of that task (Bandura, 2001). What individuals learn, feel, and internalize from experiences can mold their disposition. These same elements can also factor as dispositional barriers, which Quigley (1997) posits as the category of barriers over which programs have the ability to exert influence. Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, and Brian (2006) support Quigley's assertion that dispositional variables tend to be underrepresented in the literature but are the most promising of the three categories of barriers for improvement.

The Research Question

The connections that link experience with disposition advance the main research question that guided this persistence study: What were adult students' experiences with persistence support in ABE programs? As posed by Bandura (2001) and Merriam and Caffarella (2006), context or environmental influences are an inextricable factor in the experiences of individuals and determine behavior. Situational barriers comprise the external contexts of at-risk adults and factor into their efforts to persist in educational programs. Therefore, recognizing the inherence of environmental/contextual elements like situational barriers in the experiences of many ABE learners, subquestions to the main research question included:

- How did program participation influence learner perspectives related to past and current obstacles to persistence?

- What influences did the program environment exert on participant disposition and behaviors?

Need for the Study

Persistence is a critical goal in adult literacy programs, but it is plagued by high attrition rates, which increasingly threaten the sustainability of many ABE programs. Without positive reported outcomes, programs suffer funding consequences.

One hundred hours of study result in a grade level gain, as measured by the National Reporting System (NRS), the primary measuring instrument WIOA for programs receiving federal funding. However, studies reveal that students exit programs far short of this benchmark and before post tests can be administered to document any learning gains (Comings, 2007).

Countering high attrition rates is a serious challenge, especially in the work with at-risk and illiterate populations. The literature on attrition confirms external (situational) barriers as the factor most frequently identified by participants as the reason for their departure from programs (Comings et al.,1999; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Office of Adult and Vocational Education, 1997; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Porter et al., 2005; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Though this study examined the issue of persistence through the experiences of at-risk adults, the deficit model was not used to focus on participant faults and shortcomings (Pickard, 2013). Instead, this study was a counterbalance to the preponderance of deficit model studies in its concentration on the experience of individuals who persisted in their educational endeavors. In choosing to engage in a program, these individuals nested this new context into their larger life context. This study examined their engagement with both contexts to understand how the impact from these interactions influenced them and their participation decisions. The goal was to identify the factors that enabled them to persist in their studies and the elements that supported their efforts.

Significance of the Study

Studies concede that persistence is an amorphous concept and its study is frustratingly complicated by this undefinability (Comings, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2012). Variations to its definition; its measurement; its variables and their impact on persistence; its correlation with motivation, academic gain, self-efficacy, and goal achievement are among the aspects that comprise the numerous and diverse persistence studies. Tangential to the emphases in these studies are investigations of how persistence originates and the contextual impact of the classroom, programs, institutions, and communities on its perpetuation.

While reflecting a consensus about persistence and its criticality to successful outcomes, these multiple aspects of persistence are like unconnected mosaic fragments. Each piece of investigated information, each new finding adds to the concept; however, cohesion is needed to bind these fragments into comprehensible clusters. There is a need to group the related concepts, variables, and elements to learn how they connect and interrelate to form the underpinning for the overarching concept of persistence.

Therefore, this study attempted to enhance an understanding of one aspect of student persistence: how it was sustained in the nested context of a program with support services. From the insights and perspectives procured from participant interview data, the goal of this study was to understand how adults were affected by their experiences as participants in a program with wrap-around features. Both the internal and external contexts, which were assimilated into these experiences, were examined with the program's interventions and incentives for their influence on persistence. It is hoped that the contribution of participant voices assisted in connecting the elements of persistence and aided in the understanding of their interdependence. It is further hoped this description not only clarified one aspect of persistence but also provided program

developers with options and flexibility in working with individual or cluster components in tailoring their persistence support strategies.

Background of Researcher

As a former program coordinator, instructor, and administrator at an urban-based technical college, I have over 18 years of experience working directly with adult learners enrolled in ABE and secondary credential bearing programs. My work as an instructor and program administrator gave me firsthand experiences with the challenges of serving and working with at-risk ABE learners and with the disappointments that result from goals not achieved. The frustration was particularly keen in the secondary programs I supervised. It is well known that in leaving that secondary credential behind, students shorten the opportunity trajectory of their lives and most probably confine themselves to the same circumstances that will perpetuate their entrapments. Though the institutional cost of exited students is a loss in ABE program funding, the greater cost is the egregious loss of human potential and the impeded advancement of lives.

My professional history, my classroom work with students, and my involvement in program development-imprinted my perspectives on ABE populations and program designs to best service them. However, these established philosophies and viewpoints created the potential of and raised concerns for the study's compromise due to researcher bias. A credible study must have assurances for objectivity. Qualitative research, according to Creswell (2007), requires that the researcher clears herself of all presuppositions that would otherwise taint the conception of the study's plans and implementation. This cleansing of inherent personal viewpoints and biases requires what Moustakas (1994) details of Husserl's concept as *epoche* or bracketing.

My role as researcher required full disclosure of a number of revelations: those related to the study, such as the impetus for pursuing this research and its goals; my work with the

8

demographic of this study; and my world view that orientated me to the approach I used in this investigation. Chapter 3 more completely details the origins that prompted this study and its goals; my philosophical presuppositions regarding qualitative inquiry; and the study's methodology, including the intents for data collection, analysis, and triangulation. In addition, the delimitations of the study specify the limited generalizability of the study's findings.

My role as researcher further depended on conscious efforts to maintain the principles of qualitative inquiry where the focus depended upon the elicited views and descriptions from those who directly lived the experience of the phenomenon being studied in order to understand the meaning within those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Muting my voice as the researcher in deference to the voices of participants optimized the study's ability to present a fair representation of these lived experiences and their implications for adult education practice.

Conclusion

The pervasive challenge of sustaining persistence among at-risk learners in adult literacy programs poses threats to the viability of federally funded programs and, more critically, the populations they serve. High attrition rates not only diminish the likelihood of needed outcome measures for program survival, but more importantly, they diminish the future of lives. The discussion on persistence continues in Chapter 2 where the conceptual literature and studies of ABE program efforts to sustain participation are reviewed and related to key concepts of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 1994; 2001), which framed this study. To assist the reader, Table 1.1 provides a list of terms and their definitions as used in this study.

Table 1.1

Operational Terms as Used in This Study

Term	Definition
Adult Basic Education	Literacy skill education for individuals assessed below the 9th grade level (0-8).
Atmosphere	Mood, feeling, tone of a place or event
At-Risk	Describes populations of socio-economic disadvantage with related life-disrupting barriers and circumstances
Attrition	Reduction of educational program enrollments due to student exits (dropping out)
Context	That which comprises the surrounds of an individual's life circumstance at a particular point in time to include people, physical setting, culture, norms, atmosphere.
Dispositional Barriers	Personal traits and forces, e.g., temperament, attitude, motivation, likes, dislikes that create difficulties and challenges in the lives of individuals
Environment	The totality of multiple contexts in the individual's immediate life circumstance
External Context	Context of life outside of the Open Gate program
Institutional Barriers	Organizational, governmental, and institutional policies, procedures, rules, laws creating obstruction to an individual's goals and progress
Life Context	All that comprises an individual's life: past and present circumstances, experiences, and contexts, the totality of which establishes the individual's orientation to the world
Persistence	Continuous engagement/participation in an activity toward a goal
Personal Agency	A form of human agency (the belief of control over one's own life) that uses cognitive, motivational, affective, and choice processes to exercise self-determination of one's life (Bandura, 2001)
Positive Affect	Positive feelings, attitudes, and emotions (Comings et al., 1999)
Positive Self	Strong beliefs in oneself from feelings of affirmation
Program Context	The elements comprising the environment surrounding a learning event or situation
Retention	In education, the ability of programs to maintain student program participation
Sabotage	Interference (n.); interfere (v.); trip up (coll.)
Secondary	In education, referring to high school level

Secondary Credential	High school diploma (HSD); High school equivalency diploma (HSED); GED (General Education) certificate
Self-Efficacy	The beliefs about one's capabilities to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels (Bandura, 1986)
Setting	The physical aspects of a place or circumstance
Situational Barriers	External circumstances that interfere with, challenge, or block the choices and goals of an individual
Social Context	The "people" component, social dynamics of a context
Stop-Out	An individual demonstrating intermittent participation in continuance of a particular educational activity

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The issue of attrition in adult basic education (ABE) has elicited a constellation of responses from practitioners and researchers, seeking a clearer understanding of how to effect and support learner persistence. However, from both the programmatic and research perspective, the approaches to identify those guides are complicated by the complex characteristics and needs of ABE populations, the diversity of programs and curricula that serve this diverse group of learners, and the amorphous nature of persistence as a concept of interpretation, analysis, and study. These factors have produced a number of studies that offer diverse lenses to examine adult basic education and this programmatic challenge.

Design of Literature Review

This literature review was guided by factors related to persistence in ABE programs. The focus of persistence support for at-risk adults provided a base of search terms for literature in ERIC, Education Research Complete, and Academic Search Premier databases. "Persistence and adult basic education," set the parameters for the subject and the learning population of focus in my study. Then search terms incorporating concepts associated with discussions of persistence, e.g., "attrition," "retention," "motivation," "barriers," "affect," and "support factors" were coupled with "adult basic education" in the second layer of searches under persistence. With my study's concentration on participant experiences related to persistence support, another major search category centered on studies examining interventions designed to motivate and encourage retention and persistence. For this category, I used the search terms "incentives," "rewards," and "persistence support." The third major category for my literature search was derived from Bandura's theory, my study's framework. The abstracts and quick scans of my chosen articles confirmed the theory's connection to the persistence-related discussions in the literature. The

theory's concept of socially situated learning established another major category of the literature search. In addition to the search terms "Bandura" and "Social Learning Theory," various components of the theory, most particularly, "self-efficacy," were used and then combined with "persistence," "motivation," "affect," "disposition," and "adult basic education."

The literature search was therefore driven by three major categories and their derivatives: persistence, incentives, and Bandura's theory. The selection of articles was based on their meeting the following criteria:

1. The learning population discussed was close to or adult-aged (18 years) and at-risk.

2. The setting was an educational environment, preferably in adult basic education.

3. The selection was either conceptual or a study related to persistence interventions and support and/or Bandura's theory or its concepts.

This review first examines the literature on factors related to the challenges of learner persistence in adult basic education. Figure 2.1 summarizes the interrelated aspects of persistence that focused the literature search and guided the development of the review. Articles on persistence barriers were divided according to their relevance to the three major categories--- institutional, situational, and dispositional. The review's discussion of these barriers and their impact on participation segues into the next section of the literature review, which discusses persistence factors and program attempts to encourage sustained participation. The discussions in the review include references to the factor of social context and are summarized in Figure 2.2. The findings of these studies link persistence to the social underpinnings (social contexts) of Bandura's learning theory. These descriptions transition the review to the next section where

Bandura's theory is tied to aspects of persistence and compared to related theories. The last section of the review assimilates the strands of persistence discussion with major premises of Bandura's theory and reveals an interrelationship of context, disposition, and persistence (Figure 2.3). This interconnection framed this study of the experiences of young adults in a secondary program with wrap-around support features.

Barriers to Participation

The demographic of at-risk learners has inherent barriers that challenge their persistence in ABE programs. The majority of these learners are situated in the lower socio-economic rungs of society where the consequences of and factors related to poverty destabilize their lives and their efforts to improve their circumstances. The obstacles associated with at-risk lives account for the high attrition rates that sabotage the ability of learners to persist in educational activities. Cross (1992) categorized these barriers that inhibit learner participation in ABE activities as institutional, situational, and dispositional.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers refer to several types of challenges. Included are logistical factors such as location of service providers beyond reachable perimeters; the intimidation of a large, impersonal institutional setting; class schedules not compatible with personal or work schedules; or extensive enrollment and registration processes (Comings et al., 1999; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Porter et al., 2005). Other institutional deterrents to participation may be manifested by the dearth or inadequate level of services needed to initially engage at-risk learners. These services include communication of information related to available services, academic requirements, curriculum content, and program expectations; orientations that capture critical data about learners and their needs; counseling and/or advising to assist learners with procedures, goal

setting, goal monitoring, and career planning; appropriate and correct placement of learners into courses and programs; and identification of learning challenges and referrals for academic accommodation (Comings et al., 1999; Kafallinou, 2009; Kerka, 1995; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1997; Perin, Flugman, & Spiegel, 2006; Petty &Thomas, 2014; Tucho, 2000; Ziegler et al., 2006).

Other institutional barriers that discourage persistence relate to programs and instruction. These classroom aspects of institutional barriers, categorized by Comings, et al. (1999) as instructional forces, involve instruction and program content (Schafft & Prins, 2009). Perceived insensitivity of instructors, ineffective instruction, and irrelevance of curriculum are often cited by adults as having discouraged their sustained participation (Comings et al., 1999; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1997; Schafft & Prins, 2009; Tucho, 2000). Efforts to correct or remediate institutional factors that create barriers and deterrents to participation are constrained since logistical and service factors, most being operational or policy-based, often prove inflexible (Comings et al., 2003).

However, the pressure to conform to policies governing performance-based funding has prompted agencies and institutions to concentrate on means to improve programs and outcomes. Initiatives have been piloted with goals to heighten motivation, promote student success, and improve outcomes. These efforts have prompted a number of studies, which will be examined later in this literature review.

Situational Barriers

The prominent category of barriers leading to the high attrition rates in ABE programs is situational barriers, also referred to by Comings, et.al (1999) as life context forces. Most frequently cited by adult learners as the reason for program departure, situational barriers are

at-risk factors, created largely by circumstance, issues of which for ABE populations are due primarily to poverty (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1997; Porter et al., 2005; Schafft & Prins, 2009; Tucho, 2008). Residential instability, health, child care needs, lack of transportation, physical and learning disabilities, substance abuse, and domestic violence are the leading causes of attrition and the major deterrents to persistence (Bangser, 2013; Comings et al., 1999; Perin et al., 2006; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Porter et al., 2005).

In their study of residential mobility and persistence, Schafft and Prins (2009) state: "When situational factors such as inflexible work schedules or health problems are discussed, they are often treated as randomly occurring personal problems rather than social problems that disproportionately affect poor families" (p.4). In this statement, the authors contend that the share of burdens born by poor ABE populations is representative of a larger context created by class and social ascription. These deep economic and societal relegations to disadvantage are beyond the abilities and resources of programs to address (Porter et al., 2005; Quigley, 1997; Schafft & Prins, 2009).

Dispositional Barriers

Acknowledging the formidable nature of situational barriers, the third category of barriers—disposition— is considered by authors to hold the most promise for influence on learners and their persistence (Comings, 2007; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2012; Quigley, 1997). Though underrepresented in the literature as a persistence variable, disposition can account for behavioral decisions related to participation in learning (Ziegler et al., 2006). Comprised of individual character traits such as temperament, attitudes, motivations, likes, and dislikes, the personal forces comprising disposition affect how the individual interacts with elements of the environment (Comings et al., 1999; Ziegler et al., 2006). Environmental factors negatively affecting disposition can

deter participants from program continuance and prompt their exit from educational engagement. Negative dispositions toward education can stem from the haunts of bad school experiences (Beder, 1990; Cervero & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Comings, 2007; Comings et al., 1999; Quigley, 1997). Prompting these exits, too, is what Boulden (2008) refers to as "cultural fracture": the result of education's failure to recognize and/or address the emotional and psychological needs of students that are manifested in resistant and negative dispositions.

Interventions for Persistence

Authors advocate countering the impact of these negative influences by concentrating on building positive affect, i.e., generating positive feelings, attitudes, and emotions that can lead to what Comings et al. (1999) call the "positive self." These dispositional approaches could support the learner and learner persistence (Comings, 2009; Koselecky & Hoskinson, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Among the dispositional factors connected to persistence is motivation (Comings, 2007; Kostelecky & Hoskinson, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012). Sources of motivation can be intrinsic (from within) or extrinsic (external to the person) and can activate and direct behaviors such as persistence (Kostelecky & Hoskinson, 2005). Motivation's connection to persistent behaviors has led to its focus in ABE programmatic interventions to encourage persistence. The offer of incentives establishes a setting that enhances motivation and influences performance (Ziegler et al., 2004). Several studies examined the results of program interventions and incentives designed to heighten motivation and impact behavior, performance, and persistence.

With financial hardship as a major factor in the lives of at-risk adults, monetary benefits have been used as an incentive for learners to engage in and persist in educational programs. Bangser (2013) did an overview of a program for at-risk youth that combined paid internships with education. Under case management, the 18-year-old participants, with histories

17

of arrest, foster care, parenthood, residential instability, and substance abuse, received stipends equating to 10-15 hours of minimum wage per week, if they maintained satisfactory attendance. However, the stipend was not enough incentive to counter the continuing persistence problem. Bangser suggested that the failure of the stipend to elicit desired behavior and commitment lay with the immaturity of the young participants.

Monetary incentives for program completion have also been used to spark motivation for program advancement and completion. A workplace GED program promised $100 to participants who either achieved their GED certificate or increased their writing and math scores by two grade levels. Attrition plagued this program where, of the 151 employees who voluntarily enrolled in the program, only 39 completed it (Vann & Hinton, 1994). Similar disappointments were seen in a study by Brooks et al. (2008) of a government supported program in the United Kingdom where improved attendance and/or increased reading levels in adult literacy classes earned participants a monetary award. As the only program of its kind in the country at that time, the outcome measures of sessions attended, secondary outcomes, and post-test reading scores indicated that the financial incentives had no effect on attainment or attendance.

Ziegler, Ebert, and Cope (2004) studied the use of cash incentives to encourage progress of urban and rural welfare recipients in a Tennessee ABE program. This mixed methods study focused on several aspects: the impact on the amount of time needed to show progress, the number who progressed and achieved goals, and the perspectives of recipients and staff regarding the incentive. The findings revealed that though the rate of advancement was unchanged, the monetary incentive did result in an increased number of students who did make progress. Staff had mixed opinions regarding the impact of the incentive on motivation,

however, stating that intrinsic motivation appeared to be a stronger factor than the external motivator of the monetary benefit. Participants supported this staff perspective, stating that the incentive was not a primary motivational factor. Among the urban participants, especially, internal motivation was more important than the external reward. In their conclusion, Ziegler, Ebert, and Cope (2004) reported that the incentive did impact persistence but did not influence a reduction of time to make academic progress.

These aforementioned studies indicate that incentives of financial support, even for economically depressed learners, had minimum effect on their motivation and persistence. In all the studies, however, there existed factors that proved more impactful on learner participation decisions than the monetary incentives.

Another approach to encourage persistence centered on the specific demographic of the learners. A case study by Perin, Flugman, and Spiegel (2006) examined the outcomes at four urban ABE sites where 16-20 year olds were segregated in classes apart from older students for the purpose of defining and tailoring services to address specific needs of these younger students. The burgeoning enrollments of this demographic, however, taxed this under-resourced program. Tutoring and counseling services could not be provided, which could have contributed to the attrition that plagued this program's efforts. Though the authors conceded that participant immaturity, like the Bangser study (2013), was the primary obstacle to sustained engagement, the lack of learner support was a factor in the poor persistence rates (Perin et al., 2006).

The detrimental absence of services in the Perin et al. (2006) study merits attention. It lends further credence to the connection of student service provision to at-risk learner persistence, where the lack or inadequate delivery of these needed services erects institutional-based persistence barriers (Comings et al., 1999; Kafallinou, 2009; Kerka, 1995; Office of

Vocational and Adult Education, 1997; Perin et al., 2006; Petty & Thomas, 2014; Tucho, 2000;

Ziegler et al., 2006).

An incidental aspect of a study by Patel and Rudd (2012) provides more evidence of the

importance of support services in encouraging persistence. However, in this study, the positive

impact of services on persistence was not due to institutional or programmatic influence. The

authors examined a two-year program at two different New York colleges where a

performance-based scholarship was offered to low-income students in need of developmental

education. The goal of this scholarship program was to build evidence on the merits of such

scholarships in assisting at-risk students to succeed academically and to persist at higher rates.

The impact of monetary awards made contingent upon maintaining a minimum level of

enrollment and grades was examined. The theory behind the scholarship program was that

financial assistance would change behaviors leading to increased effort toward studies.

However, interviews with students revealed that the scholarship did not greatly influence their

thinking, behavior, or motivation. This was supported by the fact that although full time

enrollments did increase, the average number of enrolled credits and the number of credits

earned did not.

Though designed as a scholarship-only program, the examination of this study's

outcomes led the authors to similar conclusions as other programs with built-in incentives like

monetary rewards. They suggested that individual support is more critical in assisting at-risk

populations. This assertion was born out by the success of the smaller of the two colleges, which

revealed environment as a key consideration factor. At the smaller college, the scholarship

program office, where students received their funds, was located within the school's student

services area. The logistics at the smaller college created opportunities for the scholarship

participants to interact with the student services personnel. The small confines created an environment of familiarity and connection. Patel and Rudd (2012) asserted, though incidental in its creation, this social context, which did not exist at the other college, positively influenced students' affective needs and disposition toward their educational goals—more than the incentive of the scholarship itself. The environment and the social connections are noteworthy aspects in the scholarship program's success at the smaller college and pose a provocative dimension to motivation/incentive programs.

The Social Factor to Persistence

The factor of personal support in the performance-based scholarship study is an example of a common theme that emerges from the previously discussed literature: the influence on persistence by social factors that are present in the learners' programmatic and external environments. The cliques and relationships that exist outside of and that develop inside the classroom influence participation decisions. In the workplace GED program studied by Vann and Hinton (1994), whether employees persisted or dropped their GED activity was influenced by their association with workplace social networks that either supported educational efforts or dismissed their importance. The in-class cliques and resulting relationships that formed in the paid internship/education program discussed by Bangser (2013) created a positive group identity, a factor that may encourage persistence (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe, Barnes, Connor, & Steadman, 2013). A sense of belonging and the feeling of community derived from program participation can address individuals' affective (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Phillips, 1985) and psychosocial (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009) needs, where relationships gain importance as they evolve into social supports and social networks (Comings et al., 1999; Cuban, 2003; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Prins et al., 2009).

The support of others internal and external to the educational activity was cited as key to persistence in a number of studies (Comings et al., 2001; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013; Zacharakis et al., 2011). In a study of pre-GED participants in library literacy programs by Comings et al. (1999), the presence of successful role models associated with the social circles that developed in the classroom became supports in maintaining motivation and promoting persistence. Helping relationships within and outside the classroom have also been identified as aids to persistence (Mellard et al., 2012; Vann & Hinton, 1994). Elements of the social environment that impact persistence can include people associated with the institution and the program. Teachers, counselors, advisors, and mentors have been identified by participants as positive influences of support (Office of Vocational and Adult Education,1997; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Tighe et al., 2013; Zacharakis et al., 2011).

The literature reveals the complexity of the persistence issue and the learning populations involved. Authors agree that situational and institutional challenges are impediments to ABE persistence but dispositional approaches that build positive affect merit more consideration to counter attrition and support persistence. The studies of programs that used motivation to improve dispositions to positively influence behavior point to the importance of affective support. This affective support indicates the importance of social connections for their impact on dispositional elements, which include self-efficacy, a main component of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 1994; Bandura, 2001). Figure 2.1 summarizes the review of the literature on persistence and the efforts to address it and gives a preview of the theory-linked discussion to follow.

Learning as Environmentally Influenced and Socially Situated

In the studies on retention, motivation, and persistence, the social connections with

family, peers, instructors, and others influenced participants' learning experiences. These social

Persistence

initiates

as a

thwarted by

Interventions

designed to address

prompt

Concept & Issue

due to

linked with

Studies of Interventions

as concept, given

is

Barriers

to encourage

investigate

include

is

has

reveal

Pathways
Nash & Kallenbach, 2009

Highly variable with ABE populations
Greenberg et al., 2012

in

Programmatic Strategies

Incentives

Difficult to measure, predict patterns but has and can have categories
Comings et al. 2000
Pickard, 2013

Little research on ABE populations and few insights on encouraging persistence
Comings, 2007

Institutional, Situational, Dispositional Categories
Cross, 1992

Motivation

Importance of Social Context

impact

dominant are

exacerbated by

pose consideration toward

impacted by

driven by

on

Participation
Comings, et al. 1999
Office of Vocational and Adult Education.1997
Perin et al. 2006
Petty & Thomas, 2014
Porter et al. 2005

Personal Barriers (Dispositional and Situational)
Tucho, 2008
Zacharakis et al. 2011

Poverty
Nash & Kallebach, 2009
Schafft & Prins, 2009

Dispositional Factors
Comings, 2007
Mellard et al. 2012
Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1997
O'Neill &Thomson, 2013
Quigley,1997
Ziegler et al. 2006

include ►

Self-Efficacy
Bye et al. 2007
Comings et al. 2001
Mellard et al. 2012
Petty & Thomas, 2014
Porter et al. 2005
Tracy-Mumford, 1994
Ziegler et al. 2002
Ziegler et al. 2006

Persistence Literature | Literature on Barriers | Studies of Persistence | Social Cognitive Learning Theory

Figure 2.1. **Persistence, barriers, and program intervention findings.**

contexts comprised the learners' larger life environments that directed and impacted their

behavior. Pickard (2013) presents the significance of environmental factors in her discussion of

the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective on persistence. In efforts to address

attrition and the persistence issue, Pickard advocates the need to understand the impact of

experiences and environmental factors on at-risk learners. The barriers created from past

experience and in the environment of learners are situated social contexts and social patterns,

both of which influence educational engagement.

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971; 2001) acknowledges the influence of the environment and its social contexts on behavior. Unlike behaviorist theories that attribute learning only as conditioned response, Bandura's theory accounts for environment and cognition in the learning process to explain behavior. Behavior is a function resulting from the interaction of the learner with the environment (Merriam et al., 2006). According to Bandura, the individual learns by observing and interacting with other people, which situates all learning into a social context. These socially situated factors create a social interdependence within what Bandura refers to as social subsystems or communities (Bandura, 1971). This symbiotic relationship of reciprocal influence between the learner and the environment is the foundation of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory.

According to this theory, the learner acquires information from observations of and interactions within the social contexts of the environment. The decision to embark on a particular task and pursue a designated goal is informed by what the learner derives from past experience and interactions with the current social contexts. During this process of self-reflection, the learner considers information gained from the observation of others, who create a gauge against which the learner performs self-comparisons to determine her/his capacity or ability to accomplish the designated task. These social models reveal the requisite behaviors and the outcomes of those behaviors, which provide the learner with goal value (Pajares, 1996). The perceived worth of that goal is determined by its outcome expectancies (Jacobs, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 1984). The expected outcome is weighed against considerations such as the proximity of achieving the goal and access to evidence of progress. Also factoring into these reflections is the influence of credible others, e.g., peers, teachers, family, who can exert what Bandura calls social persuasion (Bandura, 1994; Schunk, 1996). This integration of experience,

present considerations, and social persuasion is used in a self-assessment process that generates

the individual's self-beliefs or competency to successfully accomplish a particular goal. This

self-evaluation constitutes the self-efficacy component of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning

Theory. Figure 2.2 summarizes the influence of social contexts in the persistence intervention

studies. It was revealed that social persuasion can encourage program participation by

supporting motivation, and thereby persistence, through dispositional support of the individual's

self-efficacy beliefs.

Self-Efficacy's Link to Motivation and Persistence

Self-efficacy is the beliefs about one's capabilities to learn or perform behaviors at

designated levels (Bandura, 1986). Motivation was the focus of the interventions implemented

in the persistence studies presented. However, according to Social Cognitive Learning Theory,

the motivation to act on a particular task or goal originates after a person's self-assessment of

her/his capabilities to perform that task. This assessment establishes efficacious beliefs which

then initiates and determines action (Bandura, 2001).

Among the individual's considerations in determining efficacy are perceptions of ability,

the difficulty of the pursuit or the goal, the amount of effort required, the supports available, and

a comparison of anticipated performance against that of observed social models (Schunk, 1996).

Motivation, which is self-generated, then enters into the decision to take action and the behaviors

enacted are self-determined and self-regulated (Merriam et al., 2006). In this goal pursuit,

motivation drives persistence, which is reflected in the amount of time devoted, the level of

effort expended, and the degree of resilience exhibited when confronted with obstacles. The

individual's self-assessment to successfully perform a task, therefore, guides and directs

behavior and action. This exercise is evidence of human agency: the capacity to exert control

over the nature and quality of one's life (Bandura, 2001).

Persistence

initiates

Interventions

linked with

to encourage

prompt

Dispositional Factors
Comings, 2007
Mellard et al. 2012
Office of Vocational and Adult Education.1997
O'Neill Thomson, 2013
Quigley,199;
Ziegler et al. 2006

impacted by

Motivation

Studies

include

driven by

supported by

reveal importance of

RE:

Self-Efficacy
Bye et al. 2007
Comings et al. 2001
Mellard et al. 2012
Petty & Thomas, 2014
Porter et al. 2005
Tracy-Mumford, 1994
Ziegler et al. 2002
Ziegler et al. 2006

support

Social Context Factors
Bangser, 2013
Nash & Kallenbach, 2009
Patel & Rudd, 2012
Reynolds & Johnson, 2014
Vann & Hinton, 2004

show strong influence of

Use of Incentives
Bangser, 2013
Brooks et al. 2008
Patel & Rudd, 2012
...

RE:

impacts

on

have

should be considered in

Participation
Comings et al. 1999
Cuban, 2003
Gall, 2013
Mellard et al. 2012
Nash & Kallenbach, 2009
Office of Vocational and Adult Education,1997
Phillips, 1985
Pickard, 2013
Porter et al. 2005
Prins et al. 2010
Quigley, 1995
Reynolds & Johnson 2014
Tighe et al. 2013
Tinto, 2002
Tucho, 2000
Vann & Hinton, 1994
Zacharakis et al. 2011

on

Positive Impact

Programmatic Interventions
Perin, et al. 2006
...

Programs with persistence interventions

Participant behaviors

Factors influencing disposition

Social learning theory concepts

Figure 2.2. **The social factor to persistence.** Studies of programmatic efforts to sustain persistence found the positive influence of social contexts on disposition and persistence behaviors.

Human and Personal Agency

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is grounded in human agency since self-beliefs correlate with motivation and action (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Since efficacious beliefs direct behavior and action, they are a key element to human agency (Pajares, 1996). In referring to human agency, Bandura (2001) terms it "the essence of humanness" and states that individuals…"are agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences" (p.4). Personal agency, one of three modes of agency according to Social Cognitive Learning Theory, uses cognitive, motivational, affective, and choice processes. Efficacy beliefs are key to the exercise of personal agency processes and central to the belief of control over one's life. As agents or controllers of their experiences, individuals actively engage with their environment. This human functioning occurs in a broad network of social systems and the environmental learning orchestrated within social communities creates contextually rich, reciprocal relationships between individuals and these social subsystems. As individuals interact with and explore their environs, they contribute to them as members and are impacted by them as learners. Personal agency and social structures function interdependently (Bandura, 2001). Therefore, self-efficacy as an element of personal agency is dynamic: open and subject to the influences created from the interactions of learners with their environment.

Self-Efficacy and Other Theories

Self-beliefs of efficacy—or competency—contribute to and regulate motivation and action. Motivation drives persistence; therefore, efficacy beliefs influence persistence (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000). The influence of these beliefs on motivation secure efficacy's role as a component in a number of other theories related to motivation and persistence.

Attribution or Causal Theory refers to the affective domain of humans, who seek explanations to the events in their lives. Competency or self-efficacy is one of the personal beliefs or perceived causes of events and outcomes in their lives. Individuals with high self-efficacy attribute failure to insufficient effort while individuals with low self-efficacy attribute the cause of failure to inadequate ability (Mellard et al., 2012). With Expectancy Value Theory, individuals choose to engage in pursuits that have perceived value. The motivation to act is based upon the efficacious behaviors and performance goals that would net a positive result (Comings et al., 1999). Self-beliefs can prove more influential on resultant behaviors than the outcome expectancies themselves (Bandura, 1994; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Zimmerman, 2000), where strong self-efficacy would support persistence, despite the challenge of barriers (Ponton, Derrick, & Carr, 2005). Achievement Goal Theory also has efficacious considerations in terms of goal setting and goal striving. Self-perceptions of competency or self-efficacy is a dispositional variable in goal-related behaviors. Learners in this theory appraise their personal abilities, i.e., competency, to be successful and compare them with the performance of others: the social models of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory. Motivation correlates with the self-beliefs associated with goal striving and goal attainment, and these goal behaviors, like motivation, are self-regulated and affect motivation during learning (Mellard et al., 2012). As progress is made toward a goal, self-efficacy is enhanced (Schunk, 1996). Therefore, self-efficacy influences the decision to act and the motivation to continue, which influences goal persistence and resilience (Pajares, 1996). These theories substantiate the pivotal role of self-efficacy in prompting action in the exercise of human agency and reveal efficacy's relationship to motivation and persistence.

The Social Context Factor to Self-Efficacy

The development and support of self-efficacy, its link to persistence, and the influences impacting this interrelationship are revealed in persistence studies that examine the social contexts surrounding learners' classroom experiences.

Several studies examined the importance of interactions, relationships, and the social communities that develop in programs. A study by Reynolds and Johnson (2014) derived data from the narratives of ABE learners on what they deemed as assets supporting their educational activities. Assets internal to the programs were the relationships with fellow students and with instructors, all of whom became sources of support and encouragement. The context of community positively impacted the participants' ability to regularly attend classes, despite difficulties, and motivated them to make progress in their studies. Many participants referred to a sense of community that was created and that served as an important persistence factor. This mention was particularly notable among female students.

Two other studies detail the experiences of at-risk women with environment and the social component in ABE programs. The affinity of women toward programs offering social support is described in a qualitative study by Prins et al. (2009) of two family literacy programs serving impoverished populations. This study stated that culturally ascribed social roles of poor women create psychosocial needs for companionship and social interaction. The social networks and supportive relationships, established with teachers and other staff, provided them with needed emotional support. The participants' development of positive affect and disposition was attributed to the environment of the ABE classroom, which provided them with "social space." The social environment provided companionship, recreation, and social distraction and gave opportunity for self-discovery, development, and for increasing self-efficacy. The authors of this

study concluded that social support was not directly correlated with persistence and retention, but it enhanced the general well-being of individuals.

Cuban (2003) also did a study of women in a literacy program. This study concluded that persistence was attributed to the mutual in-class relationship that developed between the two women. Like the participants in the Prins, et al. (2009) study, the socially ascribed roles of the women in this study created their need for social support, emotional reciprocity, and a sense of belonging to a community, all of which were satisfied through their consistent program participation.

An investigation of persistence and retention factors by Tinto (1997) also identified the primacy of the social context in educational engagement. His study of a community college's efforts to enhance students' classroom experiences revealed that peers, social connections, and the learning communities established in the classroom all supported persistence and noted the particular importance of relationships in countering attrition.

These studies evidence and suggest that environmental influences—more specifically, the social connections within those contexts—are critical factors in the decisions of at-risk learners to persist in educational activities (Bangser, 2013; Comings et al., 1999; Cuban, 2003; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Vann & Hinton, 1994). They identify interaction and a sense of belonging and community as critical factors to persistence. At the same time, the research also illuminates the affective need of ABE populations for these social connections and reveals the correlation of need satisfaction with continuing participation. This need factor is a recognized at-risk characteristic of most ABE populations and is described by Quigley and Uhland (2000) as field dependence. Individuals with a high degree of field dependence are highly reliant on others for a sense of well-being. High field dependence may be manifested in self-esteem needs and

behaviors, requiring highly supportive learning environments (Quigley & Uhland, 2000). Since high field dependence impacts dispositional states related to self-esteem and confidence, by extension, perceptions of self-efficacy would also be impacted.

<div align="center">**Affect, Disposition, and Self-Efficacy**</div>

The influence of disposition on self-efficacy development places more focus on addressing the affective needs of at-risk, field dependent learners. Authors advocate the support of persistence by concentrating on what Comings et al. (1999) refer to as the "positive self." Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) concur with a dispositional approach strategy, stating that the more positive the affect of the individual, the greater is the persistence. Persistence studies confirm the positive correlation of self-efficacy with persistence (Bye et al., 2007; Comings et al., 2001; Cuban, 2003; Tighe et al., 2013; Ziegler et al., 2002, 2006). The higher the self-efficacy, the higher is the motivation and the greater the effort to persist (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Since self-efficacy as a dispositional factor determines motivational strength in task/goal completion, the nurture of efficacious behaviors among at-risk learners would enhance academic achievement (Ziegler et al., 2006). Therefore, building and supporting self-efficacy would support persistence and help effect positive outcomes.

The impact of affect on motivation and self-perceptions of competence is revealed in the retrospective study conducted by Mellard et al. (2012) of dispositional factors influencing motivation among ABE/ASE (Adult Secondary Education) learners. This study found that the affective states of lower-level Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) score learners differed from higher-level learners. Lower-level learners were more likely to feel "downhearted and blue" (p.535). The low affect reported by low-level learners revealed a lack of confidence in their capabilities to reach their desired goals. They perceived more internal obstacles than

<div align="center">31</div>

higher-level learners. The lower-level learners did not seek out and take advantage of available help and services as the higher-level learners did, which accounted for their comparatively poorer attendance rates (Mellard et al., 2012).

The findings of this study illustrate how self-efficacy, as a dispositional variable, impacted the efforts of lower-level learners. They admitted to a lack of confidence in their capabilities, reflective of low self-efficacy, and doubted their ability to be successful in their goals. Goal orientation is a dispositional quality (Schunk, 1996). Without affirming self-beliefs, the learners lacked the capacity for personal agency and the motivation to act, resulting in their low expectation for goal success. This dispositional factor may have discouraged the low-level learners from seeking the assistance their higher level peers sought and received.

The study by Prins et al. (2009) and Cuban (2003) of impoverished women in literacy programs revealed how the interactions in the social context of educational programs satisfied their affective needs and provided personal affirmation. The support networks validated their social roles, lifted their self-esteem, built their sense of self-efficacy, and led to personal growth. The positive impact on disposition and motivation was manifested in their persistence.

Social context and self-efficacy are both variables of persistence. The environmental element of context influences persistence through its impact on the individual's affect and disposition. Research posits that when the affective needs of at-risk learners are met, dispositional variables, such as self-efficacy, are enhanced and can alter and initiate positive, productive behaviors.

However, field dependent ABE learners have personal challenges that compound the difficulties already present in the ubiquitous situational barriers that permeate persistence efforts. The emotional toll on these adults and the lack of emotional support make affective needs as

prominent a persistence factor as situational barriers (Ponton, Derrick, & Carr, 2005). Low

affect diminishes confidence and efficacious beliefs of competence. A causal chain is described

by Ziegler et al. (2006) where low self-efficacy leads to avoidance of task engagement or poor

performance, the behavior of which then lowers efficacy beliefs and the sense of competence

over time.

Learners themselves have identified that among the challenges they face in ABE

participation are those associated with personal obstacles. Among the obstacles they cite are low

self-esteem and confidence, lack of motivation, histories of bad school experiences, and negative

attitudes (Comings et al., 1999; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1997; Porter et al.,

2005; Tighe et al., 2013; Zacharakis et al., 2011). These dispositional factors are exacerbated by

lives diminished by abuse and trauma, creating for at-risk adults what Nash and Kallenbach

(2009) refer to as a "state of low level fear" (p.78). This condition which the authors blame on

issues related to poverty, generate psychosocial and affective needs that characterize the

dispositional barriers of ABE learners and discourage persistence (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009).

<p align="center">**Social Contexts, Disposition, and Building Self-Efficacy**</p>

The dispositional barriers of high field-dependent learners impede educational progress

and interfere with potential for success. Burdened with sabotaging situational barriers

experienced largely and disproportionately by ABE learners, these field-dependent adults seek

and rely on social capital for support. The connections comprising social capital have been

shown to exert influence on participation. However, the economic and social barriers of at-risk

populations can obstruct their ability to develop sustained relationships (Kappel & Daley, 2004).

Where access to social capital is possible, these supports may prove inadequate or detrimental to

persistence support. According to a theory based on a study by Zacharakis (2010), the type of

<p align="center">33</p>

social network exerting the greatest influence on an individual's life can determine that person's ability for social and economic advancement.

The Social Network Theory promoted by Zacharakis (2010) evolved from a study of adults' social networks. From the 69 ABE focus group participants who identified personal barriers as the greatest threats to persistence, Zacharakis drew conclusions about two kinds of social networks impacting the participants. He describes the first as high density networks, composed of the strong ties and strong bonds of close friendships. The second was termed low density networks, composed of weak ties, such as acquaintances. The theory posits that individuals benefit from and need low density networks to expose them to perspectives, options, and opportunities that can lead to social and economic mobility. However, more inherent to disadvantaged populations are high density networks, whose stronger social ties and bonds restrict or discourage them from pursuing paths to improve their circumstance. These primordial cliques and networks inhibit the establishment of weak ties: the necessary connections for individuals to expand their universe of experiences. In the case of ABE participation, other students and instructors would represent weak ties that could support educational efforts. In his conclusion, Zacharakis advocates countering the restrictive, negative effects of high density networks and encouraging persistence by establishing positive social networks to supplement or replace high density social networks.

A constant in the studies presented in this literature review is the impact of emotional support in neutralizing the effects of dispositional barriers that deter persistence. The studies have shown that social connections in the contexts/communities of ABE programs can support individuals by meeting their affective needs. Prins et al. (2009) stress the need to establish these social support elements and emphasize the pivotal role of ABE programs to influence learner

disposition. They reference the increasing evidence of programs' capabilities to provide social

support and enhance psychosocial well-being. This dispositional factor also impacts the affective

need of personal agency, which requires beliefs of competence or self-efficacy (Mellard et al.,

2012). Though situational and programmatic barriers do impact persistence, more focus should

center on dispositional elements as factors to participation (Prins et al., 2009). The

accommodation of affective needs necessitates the establishment of community and a sense of

belonging in learner experiences (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). In light of the influence of

environment on the individual, this focus for ABE success must include contextual

considerations.

Social Cognitive Theory states that an individual's determination of behavior and

self-perception is derived from interactions with and within the environment. Disposition and

variables like self-efficacy would be molded by the same interactive relationships. Because of

the malleability of efficacious beliefs and their subjectivity to environmental/contextual

influences, self-efficacy is dynamic, multi-dimensional, and susceptible to change and influence

(Zimmerman, 2000). Therefore, the same affective, environmental support needed by at-risk,

field dependent ABE learners would also be needed to support and build their self-efficacy.

Since attitudes and self-efficacy are environmentally-linked (Ziegler et al., 2006), the surrounds

of and the context inside the ABE classroom are where efficacious beliefs can be impacted.

Efficacy beliefs are prescriptive of behavior in goal pursuits, influencing the choice of goal, the

effort to exert, and the resilience to obstacles (Ponton et al., 2005). The literature review by

Petty and Thomas (2014) of the barriers faced by and the success components found in adult

education programs cite the need to recognize dispositional barriers of adults, by acknowledging

and addressing factors related to attitudes, self-efficacy, and resilience. Building strong self-

efficacy would manifest in motivation and persistence, which would result in greater productivity, progress toward goal completion, and success. Increased engagement (persistence) leads to improved productivity, which in turn heightens self-perceptions of efficacy (Vann & Hinton, 1994; Ziegler et al., 2006). As an important, positive force to persistence, self-efficacy and its potential for creating a positive self should be supported (Comings et al., 1999; Comings et al., 2001; Ziegler et al., 2006). Self-efficacy as a dispositional factor to the individual's internal well-being is a primary consideration in the discourse on dispositional barriers related to ABE persistence.

Figure 2.3 summarizes the factors to persistence from the reviewed literature and reveals their connections to concepts from Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory. Social context and self-efficacy, components of Bandura's theory, can influence the development of positive affect and dispositional support. The influence of social contexts reveals their potential in effecting positive behaviors like persistence in educational activities.
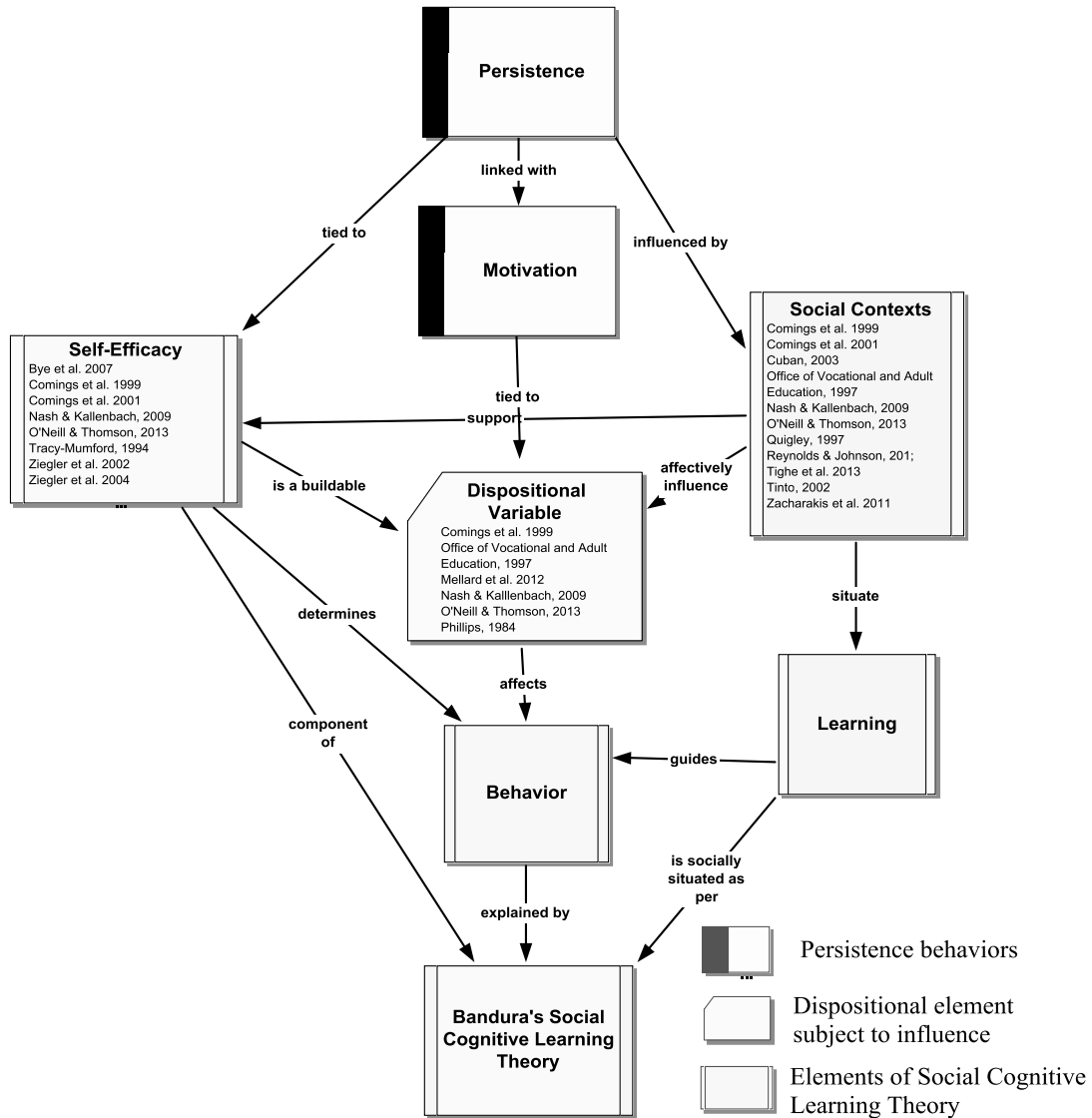
Figure 2.3. **Linking persistence to Bandura's theoretical concepts.** Self-efficacy is subject to social influence and links social context with persistence behaviors.

Conclusion

The studies and the literature in this review reveal that the challenge to facilitate

persistence among ABE learners lies in the complexity of the concept of persistence itself and in

the population of focus for its facilitation. The tenacious challenge to sustain persistence is

manifested by institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers. These categories are individually unique in the numerous obstacles inherent to each, requiring specific means to address them. Yet, they are similar in posing formidable barriers that restrict the ability or exceed the power and resources of ABE programs to resolve. The literature acknowledges the near impenetrability and impossible eradication of most institutional and situational barriers, created by decades of societal and cultural marginalization that have suppressed the lives of at-risk populations.

The identification of any specific solution to encourage persistence is further challenged by the complexity of the ABE demographic, studies of which substantiate the depth and complexity of their barriers. The population's at-risk characteristics of poverty, high field dependence, affective needs, and vulnerable dispositions tax program persistence support efforts that produce only partial solutions and marginal successes in effecting positive change. However, the literature points to a relationship among the categories of persistence barriers, where institutional and situational barriers directly impact the attitudes (disposition) of ABE learners. Lewin's Force Field Analysis describes the competing negative and positive forces controlling the actions and directions in individuals' lives (Miller, 1967). This theory would ascribe institutional and situational deterrents to educational engagement as negative forces, against which positive forces can counter their sabotaging effects. One positive force that can be developed and nurtured is the "positive self" (Comings et al., 1999).

This elevation of disposition and its variables, including self-efficacy, is one approach to persistence facilitation and a means to address dispositional barriers. Motivation for continued academic engagement and progress was the aim in the studies on incentive programs. However, the findings of persistence studies indicate the correlation of self-efficacy levels with motivation

levels. This relationship suggests the need to consider efficacy support as a prerequisite to the development of strategies to improve motivation to sustain persistence. Because of efficacy's influence on motivation, authors advocate putting focus on disposition and the sense of well-being (affect) of the individual, since both are key to self-efficacy (Comings, 2007; Koselecky & Hoskinson, 2005; Mellard et al., 2012; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Quigley, 1997). The literature confirmed that where improvements to persistence and educational advancement were evident, the dispositional and affective needs of participants were met. The participants themselves revealed the transformative effect of emotional and social support on their motivation and persistence and attested to the sense of community as a factor in continued participation. The efficacy component of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 2001; Merriam et al., 2006) posits this influence on behavior from interactions of individuals with their environment.

Therefore, the focus on affect and disposition must acknowledge the imprint of environmental influences from past and current contexts of the individual's life and recognize their effect on participation behaviors. In this literature review, the influence of context and social networks was evidenced in participants' affective and dispositional states; however, the studies did not detail how and in what ways participants were impacted by their interactions in the program context.

The life context with its experiences and social connections creates the learner who enters an ABE program (Kappel & Daley, 2004; Taylor, 1997). The dispositional effect of those elements runs concurrently with elements of the program context. This perspective is represented in Figure 2.4.

What environmental elements should be factored, where they could be mediated, and how they can be enhanced to support the positive self and elicit positive ABE behaviors are questions that merited pursuit. This qualitative study probed these areas through the examination of the experiences of participants in an incentivized program. Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 2001; Merriam et al., 2006), with its emphasis on context, provided the backdrop for the study. The theory illuminated the multiple influences of environment on the participants and enhanced the understanding of environment and its determinants on behavior. The expanse between environment and behavior was connected by dispositional variables, which were molded by the environment and which ultimately determined participant behavior. How these dispositional variables influenced persistence was revealed in the experiences of the participants. Their response to program experiences illuminated the role of context on affect, disposition, and persistence and provided perspectives on dispositional barriers to ABE persistence. More importantly, the narrative of their experiences gave voice to ABE learners and provided a needed perspective to future development of programs to support motivation and persistence.

As the researcher, I had a responsibility to accurately present the findings of this study and underscore the value of the contribution of these voices by ensuring the integrity of this investigation through the detailing of its processes. The methodology explained in Chapter Three will present the rationale behind my decision to do a qualitative study and will trace the processes that connected me to the participants. The mechanics of this qualitative study will also be detailed, which will include a review of the research question; information on the sample and the sampling rationale; descriptions of the data collection, their organization and analysis; and the quality monitoring measures that were incorporated.
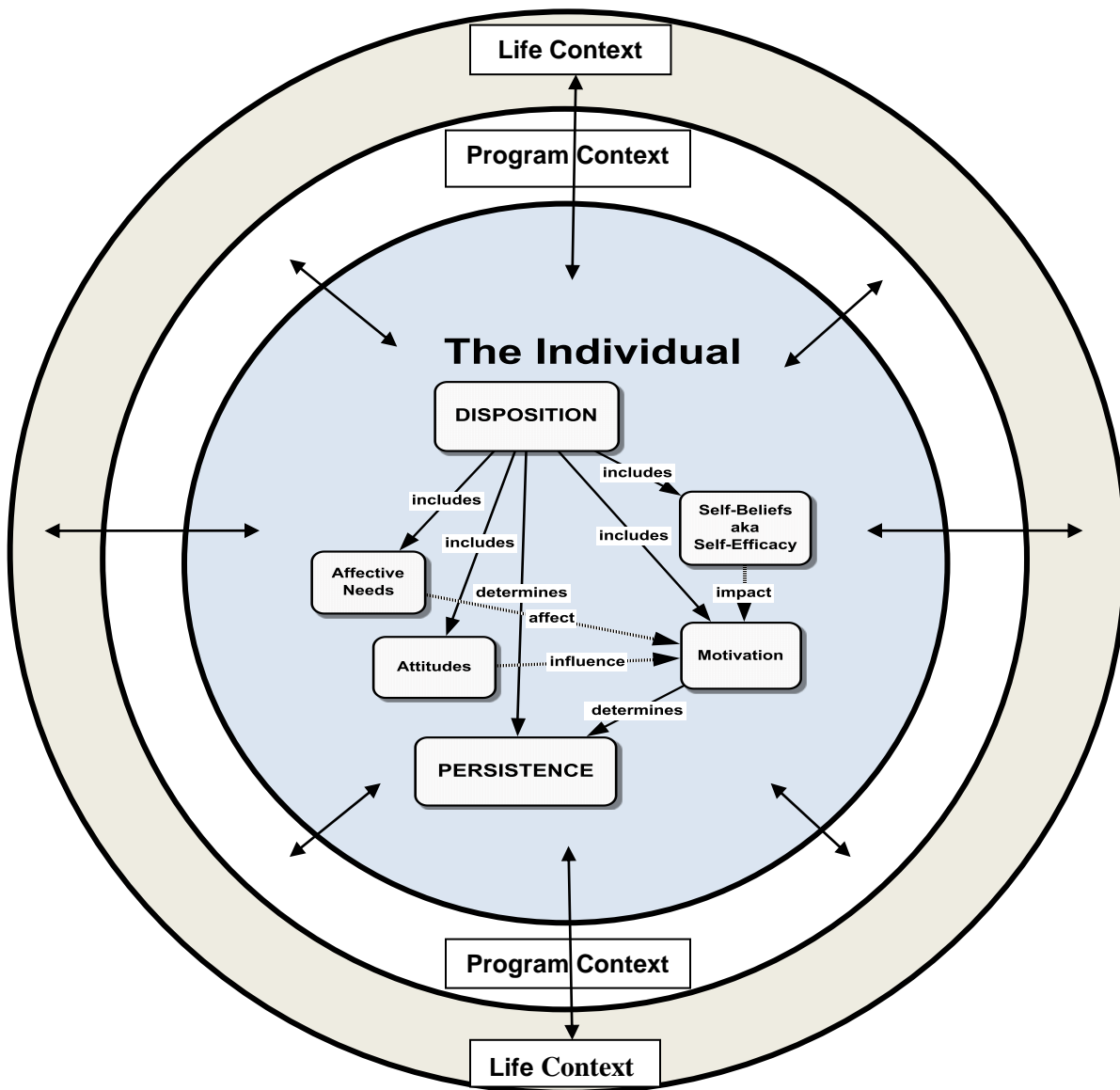
Figure 2.4. **The nested context.** The ABE participant's dispositional make-up is a composite of influences and experiences from her/his life context. Program engagement nests this new context into the individual's larger life context and compels the individual to negotiate with and between the demands of both contexts. Participant dispositions influence and are influenced by these interactions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The Choice of Qualitative Research

The choice to do a qualitative study was based on several considerations. The first consideration related to the research question and the goal of this study: to understand the meaning individuals in ABE programs attributed to their experiences with persistence support. Qualitative research requires inductive approaches to arrive at an understanding of the personalized realities individuals construct from their descriptions of the experiences being investigated. What is learned from these experiences results from interactions within social contexts; the meaning individuals derive from these exchanges constitutes their world orientations. The rich descriptions of participant experiences and the inductive strategies used to construct their meaning are characteristic of the interpretivist orientation to qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). For my study, this qualitative approach was effective in understanding participant perspectives in the effort to derive and interpret the meaning from their experiences.

Another factor guiding my choice to do a qualitative study was the compatibility of my philosophical stance with the five philosophical assumptions Creswell (2007) identifies with qualitative research. These are the ontological assumption of subjective and multiple realities that surfaced from my data; the epistemological assumption that mandated that I get close to my participants; the axiological assumption that my values and biases were a ubiquitous presence; the rhetorical assumption that the language used in my research was literary, informal, and reflective of the lexicon of qualitative work; and the methodological assumption that discovery resulted from inductive analysis and an emergent design.

The design of my study focused on the experiences of participants in the nested context of an incentivized program. This study attempted to trace how persistence became a behavioral

derivative from the meaning individuals constructed from their experiences as participants in the program. This exploration of behavioral influences on persistence decisions was facilitated through the analysis of data elicited from the interviews of participants. These interview data were examined to identify the significant factors and events that emerged during program participation and how these impacts influenced program decisions and actions. The in-person approach of interviews used to collect the data on learner experiences reflected the premise of qualitative research that such data and collection methods are conducive and imperative to understanding the drivers of human behavior.

Another reason I chose a qualitative study was because it addressed two areas that typify studies of human experiences: the experiences I had as the researcher with the incidents being studied and the questions that remained unanswered related to the events (Creswell, 2007). As previously stated, my work in education with at-risk adults exposed me to their program persistence challenges. The influences factoring into the ability of the study's participants to navigate through those barriers and persist in their studies were revealed in their descriptions of their program experiences. These perspectives on persistence are best understood when they come from the voices of the participants themselves. Creswell (2007) states: "Qualitative research is situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 36). To understand the meaning learners created from their experiences that affected persistent behaviors, it was necessary to personally connect to that world to learn from the voices of participants through a qualitative study.

In the study of human experiences the second area addressed by qualitative research relates to that which remains unsolved (Creswell, 2007). The dilemma of sustaining ABE engagement has been a persistent problem whose remedy has found no universal solution. The

diversity of the population and the complexity of their issues complicate the problem of persistence; therefore, a panacea may not exist. However, the search for ways to counter persistence barriers may point to remedies that are not so much universal as they are germane to specific situations or circumstances. The advantage to multiple investigations that probe diverse avenues of thought on the persistence question is the creation of a broader platform of concepts and ideas from which practitioners can tailor their own interventions. Therefore, my comparatively small qualitative study may not offer the universal solution to how persistence can be instituted, but my study will add one more fragment to the ever-changing mosaic of adult basic education.

Purpose

A qualitative approach best fulfilled the purpose of my study to learn how individuals responded to experiences in an enhanced educational program designed to encourage persistence. The enigma of persistence is rooted in the complexity of issues that challenge the ability of ABE learners to sustain their program efforts. Persistence is a multi-faceted concept that is reliant on probing the perspectives of those who have had experience with it in order to understand how it can be effected and supported. The development of this understanding requires face-to-face communication with those who were directly engaged in the experience (Creswell, 2007). If education has the responsibility of maintaining a literate society, then this input must be valued as an inherent component to strategic program development.

However, the work with at-risk populations, in particular, evokes problematic complexities that only qualitative inquiry can succinctly represent. It values the experiences and first-hand perspectives of participants: those most intimately connected with the events and through whom investigators can vicariously interpret and understand the meaning these

individuals derived from these events. This characteristic of valuing individuals for their contributions aligns with my beliefs of respecting and acknowledging all voices, particularly those that are marginalized and given no voice on issues that affect their lives. Only by getting close to my participants was I able to interpret and better understand the meaning behind their words and fulfill the purpose of my study.

Context in Theory and Qualitative Research

My choice of a qualitative study was further supported by context, which is a factor in qualitative research and a foundation of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura, 2001; Merriam et al., 2006). My study solicited from participants what was intimately relevant to them in a shared context: that of the program. Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of context where participants are asked to reflect on and address the issues in a study (Creswell, 2007). The context of the program in this study was critical to understanding the meanings participants derived from their experiences. The importance of context was a major focus of this study since its theoretical framework was Bandura's theory (Bandura, 2001; Merriam et al., 2006). Detailed descriptions were critical to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences in what essentially was a nested context of the program within the larger context of their lives.

The role of context in qualitative research is revealed through experiences and behavior, which are integral parts to the composite of that being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The emphasis on the importance of context in my study aligned with this concept of holism. This broader perspective considered not only facets of the Open Gate program context but also elements in the participants' larger life context. My exposure to the context was important in this study since

this contextual element was germane to both the theory framing this study as well as being seminal to the qualitative work itself.

Compatibility

Lastly, the decision to do a qualitative study was based on what I believe was the compatibility of the philosophical assumptions of this approach and me as a researcher and human being. According to Moustakas (1994), the questions I as a qualitative researcher formulated for the study had to reflect my interest in, involvement with, and personal commitment to this issue and this general population of learners. Van Manen (1990) adds that the choice of a particular method of qualitative study should "maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator in the first place" (p. 2). Student success and advancing lives has been my mission during my 30 years in education. The experiences working with the most challenged and marginalized learners inspired my interest to investigate ways practitioners and programs can facilitate success and change the trajectory of lives. This qualitative study put me closer to the source—the students— and from their perspective I have a keener insight into the phenomenon of persistence and ways to improve education's approach to assisting at-risk learners. This is the "harmony" to which van Manen refers. In this kinship of qualitative research and education, I sought to discover and understand the influences that shape human experiences, mold personal orientations, and determine life directions.

Research Paradigm

Social constructivism was the research paradigm that guided my study. Its emphasis on social interaction spoke to my educational background in sociology and my worldview related to environmental influences on individuals. People derive meaning from their experiences, used to form the lens through which they create a personalized understanding of the world and a means

to assimilate new knowledge. Much of this learning and knowledge construction comes from interaction with others. This is social constructivism. This perspective represents my epistemological stance, i.e., my perspective on the relationship I had with my study's participants and my view on human knowledge: its origins, acquisition, and limits (Creswell, 2007).

This study relied on the first-hand accounts of participants' experiences in a secondary program with wrap-around persistence support features. The context surrounding the program and its delivery of these support services provided a broad platform for examination against the backdrop of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory. My epistemological stance aligns with Bandura's theory and its emphasis on learning as socially situated. This alignment guided my study's focus: to discover the meaning Open Gate participants derived from their experiences with persistence support in this nested context and how these experiences impacted their persistence.

The Research Question

This study narrowed the broad issue of persistence to a focus on the response of adult learners as participants in an enhanced adult basic education program, designed to support persistence. The research question was: What are adult students' experiences with persistence support within ABE programs? The overall design strategy of this qualitative study was to capture the perspective of adults as participants in an educational program enhanced to support persistence. The purpose was to better understand how adults responded to this experience, what meaning they attributed to it, and how their experience impacted their persistence decisions. Concentration focused on contextual factors of both the immediate program environment as well as those external to that context to learn how these elements together influenced participation decisions.

Sample and Sampling Rationale

Creswell (2007) states that when purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research, sites and participants are chosen based on how they can inform the problem being studied. In other words, participants that were identified for this study had experience with the focus of this research (Moustakas, 1994). The sample for this study was drawn from a population that mirrors the demographic most challenged by persistence. The persistence issue is most markedly manifested by high attrition rates among at-risk ABE populations, which made the selection of Midwest College a propitious choice as the site for this study. The institution is urban-based and borders on the city's poorest neighborhoods from which it draws a majority of its ABE learners. The college is also located in a county with a disproportionate percentage of African-American men comprising the state's inmate population, which led to its recruitment by a nonprofit organization and the development of the Open Gate program. The college's adult high school, General Education Development (GED)/High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED), and ABE programs provide the educational services for this program.

The sample for this study consisted of participants of the Open Gate program, which was created in 2014 through a joint venture between Midwest College and a nonprofit organization offering educational services to incarcerated individuals and their families. Studies confirm that where situations of incarceration exist, the devastation to families is manifested most acutely in the lives of the dependent children. The psychological and emotional penalties children suffer as a result of separation are compounded by the upheavals created in their home life, often plagued by instability, transience, poverty, abuse, and neglect (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016). Such conditions exacerbate the difficulties these children have in coping with their circumstances, and invariably, result in problems that include their education. These negative factors not only

contribute to school drop-out, they also increase the likelihood that inherent to a large percentage of prison populations (Simmons, 2000).

The Open Gate program was designed to reverse the negative impact of this circumstance and the other complicating factors comprising the lives of many of the program's participants— low literacy, poverty, and family and/or personal instability. Cognizant of the threats to participant persistence, the program development committee created an enhanced or incentivized program that wrapped support services and features around the college's established secondary education services. The program enhancements were designed to support persistence, program completion, and direction toward postsecondary training and education. Open Gate participants receive assistance with financial costs related to tuition, books, and fees and access to services such as transportation and child care. In addition, Open Gate participants can earn stipends based on meeting specific program expectations.

The sampling strategy was purposeful and participant criteria aligned with the criteria for Open Gate program acceptance. The individuals who were solicited to participate in this study:

- Had a parent/guardian who was or had been incarcerated or on parole/probation

- Had not completed high school or a GED/HSED credential

- Were between the ages of 18-25 at the time of program admittance

- Had been out of high school or other education program for at least three months from the time they applied for program admittance

Seven individuals participated in this study. Because Midwest College was not in session when I commenced work on this study, I had no opportunity to do face-to-face participant recruitment. As a result, I asked Joseph (the pseudonym that will be henceforth used for the

Open Gate program administrator) for his assistance to identify prospective participants. Since most of the students on his list of potential participants were graduates of the program, I made the decision to focus on secondary graduates. This provided a specific perspective on persistence and goal completion for the study. Though this narrowed concentration did further limit the number of prospective participants, the data these seven participants provided were rich in detail and insight and reached a saturation point where the same themes were emerging.

The unit of analysis was the shared experience of those who graduated with a secondary credential as participants in the Open Gate program. The investigative inquiries were designed to elicit descriptions from these persisting students that included details of the total context of participation—elements both internal and external to the program. These details were probed to discover how these individuals, their behavior, and their persistence decisions were influenced by the dovetailing, competing, and/or lone factors of this nested program context.

Key to identifying persistent factors in their program experience was the voice of the students themselves. Their direct experience with these influences offered uniquely personalized perspectives. In addition, this study of this young segment of the ABE population has significance. These individuals not only represented the socio-economic profile of ABE participants most challenged by persistence, their age offered an intriguing aspect to the issue. Persistence studies reveal a distinction between the learning of and servicing considerations for youth compared to those of older adults who tend to persist at higher rates (Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2002). Authors pose the merits of studies involving this particular demographic as a distinct subcategory of adult learners, especially as interest grows related to millennials, who range in age from 18-34 years (Shaw & Disney, 2012). (Open Gate participants are 18-25 years old). The insights of Open Gate's participants could lend a new and unique

50

perspective to the literature on persistence. Their young voices give dimension to and expand the discourse on learner persistence. At the same time, their experiences can guide program development with fresh insights on encouraging the educational pursuits of all at-risk adults.

Site Access

After receiving my home institution's approval of my IRB, I followed Midwest College's IRB procedures to secure permission to conduct research activities. This process had two required approvals, both of which had to be submitted to the chair of Midwest College's Institutional Review Board. The first approval was administrative and assessed the request against criteria that included the planned study's relevance to the institution and its impact on personnel and resources in terms of cost and workload. The second approval involved a "Human Subjects Review Protocol" form that specified the purpose, objectives, the population of my research, and all aspects of participation. A copy of a participant information form (Appendix A) and a copy of my interview protocol (Appendix B) with my stated plan to record and transcribe the interviews, a copy of the consent form, and a statement of benefit to Midwest College for approving this study were among the documents submitted. Final approvals from both the Midwest College campus vice-president and the IRB were then forwarded to the Pre-College Division.

Program Access and Participant Selection

My access to the program and potential participants was facilitated by connections made during my work history with Midwest College. Because Midwest College IRB approval for my research was not granted until after the end of the academic year, and because no Open Gate students were registered for summer school, as stated earlier, I relied on the program administrator for participant recruitment assistance. He provided a list of approximately 15

names of potential participants. The objective was to procure 8-12 graduates of the Open Gate

program as participants. Joseph agreed to contact the graduates to secure permission for me to

call them, at which time I would inform them about my study and solicit their participation. Of

the 15 names on the list, Joseph reached eight individuals; seven granted permission for my call

and all seven later volunteered to participate in the study. The main criterion for confirming

participant selection was their interest in and their understanding of the study and its purpose.

Efforts to procure additional participants for this study were unsuccessful due to phone numbers

being no longer in service.

Maintaining Confidentiality

One of the most critical responsibilities of the researcher is to the participants of the study

(Seidman, 1998). Implied in this mandate is the need for participants to understand the scope of

the study and be informed of their role as participants and all aspects of their participation.

Paramount is the need for participants to feel comfortable, not only about their decision to

participate but also during their tenure as participants. Information is the first step.

Participants were given the Informed Consent for Participation form at the interview. In

addition to fulfilling IRB requirements, the form was used to review the information previously

shared about my study, including the rights and options as participants. The following points

were repeated at the interview:

- the purpose of their participation

- what participants were asked to do

- any risks that would be associated with their participation

- their right to review or withdraw from the study

- how the findings would be disseminated and the intended audience

As a researcher, it was my responsibility to instill confidence that confidentiality would be maintained. Participants were given another opportunity after the review of the Consent Form to have their concerns and questions addressed so their participation decision was an informed one (Locke, Wyrick, & Silverman, 2000; Seidman, 1998). As suggested by Seidman (1998), I adopted the following measures to instill security, confidence, and openness with the participants' role in the study:

- not naming the site, the nonprofit organization, the participants, or other individuals of my study

- avoiding detailed personal descriptions that could identify the above

- using pseudonyms only when referencing individuals in my data work

- using pseudonyms in my final report

- erasing the audio recordings following publication of my study

- being the sole possessor of recordings, documents, and all data

Data Collection and Tools

Data collected included basic demographic information from the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A), which was given to the student at the time of the interview. Data requested on this form included the participant's age, gender, ethnicity/race, marital status, dependents, date of last educational participation, last grade completed, educational goal, Open Gate participation history, and living situation (independent, incarcerated, dependent, shelter). In qualitative research, however, a primary means for data collection is the interview (Creswell, 2007). Data were acquired from one semi-structured, one-hour interview that was recorded and later transcribed. Since context is a primary factor in this study, my presence in the physical program context put me closer to the participant's world. On-site interviews with the study's

53

participants served several purposes: it encouraged open communication between me and participants; created a sense of ease with participants in familiar surrounds; enhanced the possibilities for thoughtful and in-depth responses against this familiar and relevant backdrop; and located me, the observer in a qualitative study, physically in the world of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

Two weeks after reviewing the list of potential participants with Joseph, I conducted the first interview, which was scheduled by phone, at Midwest College in the Open Gate office. In the meantime I awaited return calls from the other individuals. During that first interview, two of the seven contacts happened to enter the Open Gate office to visit Joseph. Both were on campus to register for their fall classes in the college. Joseph took the opportunity to introduce me to both women. One interview immediately took place and the other was scheduled at a worksite a few days later. The remaining interviews were scheduled over the next two weeks at locations of participants' convenience and choice. The fourth interview took place at a worksite; two interviews took place in participants' homes; and the last interview took place at a public place.

The interview protocol (Appendix B) consisted of open-ended questions to allow for expanded responses. These questions were designed to address the research question and the subquestions of the study (Appendix D). I used an analytic framework approach for the interview protocol as Patton (2002) suggests. In structuring the questions in this manner, the topics of query aligned with persistence factors discussed in the literature, and these topics later served to organize the data. The interview protocol consisted of three tiers or levels of questions, designed to allow parties to acclimate to the activity as the level of questioning transitioned from recall to reflective. Eliciting factual responses initially allowed a comfort level to develop and

verified information completed on the basic demographic form. A second tier of questions asked participants to detail their initial program experiences, with focus leading to positive and negative aspects of their participation and how the support features factored into these situations. The last tier of questions sought reflection from the participant in terms of personal observations and revelation that related to their total program participation experience.

Because the interview protocol was the primary tool for data collection, Creswell (2007) suggests pilot testing the interview. My plan was to conduct a pilot with a non-program student, enrolled in one of Midwest College's secondary programs. Because the semester ended before I was given IRB approval from the college, the delay prompted me to contact an online ABE student I worked with in the past. She consented to do the mock interview over the phone with me. I was be able to time the session, practice using the Interview Comment Sheet (Appendix C), and familiarize myself with the use the digital recorder so its operation would not be an intrusive factor during the real time interviews.

To enhance the data captured on the recorded interviews, I used the Interview Comment Sheet (Appendix C) to write notes during and after the interview. It documented aspects of the interview not recordable on an audio device and included my impressions during and after the interview and my reflections on that particular interaction. In addition, because context is a factor in qualitative research, this documentation served to contextualize each interview as a single, unique interaction. It provided a means to capture the holism of that process by expanding it beyond just the words that were recorded. These notes also supplemented and enhanced my data analysis in providing a form of triangulation.

The digital recorder that was used to tape each interview was also used as a tool for this same purpose of documenting my experience with each participant. When possible, I took

advantage of the immediacy of the moment, when impressions were still fresh in my mind, to document my thoughts following each interview. These thoughts were later combined with the written reflections on the comment sheet.

The reflections from the interview comment forms also became part of a journal I kept. As a once ardent journal writer, I used this piece as a personal monitor to stay on track as well as to record reflections and ruminations on the process and progress of my research. Moreover, though not done originally with any definitive use, the documenting of these thoughts proved highly valuable to me. In addition to contributing to my theme analyses, these journal notes provided thoughts that were included in Chapter Five's implications for adult education practice and in my closing remarks.

To provide another means to triangulate the data and to ensure accuracy of the interview data, a 1-2 page summary of each interview was emailed to each participant for review with the request for confirmation of receipt and a return submission of edits and additions a week afterward. Each summary had seven topics from the interview under which participant responses and my understanding of their responses were bulleted. All participant interview summaries were received, but no changes were submitted.

Data Storage

To house the tools and the data they collected, a file system was established in my home office. Each participant had a file folder in which was kept:

1. the completed Participant Information Sheet

2. the original signed Letter of Consent

3. a copy of the application to the Open Gate program

4. the full transcript of the interview

5.   a concept map of the interview

6.   the bulleted interview summary

The above files were kept in a locked file cabinet. All electronic files of data were kept on the hard drive of my home laptop computer. All electronic files were secured and password protected.

Data Analysis Organization and Tools

Data analysis and organization started prior to the actual data collection. Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that analysis, more specifically, that related to data reduction, actually begins through the anticipation of the task ahead, the framework establishment of the study, the research question being probed, and the data approaches being considered.

The organization of data analysis can also occur prior to collection. The researcher can begin by using two primary sources. The first source is the questions generated during the origins of the study, before the fieldwork of data collection actually begins. Questions surrounding negative and positive factors to ABE persistence were well discussed in the literature. These broad topic areas not only helped structure my interview protocol, but also served to organize the data into categories. This pre-field work prepared me for the actual data collection and data analysis (Patton, 2002). The second source that assisted with organizing data analysis was what occurred during the data collection process itself. Patton (2002) posits that data collection is the beginning of analysis, and he puts value to the insights and interpretations the researcher gains during this time. My data analysis was facilitated by the documentation of my impressions and insights during the interview process on the Interview Comment Sheet (Appendix C). As was previously stated, the comment sheets as well as my journal helped by triangulating the data and providing "reminders" of ideas and thoughts during analysis.

My data analysis incorporated some very basic tools and means to note my reactions and comments. Highlighters, color-coded by general topic areas, were used to initially identify categories and significant passages on the printed transcripts. Codes for subtopics of each major category were developed and became the marginal notations in the left margins of the transcript pages. The widened right margins allowed comments to be written.

My affinity for graphic representations of facts, concepts, and ideas, however, prompted the development of a tool suggested by Creswell (2007): an electronic data collection matrix. The matrices were used to log data and proved practical and helpful, for they served as a visual tool to quickly locate information. Using Microsoft Excel, I created four data collection matrices. Each matrix represented a major category derived from the persistence literature, which helped frame the interview guide and designate the line of questioning: barriers, disposition, context, and persistence. Each matrix had six columns: the participant's pseudonym, the subtopic code, detail or quote related to the code, the page number from the transcript, comments, and analytical comments. These data matrices allowed me to sort and organize the data. This allowed me to see clusters and patterns from which themes were eventually developed. These groupings were used to develop the maps that summarized concepts of the study. The capability to have sorted data, visually clustered and with their attached comments, was a valuable assist during analysis.

My preference for graphically presented information was reflected in the development of concept maps as tools. I used *Inspiration* to create maps to present and summarize the themes in Chapter Four and to summarize analyses in Chapter Five. The maps assisted me in my Chapter Four data presentation and my Chapter Five analyses and were included as a supplementary means to convey the study's findings through visual representation of the data and the themes that emerged from them.

Though there exists a number of reputable software programs for qualitative analysis such as *NVivo* and *Dedoose*, my concerns over their use lay in several areas. Time restrictions and my admitted limitations working with new technologies made me hesitant to invest time into learning and mastering the use of data analysis packages. As Patton (2000) confirms, not all researchers lean toward technology to work with data. As one who was always a "hands-on" person, I worried about the loss of researcher intimacy with the data, if totally reliant on software to extract meaning. Though software programs can logistically identify patterns and their frequency, I believe they lack the human instinct and capacity to "sense" meaning from the implied. Though the use of these technologies can be valuable in studies with large numbers of participants and/or multiple sites, the size of my study did not pose the same technical needs. Therefore, the low number of participants comprising my study, my disinclination to orient to a new technology, my preference for tactile access to my data, and a deference to time and resource savings all prompted the decision to sort my data and do my analysis mostly by hand, with only modest use of the Microsoft programs: Word, to create tables, and Excel, to sort data.

Coding, Data Reduction, and Analysis

The goal in this study's analysis was to understand the diverse perspectives from personalized narratives of a shared experience to assimilate their common threads into an interpretation of their meaning. This process began with assuring my study's trustworthiness and confirmability through my self-revelations to counter potential bias. The disclosure of my past involvement with populations similar to the one in this study was part of the required suspension of judgments. The analysis of the interview data was holistic and inductive, where significant statements were examined initially as equal in value and organized into clusters. Reduction transformed and simplified the data from the Open Gate interviews by eliminating repetitious or

59

irrelevant data that allowed detailing textural descriptions that described what participants experienced (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). How participants experienced what they did was explicated in structural descriptions, which, combined with the textural descriptions, explained the meaning of these experiences (Patton, 2002).

Codes and Coding

The transcripts were the primary source for coding and subsequent data reduction. Though codes for data analysis were established following field work, some code identification began prior to data collection, as suggested by Patton (2002). Concepts related to persistence factors were the starting point for code development or what I term "code anticipation": viable code possibilities based on what the literature had already revealed about my research issue. The general categories developed for the matrices were barriers, disposition, context influences on…, and persistence. Coded subtopic categories for the aforementioned general categories included (respectively): institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers; motivation, self-image, affect, outlook for future, self-efficacy, state; behavior, goals, perspective/outlook, social networks; incentives, program context, social support, life, motivation, goal orientation (Appendix E).

The coding of transcript passages had different level identifiers. A different highlighter color represented a general category, e.g., barriers. Each second tier level or subcategory was coded by letter or letters, e.g., B-S for barriers, situational. Detailing to a third tier added a number to the code. With the hard copy of the highlighted transcript in view, cutting and pasting words and phrases from the transcriptions to the matrices was facilitated by the use of a second computer monitor. Though time consuming from the data entry standpoint, the completed matrices/spreadsheets served my needs to document, locate, and sort the data.

Reduction

Data reduction "officially" commenced with the actual process of data review. It is in this process of data reduction that the researcher discriminately selects data upon which to focus. The data that I extracted had to meet the criteria of my study's purpose. Furthermore, I had to transform the data from the transcripts into authentic and meaningful interpretations of the experiences of the study's participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process of reduction involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts when initial reduction processes began. As I reviewed the transcripts of my participants' interviews, I used words, phrases, and symbols to make marginal notes of significant statements that I highlighted about participation experiences. After eliminating repeated and irrelevant statements, the data remaining were entered into the appropriate matrices.

The Excel-generated matrices/spreadsheets were instrumental in data reduction. The spreadsheets revealed the frequency of certain codes, which were reduced and then combined into meaningful chunks and segments, which were then named. From these segments, four themes originally emerged that later were revised to three themes, with one overarching theme.

Analysis

How data are displayed, organized, and assembled can assist the researcher in drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition to sorting the matrix data to find repetitions and themes among the interview responses, reviewing graphic representations of the same interview data on the concept maps further immersed me in the data and helped me identify the major themes. The concept mapping assisted me to visually identify the overarching theme of social context's dispositional influence on efficacy.

These commonalities seen in the concept maps and grouped from sorting the matrices provided the larger units of information called meaning units or themes that provided the basis for the textural descriptions that detailed the participants' experience. These converging themes were integrated into a composite map, which aided the in-depth interpretation that led to the structural descriptions, detailing how program participation was experienced. I used these maps to visually trace concept relationships, infer their meaning and significance, and connect them to concepts of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and those related to persistence. When the textural and structural descriptions were combined, the basis of the experience was extrapolated (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) into the conclusions that were presented in Chapter Five.

Quality Monitoring

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), "With quality comes trustworthiness, authenticity of findings" (p.277). Consistency and stability of a study's processes over time and across methods are quality measures. This sturdiness equates to methodological soundness that helps ensure the study's plausibility—its credibility. The methodological or mechanical elements of a study's design can reveal both consistency and credibility, assure objectivity, and prevent the intrusion and contamination of researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Therefore, to evidence dependability and confirmability, the design of a study should address two major interrelated considerations: the control of methodology and the countering of bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quality monitoring of both can ensure methodological soundness in its incorporation of specific measures related to data, the self-revelation of the researcher, and

the input of others. Table 3.1 summarizes this study's quality monitoring: its design

considerations, suggested measures, and how this study enacted them.

For this study, quality monitoring also included measures that protected participants and

encouraged the elicitation of freely shared program experiences in thick, rich descriptions. In

addition to enacting confidentiality measures to protect the participants, it was incumbent to treat

and represent them as individuals, whose perspectives and reflections were singularly deep,

personalized experiences. My worldview and philosophical stance called for quality measures

that ensured respect for every individual and the unique contribution each participant brought to

this study. Inductive analysis of participant contributions revealed common threads that melded

into generalized conclusions; however, the focus of this study was on the individual as the

critical component to my study and to human science research in general. With the driving

mission of adult basic education to improve the lives of at-risk populations, the emphasis on the

individual and the unique needs of every participant cannot be lost in the larger context of this

ongoing discourse.

Conclusion

Qualitative research is distinguished by analytic processes designed to maintain the

integrity of data procured from shared participant experiences. These measures assured the

personal narratives of the participants in this study were unadulterated and exacting

representation of their experiences. To accomplish this, it was incumbent upon me as the

researcher to subsume my understandings in deference to those shared by participants. In doing

so, the importance of the participant role and contribution to the goals of the study were

acknowledged. This prerequisite gives rightful voice to those closest to the experience being

investigated and upholds the tradition of qualitative interpretivist inquiry.

Table 3.1

Study's Quality Monitoring Measures for Methodological Soundness

Consideration	Means	Study's Approach
Ensuring Plausible, Strong, & Confirmable Data	Sampling Decisions (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994)	Purposeful sampling matching specific criteria provided by Open Gate program eligibility
	Methodological Triangulation: Rigorous/Multiple Forms of Data Collection (Patton, 2002)	Strategic wording & progression of open-ended interview questions
		Researcher interview notes and reflections to enhance captured data
		Digital recorder for accurate data collection
Countering Bias	Researcher Efforts (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985;Van Manen, 1990)	Disclosure of past connections with program
		Transparency of philosophical assumptions
		Suspension of judgments formed from past work with same participant demographic
		Detailing processes, e.g., coding, and data transformations
		Focus on participant voices
Checking Validity	Triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002)	Consistency in participant responses to topics
		Comparisons of differing viewpoints
		Triangulation by inquiry: review of and feedback on interview description and findings by participants (member checking)
	Member Checks (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 Moustakas, 1994)	Re-statements of interview responses to substantiate meaning and assure understanding and accuracy
		Data interpretations of participant experiences; summaries given to participants to check accuracy
	Peer/Colleague Reviews (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba,1985; Moustakas, 1994)	Debrief study and approaches with two former colleagues with doctorates and experience with research processes to elicit feedback
		Consult above peers/colleagues at critical junctures to review work, e.g., data displays and summary concept maps
Transferability	Aiding Transferability Judgment Decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994)	Clear presentation of study, research question, and design
		Detailed descriptions of setting and sample
		Explicated methods, e.g., data collection
		Thick descriptions that link findings with theory
		Explicated limitations of study and findings
Valuing the Participant	Researcher Cognizance and Actions	Respectful interactions, protected confidentiality, solicited feedback, acknowledged contributions

Chapter Four: Findings and Results

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information about the study's

participants and to present the findings from the data collected from the individual interviews.

The goal of this study was to identify themes in adult students' persistence and the elements that

supported their efforts within their studies. The research question that guided this study was:

> What are adult students' experiences with persistence support in Adult Basic Education
> programs?

To illuminate the support factors that discouraged or sustained educational engagement, the

sub-questions investigated in this study were:

- How did program participation influence learner perspectives related to past and
  current obstacles to persistence?

- What influences did the program environment exert on participant disposition and
  behaviors?

This chapter will begin with a brief description of the seven participants: graduates of an

enhanced Adult Basic Education secondary program, housed at an urban community college.

The three major themes that emerged from the data will be discussed, using descriptions from

participant interviews. To support the meaning underlying the themes and to address the study's

research questions, details from participant experiences will be presented and compared. In

addition, elements that sustained persistence during program participation will be identified.

Because the data intersected at multiple focal points, the resulting connections among the

research questions caused some overlap in references and discussions. Therefore, in the

chapter's summary, rather than addressing the research question and sub-questions separately,

the conclusions to the findings will be presented on a broader scope, but against the original

emphases of each question. These findings will give preview to Chapter 5 where final discussion

will determine the satisfaction of and implications for further query into this study's focus on persistence.

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Three Themes on Contextual Influences on Disposition

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The environment that surrounded the lives of Open Gate program participants, and specifically the social contexts that comprised it, had significant impact on their decisions and behaviors prior to and during their program participation. From the data on the simultaneous, alternating, and revolving influences of these contexts, the following three themes emerged:

1. **Theme One: Mirror to the Positive Self-"What Do They See?"** In this theme, participants describe the support provided by social contexts in building positive affect (the positive self). The different kinds of support the participants received will be divided into the following topics: goal support, social support, and efficacy support. The social contexts referenced in this discussion include families, social networks outside of the program, and the program's social context that included peers, classmates, and the program's administrator.

2. **Theme Two: Experiential Expansion-"I Accomplished Something."** This theme details the responses of participants to program-related activities and experiences outside of the classroom and their impact on personal development, goals, and efficacy.

3. **Theme Three: Change and Development-"Don't Let the Past Dictate You."** In this theme, participants discuss perspectives as to how the Open Gate program experience affected them. Their descriptions will detail

their views in three areas: their past and current challenges, their outlook

for the future, and their view of themselves.

Table 4.1 provides a frame for the discussion of the themes that will follow. Each theme is

followed by a summary statement of the theme's findings, the sub-themes, and the contextual

factors or elements impacting disposition that shaped each theme.

Table 4.1

Themes Reflecting the Influence of Context on Disposition

Theme	Findings	Subthemes	Context Factor/ Element
Theme One: Mirror to the Positive Self	Positive affect created by the support of social contexts affirmed the positive self.	Goal support Social support Efficacy support	Social contexts internal and external to program
Theme Two: Experiential Expansion	Activities provided participants with new experiences and enhanced perspectives.	Personal growth Goal setting Efficacy validation	Experiences extending beyond classroom
Theme Three: Change and Development	Participant reflections on their program experience revealed its significant dispositional impact.	Environment Dispositional readiness Timing Youth	Experiences in nested context

Qualitative Inquiry into Context

The reliance on participant contributions to academic inquiry is inherent to qualitative

research. The understanding of a particular occurrence is dependent upon the perspectives of

those who have personal experience with it. Their direct connection with the program events can

reveal aspects of the experience in ways that the researcher cannot access.

All learning occurs from interaction with social contexts within one's environment, according to Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (1971). Therefore, the external context with its social networks was important for the imprint it made on the life of each individual entering the Open Gate program. Its influence was manifested in the experiences of the participants as they traversed within the nested context, created by the addition of the program into the larger context of their lives. How participants persisted in their program commitment while simultaneously reconciling multiple demands and distractions from both contexts was an experience only they could explicate. Their educational achievements contradicted most ABE outcome statistics and indicated the need to probe deep into participants' total experience. This required taking into account events and circumstances that occurred both inside and outside of the program during their time of Open Gate participation. This approach revealed the interconnectedness of critical segments of the participants' lives. It was from their dispositional impact on the participants that the meaning from these experiences was extracted.

The Study's Participants

Open Gate participants find their way into the program in a number of ways. As a relatively small program compared to others at Midwest College, its presence is dwarfed by the college's postsecondary promotions, and it is barely visible among the myriad of Pre-College Division programs and services. Its enrollments have therefore depended more on the program manager, Joseph, and Pre-College faculty members, particularly adult high school and GED instructors, to promote the program, recruit prospects, and/or identify possible participants. As the instances illustrate below, other circumstances also led participants to the program.

Charles

The sponsors of the Open Gate program understood the reality of incarceration in families: that it can become a generational phenomenon. Such was the case with 20 year old

68

Charles, an African American. His difficulties as a student in the city's public high school landed him in an alternative high school, where a smaller setting was hoped to control his rambunctious behavior. His expulsion from this school in time led him into trouble and to incarceration for battery. However, this unfortunate circumstance evolved into what might have been the turning point in his life when Joseph, the Open Gate program administrator, met him for the first time. During a program recruitment visit at the jail, Joseph promoted the opportunity for release time for Charles to continue his high school education. Seeing this more as a break away from confinement than an opportunity to finish his education, Charles agreed to the offer and was given approval to attend Midwest College's adult high school program. There, an assessment of his school records showed a graduation requirement of 17 credits (17 classes) to earn his diploma. He started his first adult high school classes in the summer of 2015.

Henry

Like Charles, Henry first met Joseph during a recruitment visit while he was incarcerated. Twenty-three year old Henry, a white male, followed the pattern of his mother into prison for drug possession charges. Unlike Charles, however, Henry only completed 8th grade and never entered high school, spending much of his youth from age 13 on in institutions. He was a troubled youth with multiple issues that included ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) and a dissociative personality disorder for which he received psychiatric care and medication. Years living in conditions Henry described as family dysfunction, ongoing psychological and psychiatric issues, and drug addiction exacerbated his depression to the point of recurrent thoughts of suicide. However, his incarceration meant forced sobriety. During this time of clarity and self-examination, Henry decided to take advantage of GED classes offered at the prison. He was heartened by his parents' positive reaction in doing so. Therefore, when

69

Joseph appeared with information about the Open Gate opportunity to continue his education when he was released, Henry enrolled with his father's assistance and began the GED program in the fall of 2016.

Eva

Eva is a 19 year old Latina. For over six and a half years, she lived in foster homes, all the while desperately wanting to be with her parents. Her unhappiness drove her to the streets and the company of her friends, while her rebellious nature made her an inconsistent attendee in school. Once out of foster care, she described her multigenerational home life as being chaotic, and her escape from that chaos found her in the company of her friends in the streets but later, also at a summer job in a fast food restaurant at age 15. When fall came, signaling time for the start of high school, Eva was absent, refusing to attend the high school to which she was assigned. She opted instead to continue working to save enough of her modest wages to rent a substandard housing unit into which she would eventually move by herself at age 16. When asked about the circumstance of a minor independently renting an apartment, she responded, "He was a slumlord…as long as he got his money, he didn't care…" But a couple of years later, Eva did care enough about her circumstance to realize that she needed education to improve her lot in life. An online diploma program was not only a futile attempt but also a fraudulent program. She was further deterred from her diploma quest when blocked from enrolling in Midwest College's secondary program, due to her being 4 days short of majority age. However, according to Eva, it was "God" who led her to the wrong office the day she was at Midwest College to inquire about its secondary diploma programs, for it was that day she accidentally walked into the Open Gate program office and met Joseph, the program administrator. Eva began the GED program in January, 2017.

Bailey

      Bailey is a white 22 year old female, who like Eva, was deeply affected by parental absence. Her father was in prison, and his footsteps were later followed by Bailey's older brother. Her mother suffered with drug addiction and the financial hardships the family endured forced frequent residential moves. Though Bailey was a good student, the frequent moves, some due to evictions, meant different school placements, and the disruption, along with the loss of friends with the move from her favorite school district, was hard on Bailey. The final high school placement, where she was the racial minority, isolated her from any social bonds, and the highly disruptive classroom environment and its social norms created an uncomfortable atmosphere for her. Her dissatisfaction led to her dropping out of high school, but she continued her education through an online program, which she learned later, was a fraudulent one. The assistance of an aunt led her to Midwest College and the adult high school program. One of Bailey's instructors, aware of her background and circumstance, referred her to Joseph and the Open Gate program. Bailey began the program in January, 2016.

Lauren

      Without disclosing many details, 25 year old Lauren, an African-American female, described herself as "a bad kid…suspended, kicked out of school, fighting…a ticking time bomb." She essentially had to raise herself. Her years in high school were characterized by multiple instances of suspension, to the extent that she saw it pointless to continue and dropped out. Lauren admitted to several attempts to complete her secondary credential but with no success. It was fortuitous that her grandmother had earned her nursing degree from Midwest College, and it was her recommendation that brought Lauren to this city where she would enroll in the college's adult high school program. However, it was a plate full of food in the hands of a

friendly classmate that Lauren would learn about the Open Gate program. The plate of food was from the program's weekly luncheon, but it would be more than food that would keep Lauren engaged in the program and earn her a high school diploma. Lauren began the program in August, 2016.

Kim

Kim is a 28 year old white female, the only mother in this study. Like Eva, her early years were spent in foster care. She was a rebellious girl, whose restless disposition could have been blamed on her ADHD condition and the disruption to her life caused by multiple foster home placements. The shifts in school assignments, the inability to focus, and her last residential move prevented the completion of her last two high school credits. In her new location and having now reached majority age and disqualified from public school enrollment, Kim made several attempts to complete her high school diploma through various adult programs. However, lacking motivation, interest, and social connections at these programs, she was not successful. Then a conversation with a special needs ABE instructor, recruiting for the Open Gate program, led to Kim's enrollment. She began the program in the summer of 2015.

Chris

A 21 year old African American male, Chris made few references to his early childhood except for the frustrations that led him to drop out of school in the 11th grade. He left school because he "stopped learning" and saw no reason to waste his time if there were to be no gain. Living with his parents, financial need forced Chris into the job market, but there he found few good employment opportunities due to his lack of a high school credential. It was during this time that Chris' father heard about the Open Gate program from his friend. Having had a good experience in a similar ABE learner support program at Midwest College, Chris's father

encouraged him to visit the campus and learn more about the program. Chris began Open Gate in April, 2016.

Theme One: Mirror to the Positive Self-"What Do They See?"

"You can take a person out of the hood but you cannot take the hood out of a person." This statement from Eva describes how the life context with its experiences is present in the disposition of every individual. Those indelible influences shape a uniquely complex personality that distinguishes every individual. When Open Gate participants chose to exercise personal agency with their decision to pursue their educational goals, this process put them into social contexts where their success was dependent upon the efficacy of the positive self. The experiences detailed in Theme One will describe the dispositional needs of each participant that challenged the viability of the positive self. The kind of social support extended to build positive affect and the response and reaction of each participant to that support will be detailed.

Sub-theme: Goal Support

Lauren needed support from others to finish her education and actively sought to fill it. "I'm a positive person. I like to keep positive people around me, so Open Gate gave me that." Lauren's big smile, quick laugh, and big gestures as she spoke during her interview indicated an energy to me, one that may have been borne from resilience of having endured what she described as a "rough childhood." That external context of Lauren's early life forecasted a bad future. Prompted by the urging of her beloved great-grandmother, Lauren promised to leave the streets and straighten out her life. This promise continued to be her motivation when she moved to this city to attend a secondary program at the same college where her grandmother earned a nursing degree. Aware of her past failed attempts to earn her GED certificate, she knew the importance of securing personal support. She had that from a cousin, to whom she would

regularly update her progress in the adult high school program, but it was the consistent personal support she knew she needed to sustain her. It was a fortuitous day when the aroma of hot food from an Open Gate luncheon captured her attention and eventually led to her enrollment in the program. However, it would be the positive environment and its people that would fill her voids so she could keep her promise to her grandmother. When asked about the difference between this educational experience and those in her past, her response reflected the importance of a support network, which she sought and found in the program:

> …like I said, not from here, so coming here, not knowing nobody, it was a different environment. It was just like different people, more positive people. Pretty much, for the most part ... at the time, when I was in Open Gate, I could see a lot of people wanted the same things that I wanted. We pretty much all had the same struggles, you know? It was a great thing….It was just about me basically surrounding myself around the right type of people and disciplining myself to get my goal accomplished.

Unlike the encouraging family members in Lauren's early life, family was a negative factor in the goal pursuits of Kim and Bailey. Doubts for success directly and subtly conveyed by "naysayers" motivated both participants with goals to prove their doubters wrong.

Kim's only family support came from her late grandmother, with whom she obviously was very close. When I interviewed Kim at her home, she made a point of showing me where she kept her most treasured items. On a cabinet shelf behind a clear glass door rested a small urn with her grandmother's ashes; two of her grandmother's treasured cloisonné pieces; and the black folder, framing her high school diploma, kept opened for display, which she looks at every day for inspiration.

Before joining Open Gate, Kim was just two credits shy of graduating from high school, but the diploma continued to elude her despite multiple attempts to complete the required work. She was undeterred, but at that point, she had no one backing her efforts. Even as she was

74

engaged in the Open Gate program, family members doubted her ability to finish school. Her acquaintances, whom she termed "haters," in their comments and innuendos insinuated their ill will. Because of the "naysayers" in Kim's life, she found it difficult being in the company of those who didn't have faith in her:

> Honestly, I feel like it made a lot of people mad that I was doing well. People wanna bring you down a notch, and I had to face that a lot.

> Family. My own family, yes. They will never admit it. They will never say that they were jealous, but I know that they were, because no one in my family has finished high school besides on my grandmother's side, my mother's side, and so I don't know if it was a jealousy thing, and I wasn't trying to make them jealous. This was my journey.

The support she received from the program's social context is what Kim credited as the reason why she was able to persist in completing her diploma:

> …the reason why I think this worked is because I had so many mentors and so many people that gave me the motivation to come in.

> Also, I believe being with my own age group helped, but I say 100% of why I think that I succeeded with this program and no other program was that I had people that pushed me and helped me.

She was given the motivation to complete and could say to her detractors as well as to those who were supporting her:

> "Hey, you know what? Every person that gave up on me, I'm gonna do this."

> Because, it almost was like I wanna show my haters, and my motivators. The people who didn't believe in me, look at me now. It almost was kinda like that as well, but that wasn't really in my mind 100%, but, yeah, that was also a reason to keep pushing and keep going.

Like Kim, Bailey had little support from her family. Her mother was an addict (and died three years ago from her addiction) and her father and brother had been incarcerated. Both sides of her family predicted that she would follow the footsteps of one or both parents, but she resolutely set her goal to steer her life in a far different direction:

> …they all thought I was going to turn out like my mother and my father, so I had that, "Sooner or later you will go down the same path; you'll start using; you'll start stealing and…" rap. And I don't. I guess I've seen it and not even been through it, and I don't ever want to live or be in that lifestyle ever again in my life.

As a college student now in a criminal justice program, it is apparent that Bailey is maintaining her goal focus, and like Kim, can discredit her doubters and their predictions. She shared what most impacted her from the program from the standpoint of what had been her personal situation:

> …everybody in general that was involved in it, even the teachers and even when they weren't involved in the program, they just cared….They showed that they really cared a lot …They genuinely cared.

> …some students might not have a lot of family members that are rooting for them. You may have family members like, "Why are you going to school? You don't need the education." There's so many different things and conclusions, scenarios. I guess, just when you were there, everybody felt equal or it felt like people actually cared.

> It's just a lot of support.

Sub-Theme: Social Support

Bailey's soft-spoken manner reflected a distinct sadness, which was substantiated by her tears as she recounted the circumstances of her earlier life. With her father imprisoned, her mother an addict, and seven years separating her from her two siblings, there were no familial bonds to speak of. Bailey's life became bleaker with the move away from her friends into an environment where she was unable to form the kind of social connections she had before. She hungered to be a friend and be befriended, but in her last high school, she was estranged as an outcast racial minority and from the "anti-school" culture, which judged and focused on appearance. As a consequence, she became increasingly lonely, skeptical, and distrusting of others.

You want to believe that every single person is like that (nice) in this world and sometimes they're not. With me I want, like I was saying, I want, people are mad at me or don't like me, I want to fix that. I want everyone to be my friend. But then you get stabbed in the back...

You don't know what to expect in this world anymore. Are they just using it because they want something in return?

However, Bailey made the decision to join the program, stating, "...as far as the students, maybe they'd have a better understanding around how I feel..." At the time she entered Open Gate, the voids in familial relationships continued. The recent passing of her mother was hard on her; her father, now out of prison, was not a parental presence; and hard feelings related to her mother's death on both sides of the family divided them. Her distrust of people, however, kept her at a distance from her program peers. The negative experience with scrutinizing teen cultures was evidenced in her hesitation to share too much of herself for fear of being judged.

My walls were still up... didn't know all of them. It was going to be confidential but other people are going to know and then knowing the fact that they know, so then they're going to judge me off of that, but not get to know me for me.

Yet, in time, Bailey became more comfortable in the program, as noted in how she described her feelings and the interactions that took place:

I felt like I belonged. Not so to myself, I was starting to open up. Charles, Deborah, Jenny. They were just like … It was like another family outside of our families. We cared about one another. We made sure we knew when someone wasn't being themselves, and we knew when something was wrong. We'd goof around and laugh, or sometimes we have our little fights like siblings, but then we get past that. Chris, Chris was a sweetheart.

Eva was another participant without any stable familial relationships. Independent, having raised herself from the time she was 16 years old, she was still in need of social connections, which she had with her strong social circle in the "hood" where she lived and worked. However, Eva's friends were indifferent and dismissive of her educational efforts.

Group activities became a concern when they started to sabotage her study time, but especially when they became risky.

> Yes, oh yes. Temptation is hard. Temptation is very hard. So, I don't know, so I think, I know the worst thing I do in life is smoke weed. And a lot of my friends obviously smoke weed too so that was one of the things. They didn't, a lot of people that I used to hang out with didn't just smoke weed though they started to do other stuff… But I'd say where the complication came in is when people start to acknowledge the fact that you're straying away or contacting them less. Then in the generation I live in you get the risk of being called fake or you're not, I don't know, we're not friends or whatever.

Because these friends had been her main social network prior to Open Gate, Eva found it difficult to keep her distance. As she continued to prosper in her program, she was conflicted as her comments indicate:

> It's definitely been difficulties *(sic)*staying away and going back. Because I feel like there's been times where I just cut some people out. Like, "No, they're not doing good. I don't want to be around them anymore." And then, there's been times where I thought about it, "Maybe they need me around though maybe they need some type of positiveness. Maybe if nothing else I can be that threshold that keeps them still here to an extent." So yeah, there's definitely been problems straying away from people and going back.

The internal conflicts created by the strained relationships with her outside social network were contrasted by her comments about the support she received from her Open Gate peers:

> So, I feel in school and out of school I never really got the attention or the support that I've got since I've been in the Open Gate program. I feel like I've never been alone since then. If I needed help, I've always had someone to call. I just feel like yeah, I just feel like there's always a helping hand even if it's not an adult per se or a teacher or a counselor. Even if it's just a friend who's in the program as well. There's always somebody to feel like you can reach out for or to.

Sub-Theme: Efficacy Support

Positive affect sustains the positive self, which determines efficacious strength, which impacts motivation and ultimately, persistence. As stated earlier, data from interviews overlapped at multiple points in this study: such was the case with details of social support

experiences among the Open Gate participants. Where social contexts influenced goal and social support needs, invariably, they also influenced participants' efficacious needs and beliefs.

Experience can have significant affective and dispositional impact and its imprint can affect an individual's efficacious beliefs. This was the case with Charles. Charles had past academic challenges in school. To cover up his frustrations, he created trouble in his high school classroom. "I was like a hot-head. Like, the teachers ain't gonna help me, I'll just make a class joke or make some type of scene in the class and leave out."   Though he appreciated his release time from incarceration, he understood that in order to be allowed to continue his Open Gate participation, he had to have passing grades. Past school experiences and low expectations for himself created some anxiety and embarrassment:

> When I first started, I was nervous because I wasn't that good at school. Like with math and stuff like that. When Joseph bring my transcript, he started reading my grades to me and stuff.   I was like this is kind of embarrassing. He's like, "Yeah, you need 17 more credits." I'm like, "Whoa. That's a lot of credits."

Seventeen credits meant a long commitment to the program, which extended beyond the duration of Charles' incarceration. The length of commitment, made more challenging now with a fast food job, tested his persistence and efficacy to finish his program. When asked what kept him coming back to the classroom, he responded:

> When you have that support it's everything. Like, if I didn't have Joseph and the books and the stuff, I wouldn't have probably went to school. For real. Joseph was like the main reason I went 'cause he helped me so much. I didn't want to let Joseph down and I didn't want to let myself down or my momma, so I just kept going to school.

Besides the persistence support Joseph provided, his acknowledgement of Charles' progress not only reinforced his motivation but also strengthened Charles' efficacious beliefs as shown in his aspirations to "do better":

> At first, when I was at the high school, I settled for less, for like C's and D's. "Come on. You could do better than this, Charles." Joseph gave me that

encouragement…Being around Joseph is like pretty cool. It's like Joseph is a grandpa. He was just there all day long, just supportive. Just nothing but supportive. Like, he'd be doing my grades like, "Charles, we got all these good grades." Every time it comes back, "Look Joseph….I got an A in Mr. B.'s class." I ain't never had A's. Like I never had A's and B's until I got into the Open Gate program. It's like I had support. I wanted to do better.

When Lauren entered the program, the energy from her outgoing personality and the motivation from her promise to her great-grandmother did not indicate a need for the kind of efficacy support required of one like Charles with ability doubts. But Lauren had failed attempts before. Also, she was like Charles: on a longer path to a more distant goal. For Lauren, this meant not only high school graduation, but college afterwards and extending the commitment to time and effort. Therefore, Lauren's efficacious need for support sometimes required more than that offered by the "positive" peers surrounding her. Like for Charles, that personalized support and encouragement came from Joseph.

I came here a couple of times like, "Joseph, I'm leaving. I'm not doing it." He was like, "Okay. Well, why don't you just sit down and we'll talk about it." End of the conversation I will give Mr. Joseph a thousand reasons why I should leave school. He would come back and give me 2000 reasons why I should not leave school. He used to always win the battle.

Where dispositions can be uplifted to strengthen efficacy, the influence of social contexts can also have negative effects that diminish efficacy. The social contexts in Bailey, Kim, and Eva's lives created challenges that did affect their beliefs in their self-efficacy.

Bailey's lack of family and social support may have accounted for a low dispositional state:

I want everyone to be my friend. But then you get stabbed in the back or … And that hurts and then you cry and then you're like, "Okay, pick yourself back up and be strong." But then that's the same thing with them as far as what my family, everyone says. I'm the strongest person and this and that. And before it would make me feel good, but at times, when are you going to ask me, "How are you? Are you okay? What's going on?" Let me cry on your shoulder, and let me open up; let me vent. It's very weird.

80

Low affect depresses efficacious beliefs, and Bailey's lack of confidence was revealed in her statement: "I honestly…didn't think I was going to get my high school diploma…I wasn't being so positive, keeping my head up high. I was still worried about my grades…" However, as previously detailed, she expressed a positive regard for her Open Gate peers, positive social connections that Bailey did not have in her external social context. This same social context that offered her support had a positive dispositional influence, which was supportive of her efficacy as well.

Like Bailey, though not lacking motivation, Kim's internal struggles stemmed from doubters in her family and social network. Her confidence began to wane and threaten her persistence as she herself began to doubt:

> It was hard because I had people doubting me, and that's hard, because you can say all you want: "It doesn't affect me. It doesn't hurt me, but that's all you think about is, "Am I gonna fail again?" and "They're gonna be right."

However, she found support for her efficacy as she did for her goal from the social context of the program. For her, this atmosphere was a welcome respite from the social context of her outside life:

> …there were bumps in the road, too. Sometimes I might not have wanted to go because I was tired, or I just had some personal stuff going on, but that even was better for me, when bad things were happening, because that gave me a chance to be like, "School is the best place for me right now to let this out. To get this off of my chest, and to be in a different atmosphere where there's nothing but love. Seriously. That's my experience from it. Nothing but love at that place.

Eva's efficacy beliefs were not affected in the same way as those of Bailey or Kim, but the external social context was the same factor. Eva's social group did not challenge her confidence in her abilities, but what the group represented and what it posed may have created an efficacious need. Eva's friends represented the life she knew, albeit imperfect, and its attraction

lay in the comfort of its familiarity. Seeing the positive aspects of her direction, Eva attempted

to share her experiences with her friends, but they were indifferent and dismissive:

> I've attempted to express my feelings to people and try to get them…to do good.
> But basically get people options and resources and talk about how I feel with
> people. But you can bring a horse to water but you can't make him to drink.
> There's a lot of my friends who are the same age as me or a few years older that
> are stuck in their ways though. They feel like I'm preaching when I talk to them so
> they don't really want to talk to me anymore.

The differences in perspectives started to create distances in her relationships:

> It kind of separated me from a lot of people, too. And I feel like nowadays people
> …who aren't doing good don't like to see people doing good…or if they're not
> doing well, they want people to suffer with them.

Without the support of her old friends, Eva's efficacious needs were not only social but also

affirming of her choices and decisions:

> I feel like I've had family there since I met everyone. So, just the support just the
> resources, just the environment. I feel like everyone there is more or less like a
> family than we're all students. Sometimes when we get there we all can be
> having these huge conversations; we'll all be so engaged; everybody talks. I don't
> know. We all joke around with each other like brothers and sisters. I already
> wanted to go to school and the fact that I could have help with some of the things
> that might have been a problem definitely was awesome.

Where Eva's challenge stemmed from her attempts to reconcile an external situation,

Henry's challenge was internal, as he started to sort out his life during the time he was

incarcerated.

> I think I was disassociating a lot before that. But when I got into jail I detoxed
> myself. I went through all that. I started to have a moment of clarity of like
> "What the hell am I doing?" Excuse my language, but what am I ... Seriously.
> And just seeing my parents' happiness over the video monitor. Me telling them
> I'm doing good. It really made me emotional to see them happy. Had a big
> change in my life.

This was his transformative moment. Upon arriving to the program, he came with

motivation and a new life perspective. He described himself at the start as, "Nervous and

hopeful. It was good anxiety. I wasn't used to trying, so it was definitely a good change." Yet, when asked about any challenges he foresaw, his response might have reflected the realities of his past as he admitted, "It'd probably be my own self. My own self-defeating behavior that I always...that I'm stuck in. That I'm working on getting out of. You know, why even try at that? I'm gonna fail at that. It's mainly myself."

The efficacious uncertainty in those words might have reflected his circumstance. Henry was still transitioning out of his past, but having "de-toxed" himself and having achieved sobriety did not guarantee erasure of haunts related to his addiction, depression, ADHD, and his depersonalization disorder. The latter posed the greatest challenge, since his program participation put him among people, who are naturally inherent to the context of a school setting. In spite of this history, Henry surprised even himself when he passed the first of his four GED tests:

> My hopes were high after that: after I completed the first one. I'm like, Wow, I actually did this. I can do this! I got more and more confident with what I was doing. So my hopes got higher and higher. And now I'm at a college level, trying…getting my associate's degree. Not trying: I am!

When asked what else kept him motivated, he smiled and responded with great earnest:

> …my parents, seeing them happy, which made me happy. It creates a whole positive energy within my life…My parents have been really supportive in everything, along with Joseph. I think those are the two main things that kept me going.

During Henry's interview, and during others for this study, Chris' name was mentioned favorably for his nice personality. When I met him for his interview, I admit to being impressed by his quietly polite and pleasant nature. I was then surprised to hear him describe himself as a one-time introvert and loner. Whether that quiet nature was a factor in his decision to quit high school is unknown, but his preference for being alone was pronounced.

83

> Back then, it was different. Like it was just me by myself, just going to the classes and trying to get what I had to get in order to survive, basically…. I didn't like to be around people. I had more energy just being alone and thinking to myself…

The "release" of that introverted personality began during Chris' first encounter with Joseph, the program's administrator, which he described as a "warm welcome." Asked what he appreciated of this program compared to past education experiences, he stated:

> Here is much more warmer. You have people that have the same goals as you have. They're trying to accomplish their goal of getting their degree or diploma and along that way, you are too. So when two people have the same goal then they tend to equip each other with the right tools to work towards that goal.

As far as the Open Gate participants, he said:

> Well, most of them had some of the same classes as I had, so we worked together on projects. Even the final project, we helped each other get good grades, and we ate with each other, we talked, cried together, laughed together.

Chris' case revealed that efficacy needs may not necessarily be an indication of a deficit in confidence of ability, level of support, or exertion of effort. Efficacious support in Chris' case meant eliciting the emergence of the entire positive self so that not only might goals be achieved but full potential realized. When Chris opened himself up, he widened the parameters of experience and extended his reach to opportunities through the program as his experiences related in Theme Two will attest.

Though Chris' name might qualify as a "group favorite" among the participants in this study, one name repeatedly permeated all the interviews: Joseph, the Open Gate program administrator and its only staff person. It was common for participants to refer to him as a father or grandfather during their interviews. Bailey stated: "Joseph has been more of a father than my own father, and I hate to say it but it's true. …" and continued, "the things he would do for other students and just very, very kind hearted, huge heart." He was credited by several participants

for establishing a warm, caring program environment to which Kim could escape her outside

problems and to Eva "was the only thing I felt some days kept me human." His official

administrative duties include recruitment, enrollment, advising, reporting, and representing the

program.

His unofficial task and role, based on participant descriptions of their interactions with

Joseph, could be summed up as "efficacy enforcer." For each participant, that efficacy support

was personalized, e.g., urging Charles to aim for higher grades; convincing Lauren for the

"2000th" time to stay in the program; extending a warm welcome to an introverted Chris that

prompted his decision to enroll in the program; and supporting Henry, who said that without the

positive effects of the Open Gate program, "I'm just gonna wind up dead in some gutter, which I

probably would be if I didn't find Joseph."

Eva's statement might best reveal the role Joseph had in terms of the efficacy of the Open

Gate's participants:

> Joseph obviously wasn't too stern, but he cared and he showed that he cared. And
> having someone care and believe in you, I guess, is kind of just amazing because
> it's like when you don't believe in yourself, and someone believes in you, it kind
> of just makes you look at yourself and think, "What do they see? What can I do?"

Theme One's findings reveal the significant impact of social contexts on participant

dispositions. The interactions generated positive feelings, attitudes, and emotions and

encouraged the development of the positive self. These interactions created self-awareness when

the potential of the positive self was reflected in the mirror they provided. This influence helped

build positive affect to facilitate participant persistence and completion and affirmed,

strengthened, enhanced, and motivated the positive self.

Theme Two: Experiential Expansion-"I Accomplished Something"

Though the focus of the Open Gate program was the support of participants in their

effort to earn their high school or GED credential, interviews revealed that activities directly and

indirectly related to that goal gave support and benefit to participants.

Sub-Theme: Personal Growth

Lauren's energy and extroverted personality seemed to need an outlet. She found one in

her adult high school English class, where classmates recognized her skill and her willingness to

assist them. Soon, her leadership skills moved into the Open Gate program office as well where

Chris and Eva needed assistance with their civics exams. She enthusiastically embraced these

tutoring roles as her responsibility to the extent that it became a driver for her persistence in the

Open Gate program:

> Like I said, I'm not from this city, so ... basically, the kids in my class, we was kind of like in this one particular class. It was Ms. T.'s class. She teaches composition. Great teacher. I was already a great writer, so everybody in the class used to come up to me, "Hey, help me with my paper," so basically it became like a little family type of thing. I always like to have a family outside of the family, you know? Joseph program gave me that. It brought a sense of, "Okay, I've gotta come to school. I gotta come to school. I gotta do the right thing because I have people looking up to me." I always put it in a context of Joseph is my mentor, but I was maybe somebody else's mentor in the program, 'cause people always looked up to me in his program. They always have shown me a lot of great respect and always looked up to me...
>
> Yeah, I have always been like a leader.
>
> Only thing I wanted to do was just come in here and get my high school diploma. They put a requirement for the civics test on the graduation, and I actually did tutoring. I helped students like Chris. What happened that I did not expect was for so many people to start looking up to me like Eva did, just came up here. She wound up looking up to me. I also helped her pass her civic test …I came in here looking for some leadership. I came out learning how to be a leader and wound up leading some people. That was a great thing to me. I always say, "I'm coming in to gain something, but if I can take something away from me to help another person gain, I'm just as good."

Ever on the alert for activities of interest for Open Gate students and opportunities to

promote the program, the program's administrator, Joseph, encouraged and recruited several of

the participants. An invitation was received from a professor friend of Joseph to present at a

criminal justice class. Lauren agreed to the chance to visit a college outside of the city and serve

as a speaker on a panel about inner city life and the Open Gate program. Having had the

opportunity to present a personal perspective on police violence, on which Lauren was

particularly passionate, she said:

> I never would have thought that I would get the chance to just have somebody
> understand. If not understand, just take into consideration you are out here and
> you are in law enforcement, somebody's breaking the law, do your job. You don't
> have to go in, go overboard with the situation.

Chris also participated on the panel. This activity presented a situation where the

introverted part of his personality was subsumed to allow for a new social experience:

> Joseph would bring us to events like to talk about the program and to share what
> we did at the program. And so in those talk sessions, it would be me and two
> other students, maybe one other student, and we would talk about our experience
> with the program. So that right there, being that I'm an introvert and I don't really
> talk to people, I got to talk to a whole class of like 30 people or 50 people each
> time.

Chris' new experiences continued outside of the classroom. His interest in construction

led to his agreeing to Joseph's recommendation to participate in a program that trained youth to

build houses. Of that experience, Chris said, "…when I went there, I met new people and was in

a warm environment and met different types of age groups and what not. So that right there

allowed me to learn a couple of more things outside of me."

Sub-theme: Goal Setting

Early life experiences made an indelible imprint on Eva. They steered her toward her

goal and in her actions:

> …how I grew up I never wanted to go back to that…
>
> So, I've always never wanted to live like that so I always have done everything if
> it's whatever working all day or whatever to make sure that I don't have to live
> that way. And sometimes it wasn't school so it wasn't always easy to stay focused
> on school when you had things that you wanted and you felt like that wasn't going

to get you there. But then I really looked at it and I thought about it if I'm ever gonna get what I really, really want which is a decent life and a decent career. A job that's not necessarily just a job then you gotta go to school for that. Everybody doesn't I know that too. School isn't for everybody. School isn't everybody's destiny. Everybody doesn't have to school to get a good job but I do. I knew that.

Just because of my life and what I've been through, I want to help kids so bad. That's why I want to go to school for social work. I definitely want to help kids… my passion is with kids.

A particular college visit would prove pivotal for Eva in her education and career goal. A visit with the dean of a social welfare school made a lasting impression on her, for she has now established her educational pathway toward social work:

Talking to the Dean of Social Work was amazing. Just getting his insight and his advice and just seeing that there is people who cannot even know you personally and have so much faith and so much support that it's so, so encouraging. Meeting him was like a goal because I want to be in his program. I want to go to school for social work; human services is the step that I have to take to get there.

When the CEO of the nonprofit sponsor of Open Gate visited the Midwest College campus, he invited several state and local officials to a panel discussion presented by Open Gate students about their program experiences. When asked what ranked among his most memorable Open Gate experiences, Charles identified this particular event for what it meant to him personally to share his story and for the goal possibility that he saw in front of him:

When we met the state representatives, the legislators or something like that. We all started crying 'cause we all started talking about our stories, about what happened. It's nice meeting people with higher power. You're gonna see us up in that suit one day. For real. Like, I told Joseph, I would do anything for the Open Gate program because I want to see the kids do good. I don't want to see nobody behind bars, got to do all that.

Sub-theme: Efficacy Validation

As a graduating student from the college's adult high school, Kim was asked to be the keynote speaker at an all ABE school assembly. As a student who had challenges with

persistence and succeeded in her educational goal, she was selected to speak on her experiences. In reflecting on that event, she said:

> I accomplished something, and I was able to give speeches in front of the whole auditorium, and I felt almost famous. I wanted everybody to know if you feel like you can't do this, and it's a lot, think again. There's always something that is gonna be in your way. There's always gonna ... there's always gonna be obstacles, it's you that has to face those, head up. Basically be like, is this what I want or is this what I do not want? It is a choice, but I made that choice to keep going, but I had that help, and being able to speak to other people: it was so therapeutic for me.

Findings in Theme Two revealed that program-related activities and events provided participants with personal growth opportunities, goal orientation support, and recognition of their accomplishments. They added to the mounting impressions and experiences that influenced change in the perspectives of Open Gate participants.

Theme Three: Change and Growth-"Don't Let the Past Dictate You"

The elapsed time since their graduation, their life circumstances since that time, and their future goals provided an interesting backdrop for reflection when participants were asked about their Open Gate experiences. Kim expressed that fact when she stated:

> I'm looking actually back with a different mindset.
>
> ... because if we would have done this interview right after I finished, I'm sure a lot of my answers would have been different, but I'm maturing; life is amazing right now, and I owe a lot of my positive life style to the Open Gate program, because that made it easier for me. I was able to, "Okay this is a check mark off my list of things to do. I can go pursue other things. I can be what I wanna be now. I can do what I need to do now."

As one of the two parents in the program, Kim pointed to her daughter as being a key motivation in her desire to "be a better person and a better mother" and a role model for her child. However, when Kim started the program, the effects of her early foster life and the lack of familial and social support depressed her efficacy and outlook. Now, two years since

graduating and leaving the program, this once highly unsettled, unfocused individual became

reflective in her interview. She spoke about the impact of her Open Gate experience and stated:

> I haven't had the opportunity yet to get back into school and get some type of degree, but that is a goal of mine. Just, life right now is amazing, and I do owe a lot of it to that place. I will say that. It's changed me as a person for the better, and I've eliminated all negativity out of my life…

As the other parent in the Open Gate program, Charles was motivated to excel for his two

young children: "I can try to do more and be better. 'Cause my son and daughter: I want them to

have the perfect life." The contrasts of prison life and what Open Gate presented as life

possibilities convinced Charles of the direction his life needed to take. Yet, Charles learned

more from his experiences during his time with Open Gate and he applied what he learned to his

employment:

> I had a set schedule to be at school at a certain time. I was lazy, I never get up in the morning until I started going to school at eight o'clock. I had to be there every day on time. Now, I work every day. 'Cause I be here constantly every day like I was at school every day. It helped me with consistency.

Charles works long full time days, which often include one and a half hour bus rides to and from

work when no family member can provide him a ride. He was promoted to assistant manager at

a fast food restaurant, aspires for the manager's position, and has goals to return to school for

automotive repair.

Aside from the practical lessons he learned and applied to the workplace, Charles learned

and gained more from his experience. From the encouragement of the program administrator

who became his mentor, Charles learned he was capable of more, to not just "get by," but to

excel. As a result, he experienced academic success for the first time as a student and was

recognized and commended for those efforts. When asked to summarize what he learned from

being an Open Gate student, Charles replied:

Just stay on the right path. At the time, I was on a right path. Me going through Open Gate, it made me stay on the right path. Because why waste my time doing the same thing over and over when I could be better? Like if I became a manager, if I took on more responsibilities because I got more responsibilities to handle.

I have kids, so I want to teach my kids stuff. I don't want to not know things and not teach my kids. Then education is everything. That's what I realized in the Open Gate program.

Charles and Kim have children that focused their goals, but the efficacy both lacked at one time during the program was uplifted and persisted in their lives afterward. They have aspirations and hopes whose roots stemmed from the support each received and what they learned of themselves from their experience.

Bailey also recognized change in herself. Where she admitted to having her walls up initially as a participant, the fact that she did in time open up to her program peers and the program administrator proved change had occurred. Letting her guard down opened a new perspective about her personal circumstances, which led to a new understanding of herself and those around her:

Well just my mindset changed a lot. I mean, it was still different than everyone else that wasn't going through the same thing. But realizing like, I'm not the only one that is going through something like this, not just me, or this would only happen to Bailey. I'm not saying, like, what I've been through my life was terrible or this and that, there are more stories out there that are 20, 50 times worse and you can't believe like you're still here, you didn't lose it or you're not dead. You would be surprised the stories you hear or you would talk and other people would have an understanding because you're like, "I went through the same thing." It's not the same area or same anywhere, but the same thing.

This statement indicates that Bailey understood that though her situation was unchanged, having learned that other people struggle with challenges put her situation into perspective. This realization may have influenced the following view she shared on people and their potential:

Just, don't let your past and what you've been through in your life make you think that you're that person…Don't let your past dictate you…We all have regrets, we all have mistakes but we move past it, move past it as much as sometimes some

are more difficult than others, we'll get through it. I mean, I'm still getting through certain things. I still, it'll be three years now next month that my mother's been gone, and I still miss her, still love her, the same thing with my sister.

Just in general, don't think that you're alone. Don't think that you're the only person that's going through this, don't think that you can't achieve and do the things that you want in life…. We just have to work at our pace, our own pace. It won't come right away. Sometimes we have to work harder than we want to but it all depends on how much you want it. And once you do get it, you will feel a huge relief and you will be very happy.

Her new outlook on life was reflected in her response to the interview question asking if she had a "feel good" event she could recall from her Open Gate experience. Her response was her graduation ceremony, where she received her diploma in the same commencement exercises as the college's graduates. Her statement as she gazed at the college students, receiving their diplomas on stage, revealed her optimistic view for the future: "Okay, that's my next step. I want that. I want that for me now!"

Where Bailey's issue was in part due to not hearing others, Lauren thought she would never be heard.   As a favorite return panel participant for a university's criminal justice class, Lauren appreciated the opportunities to represent and speak for a population she perceived as not being understood: those who live in central cities. Because one of her relatives is active in local politics, Lauren is knowledgeable of and particularly sensitive to economic and social issues that affect inner city populations. She was surprised and impressed that through her Open Gate participation, she was given the chance to be a spokesperson:

Being in the Open Gate program has opened up many doors and opportunities for me. For example, every semester we take this trip; me, Mr. Joseph, and Chris. Take this trip up to ____. We talked to the criminal justice class of people who want to be police officers. We do this every semester. Now, it's just a door that I never would have thought that this program could give me something like that to be able to help people understand about living in the Inner City and how bad it is. I never would have thought that I would get the chance to just have somebody understand.

92

Having exercised this voice and having exercised leadership skills in the program and classroom, Lauren may have the beginnings of social activism brewing in her as a result of this experience, for it combined her talents, interests, and civic consciousness. Her closing words when I thanked her for the interview on the Open Gate program were: "Anything that I can do to help our youth keep it moving and become successful members of society is a great thing. I'm always willing to do it."

For Chris to have been Lauren's panel partner in the university presentations was noteworthy for this once self-described loner who preferred his own company. Chris suppressed his "nonsocial" self to engage in the house construction program and the university panels. The frequent mention of his name as a favorite among his Open Gate peers who were interviewed for this study was further indication of social involvement and his changing regard for people and interaction with them. This change in Chris' perspective may hearken back to the experiences he had outside of the classroom:

> He (Joseph) provided opportunities to talk with other people and not just here at the school, but almost all over ____. He also would take us places and show us different things and that right there showed me a lot and it changed kind of a little bit who I am. Because at first I didn't like to be around people. I had more energy just being alone and thinking to myself, but being with Joseph and finding out that everybody has their flaws or everybody aren't the cold type. That right there let me know that I didn't have to be alone.

Now with a high school diploma, he qualified for a job offered through a social service agency: an opportunity this one-time introvert might have bypassed because of its application process. However, having had positive experiences with new and unfamiliar situations, Chris' experience with Open Gate established his receptivity to prospective experiences and opportunities and a future that he hopes will include a college education in computer animation.

Unlike the other participants, Henry's transformation actually started before entering the Open Gate program. His time in prison and his new sobriety gave him the opportunity to do some serious reflection:

> I think I was disassociating a lot before that. But when I got into jail, I detoxed myself. I went through all that. I started to have a moment of clarity of like, 'What the hell am I doing?'…And just seeing my parents' happiness over the video monitor. Me telling them I'm doing good. It really made me emotional to see them happy.

Henry's resolution to make a life change began with his enrollment in GED classes while incarcerated and then continued with his Open Gate participation upon his release. However, his mental health issues were a ubiquitous threat to his efficacy and motivation and necessitated the continuing support of his parents, his teachers, and especially the program administrator, with whom Henry had formed a special bond. The factors contributing to his support and to his evolving perspectives are summarized in the following, where he also expresses his feelings about his program participation:

> How it's affected me? It's affected me in a way that's actually given me hope for the future, hope for myself. It's actually made me think that I could actually be something. Rather than I'm just gonna wind up dead in some gutter, which I probably would be if I didn't find Joseph. The fact that I'm still here today, it means I haven't given up, that I'm still alive on this Earth. 'Cause otherwise that would've happened a long time ago.
>
> Meeting all the helpful people. Meeting all the teachers. Just everything that I've experienced with the school has been a just tremendous ...in more ways than I can describe. And just the feeling of hope that it's given me towards myself and towards other people seeing the potential in me. It's been life changing.

Eva had a life changing event as well. However, hers was shockingly abrupt. The trauma created by the event and the fear it instilled forced Eva to do a serious assessment of her present circumstances and her goals.

> I was shot.

Yeah, these aren't hickies. It came in here and out here…I had gotten into some really bad stuff. I ended up getting shot in my neck and I couldn't talk for a while. I couldn't, I could hardly move around and talk and breathe on my own and stuff. I didn't think that I was going to have enough strength or confidence to go back to school after that.

At that point I didn't know; I didn't know if I was even ever going to get my voice back. For me being who I am, I talk a lot, so that was scary for me. That was intimidating not knowing if I was ever going to hear myself talk again. So just like that was really a huge, huge, huge thing for me because I didn't know if I was even going to be able pursue a normal life again like other people. Again, that higher power, by the grace of God, one day I woke up and I could talk.

Eva's physical well-being was not her only concern as she further related:

It was hard. It was a hard thing to get over. And the fear, too, of the person who shot me. I didn't know them personally or the bullet wasn't meant for me. We were at a house party and somebody shot the party up. So just the fear as well of not knowing why or who or how? Do they know me and I don't know them? Just kind of a fear of life at that point. I was kind of scared, too, to get back to my regular life. So that was really hard on school, too, because again, it distracted me so much. It took my focus completely off...

The gravitational pull of her external life and the influence of friends had been temptations, luring and interrupting her from her studies.   However, now with this shooting incident, everything was changed. She thought:

If those are the type of people you're going to be around, those are the type of risks you take. It made me know, that's not the life I want to live. It's not how I want to be. I don't want to be scared to, I don't know, like live basically. I don't want to be scared to be around who I'm around and fear something's going to happen and whatever the case may be. So it definitely refocused me a lot because it made me feel like if I'm ever going to get out of this, then I have to go to school. I have to finish what I started.

Eva's Open Gate experience seemed to have prepared her for the changes in her social network. She noted the influence of Open Gate and being in the company of supportive individuals with similar goals, the company with whom she still keeps, now that she is enrolled in college:

Before I joined the Open Gate program I was more at risk to making bad decisions or hanging with the wrong people just because life is half of who you

hang around and support is a big thing. Motivation is a big thing. And I just felt like the Open Gate program kind of molded me a little bit.

It humbled me a lot just knowing that there's options and there's people who want to see you do good, too. If you want it, then there's people who can help you do that. And it just kind of, it honestly not intentionally, but strayed me away from old friends that I found weren't necessarily the best friends for me to hang around anymore. It brought new friends. It definitely gave me some new hobbies, took away some old hobbies. Yeah, so I study more. In the streets less. So definitely it's been, it's changed me, I feel like.

During Eva's convalescence from her wounds, Joseph worked with her on her GED math homework, which was difficult, due to her inability to speak. He continues to be a support for her even now as a Midwest College student (for Lauren as well). Joseph's influence, the friendship of her program peers, her GED successes, the shooting incident, the college visit with the dean: these were among the accumulation of experiences that Eva assimilated and worked into an understanding that allowed her to comprehend her world and her place in it. The meaning she derived and its result for Eva, like for the other Open Gate participants, was one of change:

How I view other people's feelings. I really, I think within the last year and a half I really grew a conscience to what I or how what I do and say affects other people.

And I just really try to think about my actions and what it's going to, what's going to be the outcome not just for me but for people who are around me. I've learned, I've learned patience.

I feel like I've been humbled, I've been humbled overall since I've been there.

So, just growing up, when I grew up and learned different things and started to see my own worth and stop thinking about how I feel all the time and just thinking about what I deserve.

So, I think just overall I've just, like you said, grew a more expansive mindset or view of how I view myself and life and so many things that we all take for granted.

…I've changed so much…

Conclusion

Chapter Four presented the findings of a qualitative study that described the experiences of adult students in secondary programs with persistence support. The study based its research on data procured from individually conducted interviews of seven graduates of the Open Gate program, housed in the Pre-College Division of Midwest College. This program supplemented the college's adult high school and GED programs with personnel, academic services, and financial assistance to support the persistence of its participants, the adult children of parents or guardians with incarceration histories.

The influences of participants' external life experiences impacted how individuals interacted with and responded to their experiences in the new program context. From the interview data on the experiences of Open Gate program participants, the three themes that emerged revealed the influence of context on the disposition of Open Gate program participants. With persistence support and education completion as the main goals of the participants' program, disposition became a primary focus for influence. Disposition, as a derivative of the culmination of experiences and elements in an individual's life, determines behavior, which includes the motivation to persist toward a goal. However, because the dispositional state has been a proven key to motivation and because efficacy is a dispositional variable, a positive disposition would correlate with motivation, and hence, persistence. The findings of this study revealed that addressing dispositional needs and upholding the positive self elicited positive actions and behavior. The social contexts in the lives of the participants influenced dispositional states that in turn prompted those behaviors.

The themes in this chapter traced contextual influence on disposition, starting with Theme One, which described how social contexts affected the emergence and development of

the positive self. The importance of support from these contexts was a repeated scenario among the participants, who attributed their ability to persist to the support of family, friends, and mentors. Ironically, contributing to persistence were the discouraging external social networks, which became their motivation for succeeding. Significant to the findings of Theme One was that persistence was an outgrowth of the program's social context: a community that shared common goals and values. Theme Two detailed how program-related activities became impactful and memorable experiences for participants in their influence on personal development, goal orientations, and efficacy. Theme Three showed how the impact of experiences extended beyond the parameters of program completion for Open Gate participants. All participants showed positive dispositional change in their self-perception, efficacious beliefs, motivation, aspirations, and outlook for their future.   For all, in varying degrees, the experiences that caused these transformations were "life changing."

The interviews of these seven Open Gate participants revealed that their response to program experiences were dependent upon the degree of influence from elements of their outside life and those of the program context. Their responses reflected the dispositional impact of those elements. Open Gate participants had various challenges that affected their dispositional states and impacted their efficacious beliefs, but data revealed the supportive role of the program's social context in sustaining motivation and persistence through the support of the positive self. This social support strengthened efficacious beliefs, improved affect, and transformed outlooks and helped participants identify goals and clarify life directions. The findings, based on the experiences of these participants, addressed the study's queries in detailing what and how the environment, which included the Open Gate program context, influenced their disposition, perspectives, and actions related to their personal challenges and to their persistence. Figure 4.1

summarizes the findings of this study on the dispositional influence of both external and program social contexts on Open Gate program participants.

In Chapter Five, a summary of the study will include comparisons of major findings with the literature and theoretical concepts on social cognitive theory and persistence, a discussion of implications from the study's findings, suggestions for future research, and this researcher's concluding thoughts.
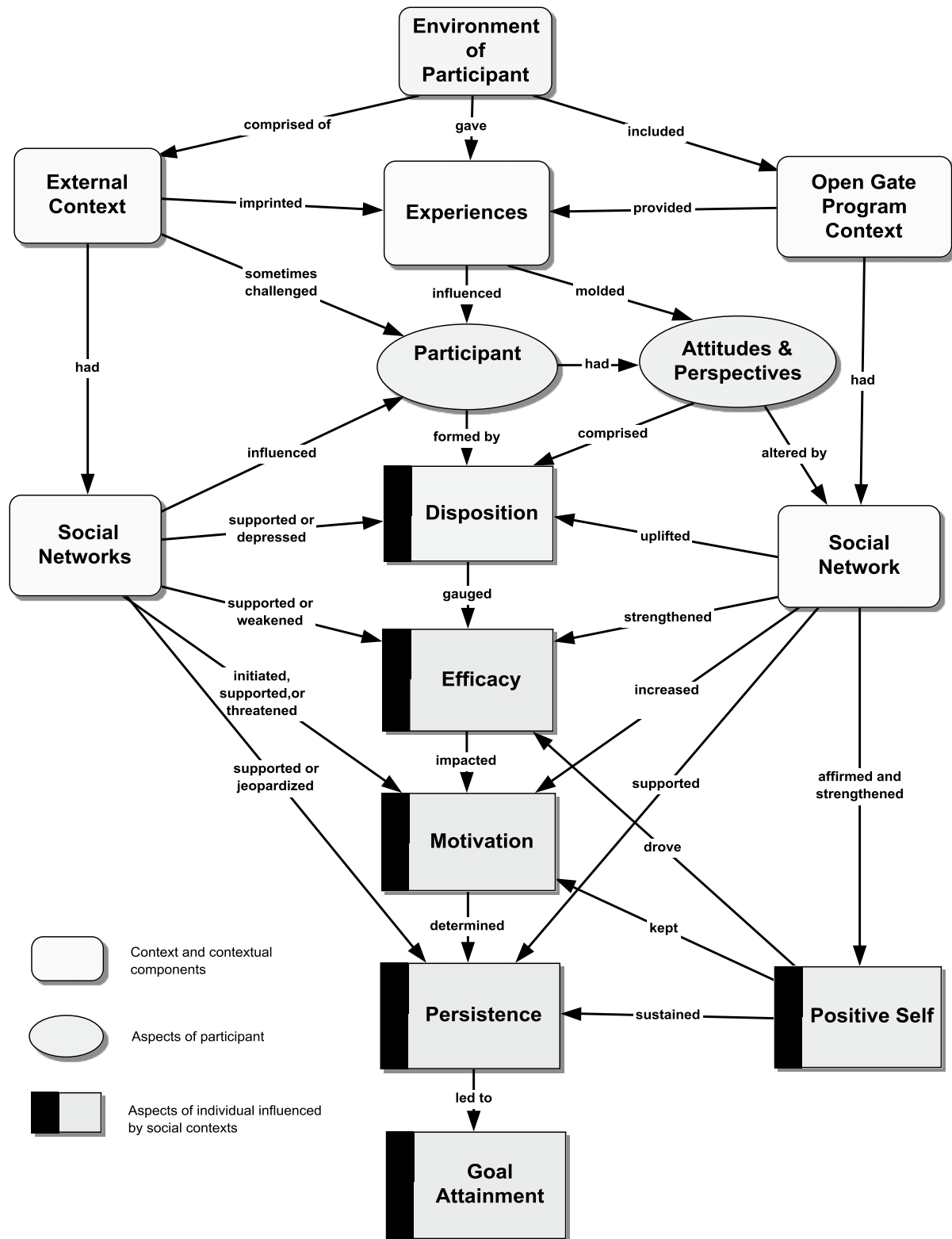
Figure 4.1. **Influence of environment and context.** Both external and program social contexts impacted participant disposition. Influence of Open Gate's social context proved most impactful.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter, as the final step in qualitative analysis, a composite description of the themes and the meaning that permeated the experiences of the study's participants (Moustakas, 1990) are developed. Beginning with a review and an analysis of the study's three themes, common elements participants experienced are described. From these shared experiences, the meaning participants derived will be presented, forming the basis of the study's central theme. The next section of Chapter Five will compare the findings of this study with the research and conceptual works on persistence and Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and related theories. The findings of this study and the literature in Chapter Two will provide the bases for the implications for adult education practice and considerations for further research in the two sections that follow. The chapter will then conclude with closing remarks based on the insights I gained from this study.

Themes on Context and Disposition

When the participants of this study entered the Open Gate program, they possessed the affect, attitudes, and perspectives that were shaped by the context of their earlier lives and the influences and circumstances of their current lives. They had to reconcile these externally based elements with the norms and expectations of the program context and successfully negotiate among the influences of both their outside life and program contexts in order to accomplish their personal goals. Their actions and behaviors during their program participation were how they responded to the influences from both the program and external contexts. The dispositional influences from these contexts and the participants' reactions to them constituted the findings of this study presented in Chapter Four. Figure 5.1 summarizes these findings and reveals the
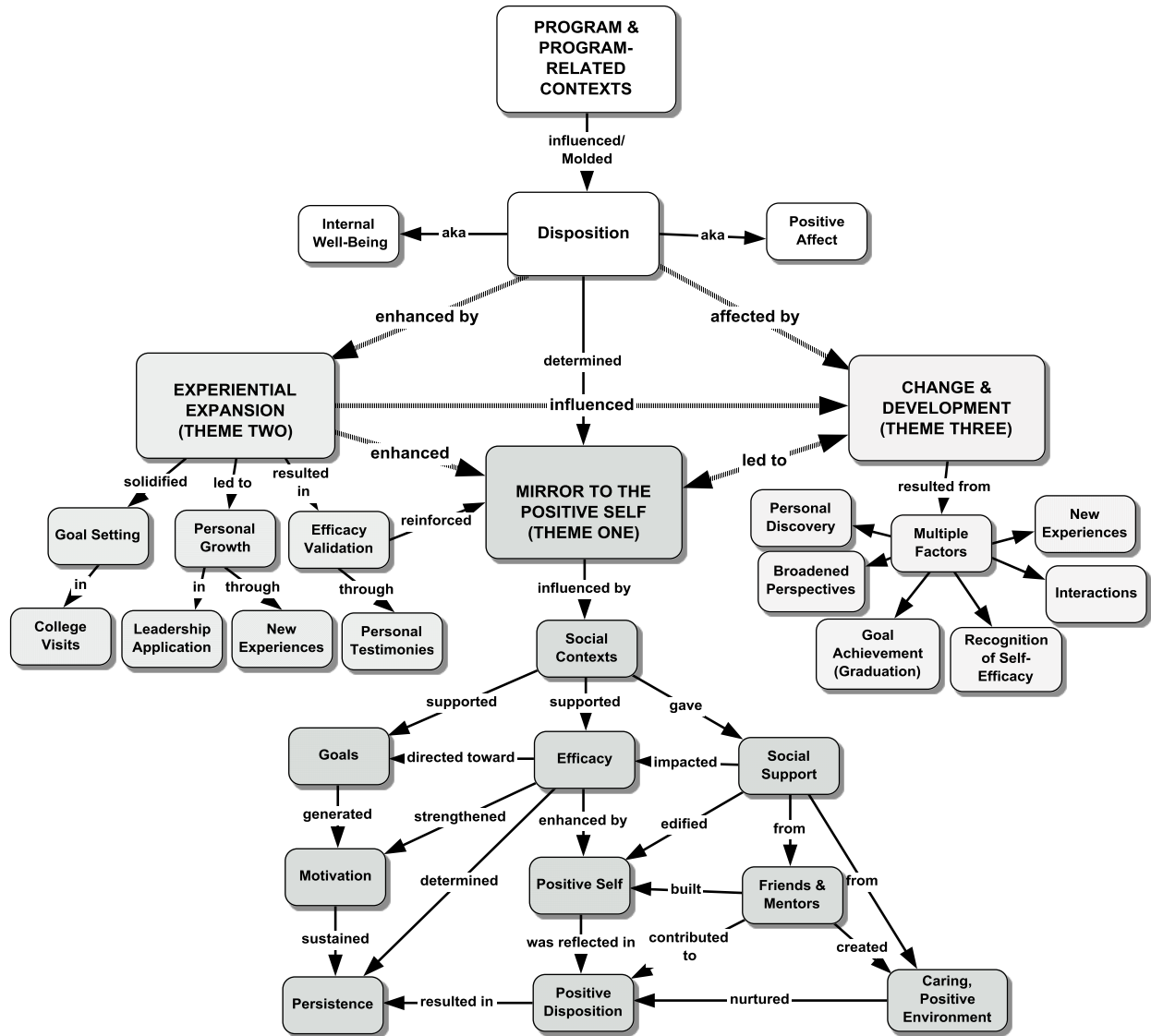
Figure 5.1. **Themes on dispositional impact of contexts.** Dispositional influences permeated elements of the study's three themes and reveal their interrelationship.

pivotal role of social contexts on participant disposition, which was central to each of the three

themes.

Theme One: Mirror to the Positive Self-"What Do They See?"

In Theme One, the findings revealed that the positive affect created by the support of

social contexts affirmed the positive self. Dispositional well-being was a requisite to developing

the positive self. Because that positive self was strengthened in its efficacious beliefs, Open

Gate participants had the support they needed to persist and complete their programs. However, the individual nature of each participant's efficacious need specified the kind of support each person sought. As uniquely individual as their efficacy needs were, participants were able to find their primary support from the same source: the social context of the Open Gate program.

      Social support for goals. Life circumstances were significant factors to the goals participants determined for themselves. However, the same life elements that prompted participants' goals also challenged their abilities to remain goal-focused and motivated. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (1994), goal seekers assess a number of factors to determine goal effort. Among those considerations is the availability of support (Schunk, 1996). Access to goal support was crucial for these participants for it also meant efficacy support, which was needed for goal success. However, support would not be easily accessed in their external context due to inhospitable environments, disparaging family members and friends, and the lack of sympathetic and empathetic support. This situation created dispositional needs and prompted their search for specific kinds of support. The social context of the Open Gate program was able to address those varied needs and provide the goal support that was sought.

      In the Open Gate program, these support seeking individuals found a community of people who, though differing in backgrounds, had a number of things in common, but most importantly, essentially the same goals in the program. These individuals, who demographically were close in age to each other, who all had struggles early in life, who all had families disrupted by incarcerated parents, became the sympathetic, empathetic support these participants needed. These "positive people" and "people who pushed me" affirmed their efficacious beliefs in the

probability of accomplishing their goals. With efficacy confirmed, their motivation and persistence were supported.

Another goal supporting factor provided by this social context was the social model that was being mirrored to the participants. According to Bandura's theory, individuals make goal pursuit determinations on what they observe and learn from interactions with their environment. In the context of the Open Gate program, participants had to learn the requisite behaviors for goal attainment (graduation) from social models in that context (Pajares, 1996). In addition to the program, Open Gate participants were also part of the larger social context of the college: an institution with norms and policies that established the requisite behaviors for education completion. The goal-oriented program community, therefore, gave support by serving as a mirror, reflecting participant images that modeled and reinforced desired behaviors for goal success.

Finally, the social context provided goal support in a critically important way. It gave their goal its value and thereby gave purpose to its pursuit. The participants' peers and the program administrator were the "credible others" providing their goal support through "social persuasion," according to Bandura's theory (Bandura, 1994; Schunk, 1996). Program peers shared the same goal of a secondary credential and therefore understood its value and its importance for moving their lives forward. One participant described the aim of graduation as a journey they all shared. The administrator's input to the goal support is also noteworthy, but from a different standpoint. Besides adding credence to the goal value and to its pursuit, the administrator's endorsement as an authority figure and as a parental figure merits attention. One participant specifically mentioned her appreciation of having someone "older" to help guide her. Parental figures were absent for varying periods in the lives of these participants. The

appreciation for the relationship participants had with Joseph was mentioned often during the interviews as were references to him as a father figure. That role also proved significant in its social support as the next discussion will highlight.

Social support to fill voids. The need and search for goal support by participants evidenced social voids in their lives: effects of circumstances from the past and from those that still existed. These social voids were partially a result of estrangement from friends and family members as was detailed in interview descriptions of these relationships. Participants had no peers, siblings, or equals with whom they could identify or relate their aspirations, especially since they were the only ones in these groups to take an upward step in life. Several of the participants felt alone in the company of certain friends or family members who neither shared nor cared about their schooling or goals. For most of the participants, the external context had no one who understood them to offer positive, sympathetic, or empathetic support. When adding the individual experiences of each participant, among which included years in the foster care system; youth spent in high-risk, unstable environments; personal incarceration; and addiction, a certain degree of singleness or isolation characterized the dispositional state of most participants upon program entry.

Participant affinity for Open Gate engagement was explained by its satisfaction of their social voids. With outside social connections giving little credence or value to their goals and efforts, participants needed to counterbalance this negative weight on their motivation. These outside strong, influential, social groups that Zacharakis (2010) referred to as "high density networks," were potential saboteurs to participant goals. To support their goals and advance their lives, participants accessed "low density networks": the social ties provided by the Open Gate program. These credible others, who shared the same goals and values, affirmed the

rightness of participants' decisions, strengthened their motivation, and supported their persistence with personal support.

The personal support participants found in the program compensated for the lack of or inadequacy of social bonds in their families. The absence of parents, family instability, and foster home placements were among the past experiences that created the yearning participants revealed in their interviews for familial-type bonds. Their having semblances of such relationships in the Open Gate program had a positive impact on their dispositions. Participant descriptions of the interactions among the students revealed helpful, caring, supportive relationships, which established a safe, nonjudgmental, comfortable atmosphere that encouraged persistence. The accounts of homework assistance, animated conversations, and discussions during weekly luncheons were examples of the small yet significant aspects of this context that added to the overall positive impact they had on participant dispositions and their persistence decisions. Completing this "family" picture is the family figurehead: Joseph, the program administrator. Parental terms were frequently used by a number of the participants when referring to Joseph, and his presence was the constant and stabilizing influence and presence that was absent in the lives of a number of the participants.

The fact that participants gained from the positive influence of the Open Gate's social environment revealed their reliance on this programmatic context for their sense of well-being and the edification of the positive self. This reliance, referred to as "field dependence" by Quigley and Uhland (2000), was a dispositional barrier, reflecting participants' affective need for social and relational support to sustain their motivation. The field dependence of Open Gate participants was addressed by the social community of the program with its shared goals, shared values, and shared support.

106

Efficacy support. The social context of the program was the source of goal and personal support for Open Gate participants. However, what fed the continued momentum of participants toward their goals was efficacy support. This dispositional support was inherent to both the goal and social support participants received and was vital to their success. Efficacious beliefs were critical to the participants' exercise of personal agency (to graduate) because they facilitated their ability to successfully interact with the social context of the program environment, i.e., the college (Bandura, 2001). It was necessary, therefore, that participant dispositions be kept uplifted to sustain the positive self so self-efficacy could perpetuate motivation and persistence.

Though motivated to complete their secondary credentials, with few exceptions, Open Gate participants were hampered by doubts of efficacy that were primarily self-imposed, learned from past failed experiences, or imprinted by the negativity of others. When motivation is dependent upon the individual's level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001), influences on the positive self had a domino effect on efficacious beliefs, which in turn impact both motivation and persistence.

The data on the efficacious needs among the participants did not reveal any universal factor in their life contexts that created them. Because of differing external and internal contextual elements in participants' lives, stemming from situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers, the reasons and needs for efficacy support did vary to an extent. However, the decision of all of the Open Gate participants to move forward with their educational goals was the exercise of their personal agency. Efficacious support was therefore critical to their success.

The environment surrounding the Open Gate program and most particularly the context within the program itself were prominent factors in the efficacious development of participants.

Drawing energy and inspiration from the diversity of the student population and from the college setting, participants identified this institutional environment as part of their future plans. The program's social context, like the larger college context, also exerted influence on the participants' present and future, but this influence had direct dispositional impact on the positive self which helped propel participants to goal completion.

Yet, the external context remained a constant factor in the lives of the participants. Life experiences left an imprint on some Open Gate participants and continued to be an influence for others. This effect was reflected in their feelings and attitudes when they began the program. "Good anxiety" and "nervousness" were among the descriptions participants gave; others expressed a wavering hope. Without a guarantee of the desired outcome, the decision of participants to enroll in the program did nevertheless reveal their motivation, but their self-efficacy was fragile and vulnerable to diminishment.

This uncertainty may have stemmed in part from what essentially was a pre-judgment of an unproven efficacious self. In accordance with Bandura's theory, after identifying their goal of a diploma, Open Gate participants performed assessments related to that goal, including an assessment of their own efficacy (Bandura, 1986). In the past, life circumstances stopped their efforts toward this goal: as a result, their efficacy in terms of their capabilities was never fully tested. When participants again identified the goal of a diploma with the Open Gate program, they may have misinterpreted past uncompleted efforts with a deficit in their capabilities. In addition to contributing to low efficacious beliefs, other factors from the external context had the potential of diminishing efficacious strength, despite the availability of social support. Certain elements from this context were still present in the lives of participants during their Open Gate program participation, and the negative influence from these elements posed threats to

108

participants' efficacy, motivation, persistence, and goal orientation. The strained relationships and discord participants experienced with family members and friends and the skepticism and disinterest these groups openly exhibited furthered the potential for efficacy detraction. Adding to these challenges were the ubiquitous situational barriers that ABE learners cited in the literature as the primary reasons for program departure (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1997; Porter et al., 2005; Schafft & Prins, 2009; Tucho, 2008).

The social support of the program did not isolate participants from these challenges to their efficacy and motivation, but it did insulate them enough from the negative impact to support their persistence. Ironically, however, persistence itself was a potential threat to efficacy and motivation to several students. The need to complete many credits for graduation or a career goal requiring advanced degrees after high school were two examples in this study where a long commitment was required for goal completion. In both cases, participants expressed doubts, concerns, and second thoughts of a prolonged commitment, knowing the potential of life circumstances interfering with their goal pursuits.

The energy drain of lengthier goals and the relentless, sabotaging influences of negative elements in the external context can cause efficacy erosion. Participants possessed efficacious beliefs, but these erosive factors would have impacted motivation and threatened persistence if it were not for the fact that the positive self was sustained and their efficacy was reinforced. This was done by keeping dispositions positive, which resulted in an internal sense of well-being. In the case of Open Gate participants, this was achieved through interactions with the social context of the program. The influence was strong enough to counter the threats to participants' goal focus through its edification of the positive self, which strengthened self-efficacy.

Not all participants endured acute challenges from their external contexts, however. This was reflected in their lesser need for motivational encouragement and their ability to maintain a steady, forward momentum in their progress toward their diplomas. Yet, efficacy development for one participant was as important as efficacy support was for the others. When Chris, the quiet, once introverted participant changed his perspective about social connections, his subsequent involvement in program-related activities broadened his view of opportunities and possibilities. This change in perspective occurred from his interactions with the social context and his engagement in program-related activities, due to the encouragement of the program administrator. The context and the administrator were highlighted by Chris in his interview as the major contributors to the warm atmosphere that attracted him to the program and from which he derived inspiration and energy. Efficacy's importance in goal achievement is its function as a catalyst for motivation, but Chris' situation emphasized two points on efficacy: 1) it illustrated that participants benefited not only from support given for weakened efficacious beliefs, but they also profited from their enhancement; 2) it confirmed the importance of the program's social context as the backdrop for positive influence on the efficacy of participants.

From participant descriptions of the social context of the Open Gate program, it was apparent that the atmosphere this program community created and shared was in great part responsible for improving the efficacy of participants. As a place to retreat from outside pressures and to feel "human," the program office, where Joseph's office was also located, served as the gathering place for participants. Here participants spoke of encountering no judgments; feeling safe; having someone to talk to; finding help with homework; and feeling care, understanding, and empathy in a warm environment shared by "family outside of family." This "comfort context" provided a welcomed respite from the stressors that still existed in the

110

lives of some participants, and it perpetuated the positive dispositional influence of the program on all of them.

The participants' dispositional states created by life circumstances revealed their individual needs for positive affect to uplift the positive self: the key to self-efficacy. This required the generation of positive feelings, attitudes, and emotions to build positive affect (Comings et al., 1999). The social contexts of the program environment and its family atmosphere, helped build that positive affect. Their positive influences affirmed, strengthened, enhanced, and motivated the positive self toward positive behaviors and goal fulfillment. The social contexts and their elements were the edifying influences that impacted the viability and level of participants' efficacious beliefs, motivation, and ultimately their persistence, thereby enabling them to complete their programs.

Theme Two: Experiential Expansion- "I Accomplished Something"

In exercising personal agency to achieve their high school credential, participants had opportunity for interactions in various social contexts through their program participation. These events and activities added significantly to their program experience and positively influenced their individual growth, goal setting, and self-perception.

One of the assumptions of adult education practice is adults' orientation to relevance in learning (Cranton, 1994). Not all learning that occurred from Open Gate participation was confined to the classroom. What participants learned about themselves outside of the classroom proved not only relevant to their immediate goals but had application and importance to their lives after the program as well.

Program-related activities outside of the classroom exposed participants to experiences and opportunities they might not otherwise have encountered. Lives spent in poverty narrow the

scope of experiences and offer few opportunities for growth and enrichment. Open Gate program activities widened this scope. The university panel presentations were one example. They took participants outside of the city to rural communities and into social contexts with populations with whom they might not have ever interacted. Participants were in a college environment and in college classrooms as featured speakers with a captive audience before them, who were focused on their words and intent on learning from them. This activity allowed participants to expand their personal skills in speaking before groups of people; stretch their comfort zones in accepting a challenging and somewhat intimidating task; and share their perspectives as representatives of their community.

In addition to the positive experience of visiting a residential college, participants also received an efficacious boost to their self-perception as respected contributors to a college class. For at least one of the participants, the vision for her future was enhanced during a different college visit where she spoke with a dean. This conversation was a highlight for her: it clarified the path to her career goal, heightened her aspirations, energized her, and confirmed the rightness of the life direction she was taking.

The dispositional influence of program-related activities also occurred on the campus of the Open Gate program. Whenever participants were asked to share their Open Gate experiences, whether to policy makers, college classes, or fellow students, the value of their program perspectives was thereby endorsed, which gave them feelings of worth and reinforced their efficacy. These opportunities to share their stories also provided another dispositional benefit: in allowing the review of their accomplishments, participants acknowledged their own success and their efficacy to continue moving their lives forward.

These program-related experiences and activities enhanced personal growth and individual perspectives. The assignment of a new task and the context of a different environment required participants to exercise new skills. In responding to these situations, participants had to change, and in so doing, revealed aspects of themselves they never knew existed. These activities expanded their view of opportunities and engendered a willingness to pursue new ventures. The experiences of Open Gate participants revealed that program-related activities affirmed efficacious beliefs by recognizing their accomplishments and valuing them as individuals. These activities and events contributed to significant changes in the perspectives of Open Gate participants.

Theme Three: Change and Development-"Don't Let Your Past Dictate You"

When the interviews for this study took place, it was perhaps the first time since graduation that these Open Gate participants were asked to reflect on and verbalize their thoughts about the program. One of the participants stated that had she been interviewed right after program completion, her responses would have been quite different. This statement proved accurate for the other participants as well. As graduates, time had passed, and a sequence of life events had transpired. Both now gave participants a basis from which to reflect on how the Open Gate experience helped them arrive at this point in their lives. When describing the impact of their program experience, the word most often used by participants was "changed."

Environment. The factors that created these dispositional changes were not designs built into the Open Gate program. Therefore, when examining the prominent program influences on participant change, the program context was a major factor, for it provided a fertile environment for change to take place. The college environment with its physical setting offering diverse, academic, and cultural stimulation surrounded the Open Gate program and energized

and inspired the participants. The social models of this context, most notably, the college graduates at the commencement exercises, had significant motivational influence on participants. These social models were visual proof of what Open Gate participants, now with strengthened self-efficacy, could also achieve. The positive self in Bailey was revealed in her comments at the Midwest commencement exercises when she declared: "…that's my next step."

This environment with the program related activities and experiences gave relevance to participants' life situations, stimulated reflection on their options and life directions, and helped them see possibilities and set goals. This same environment also housed the program's social context, where participants interacted with peers whose life circumstances mirrored theirs and who could offer the empathetic support and friendship they needed. Here they met people who demonstrated understanding and care and extended personal support which uplifted participants and their dispositions. The combination of enhanced awareness of opportunities and efficacious support provided by this environment gave balance to the life of challenge participants brought with them into the program. This clarity of life focus resulted in dispositional and efficacious changes that were nurtured by the program environment.

Dispositional readiness. At the same time, however, a certain dispositional readiness or receptivity had to be in place in order for change to have occurred. Again, the program context was prominent in preparing participants for transformation, first because of the environment's stimulation. The setting was a contrast to any participants had previously experienced, and their physical presence in this whole new environment represented a new beginning for them. A second factor was the social effect of the program context and the dispositional strengthening it provided. This support was a needed and welcomed counterbalance to the external social

elements, whose disinterest and negative predictions regarding participants' efforts threatened their efficacy and motivation. Open Gate support reversed these influences: participants' self-perceptions were changed as the positive self was solidified. Participants could make sense of their circumstances and maintain their balance against the buffets of external challenges. Their heightened self-worth led to more confidence in determining life directions as they continued their exercise of personal agency.

Timing. The readiness and ability of participants to enact change was also dependent upon when the stimulus for change occurred. However, this third factor was more serendipitous; this factor was timing. Participants entered the Open Gate program at junctures of their lives that varied in degrees of criticality. For one individual, the program was the first step after a commitment to a new life direction; for another, it was a test if this life direction could be maintained; for all of the participants, it was a necessary next step to advance to any future goal. Therefore, the timing of program entry happened to coincide during what was essentially a turning point in their lives. Participants were positioned for change.

At this juncture the external and program contexts would intersect. In response to circumstances and unanticipated situations, participants turned to the Open Gate program, especially as they became more integrated into its social context. This context became increasingly influential as participants were strengthened by the support of its social network. In the literature on social factors related to persistence, relationships as the ones that formed in Open Gate gradually gained importance and evolved into social supports and social networks (Comings et al., 1999; Cuban, 2003; O'Neill & Thomson 2013; Prins et al., 2009). This was illustrated in the case of the participant who cut social ties from her external context, whom she implicated for the residual fear her traumatic event created. Her decision was made less difficult

115

because she had the support of her new social network and because she had the dispositional strength that was nurtured during the program.

This kind of life precipice was essentially what Open Gate participants experienced repeatedly as they progressed through their program. Each step of forward progress had an external prompt, but the movement was stimulated internally and its momentum was sustained by the efficacy built from their experiences and the support of the program's social network. Though they did not happen concurrently, the dispositional changes and subsequent personal growth of the Open Gate participants were synchronized with critically important periods in their lives.

Timing and the program's context would not completely or permanently isolate participants from the negative external elements, however. As a temporary shelter from them, the program's context did help insulate participants from consequential effects. A statement quoted earlier from Chris provides an interpretation of how participants were able to cope with these realities: "…when two people have the same goal, then they tend to equip each other with the right tools to work towards that goal." Though some issues remained latent challenges in their lives, participants were changed and better equipped to address them. They had the "tools" to deflect their impact.

Youth. One last factor for consideration related to participants' readiness for change was the age of the participants. There were indications that the participants were more malleable to change due to their young age. These participants were in their early and mid 20s: with no accumulation of years to harden perspectives and attitudes. Moreover, their references to seeking and appreciating advice from an "older" person (Joseph) and their frequent use of paternal terms when speaking of the program administrator indicated deference to age and an

116

associated wisdom. Therefore, it could be assumed that as young people, they would be

receptive and open to learning, new perspectives, and change. Furthermore, at this age they most

likely saw a long future ahead: one they themselves could fashion. That vision incentivized them

and could explain how youth factored into their readiness for change.

Change accounted for participants' goal completion. The educational achievement of

Open Gate participants proven by their graduation was evidence of their successful interactions

of personal agency within their social environment. The influence of that environment had the

potential for positive or negative impact on disposition. Evidence of positive dispositional

impact of the Open Gate program context was revealed by participants' program persistence that

led to the acquisition of their diplomas. The social context's maintenance of positive

dispositions avoided "cultural fracture" (Boulden, 2008) by providing an environment where

participants had their emotional and psychological needs met and had their positive self

strengthened. Where participant efficacy needed development, strengthening, or sustenance, the

social contexts provided that support. It was this dispositional change that sloughed off the

negative influences of participants' past, created the momentum that earned them their diploma,

and carried them forward into their lives. Figure 5.2 summarizes the dispositional impact of the

participants' Open Gate experience.

The overarching theme is that of the social context and its role in raising the efficacy of

the participants by its edification of the positive self. Elements of the social context that affected

this efficacious development included group interactions, experiences and activities, personal

support, role models, and the social atmosphere created by the context. The dispositional impact

of these influences was reflected in the positive self, which was strengthened by goal

achievement and social support. This elevated self-worth, raised efficacy levels, heightened

goals, broadened perspectives, and increased self-awareness. It strengthened participants'

efficacious beliefs, reinforced their motivation, and sustained their persistence.

These findings were both unexpected and provocative. Because the context and focus of

the Open Gate program was education, and because the study's purpose was to investigate

persistence through the experiences of ABE program participants, I expected the findings to

center on programmatic and practice-related factors. Though an investigation of context was a

focus of this study, the degree to which its elements interacted and impacted participants was an

unexpected finding. Because social context has been tied to persistence in the literature and

because it is the basis of Bandura's theory, the Open Gate social context was determined as a

factor of consideration in this study. However, the dominance of its influence and the lasting

imprint it made on participants underscored the importance of dispositional support for

persistence that was presented in the literature review. That discussion and other links of the

study to the literature follow.

Findings Compared to the Literature

This study revealed findings that support the literature on dispositional approaches to

persistence and illustrated how key concepts of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory

were demonstrated by the nested context of the Open Gate program and its participants.

Literature on Persistence Intervention, Dispositional Support, and Social Support

Persistence intervention. The literature on persistence included studies on

programmatic efforts to support persistence among ABE participants. As motivation, a number

of these programs offered monetary support in the way of financial incentives or tailored

academic services for specific groups, e.g., youth, workers. Though these studies did not specify

otherwise, the concentration of these persistence interventions was academically-based, i.e, the
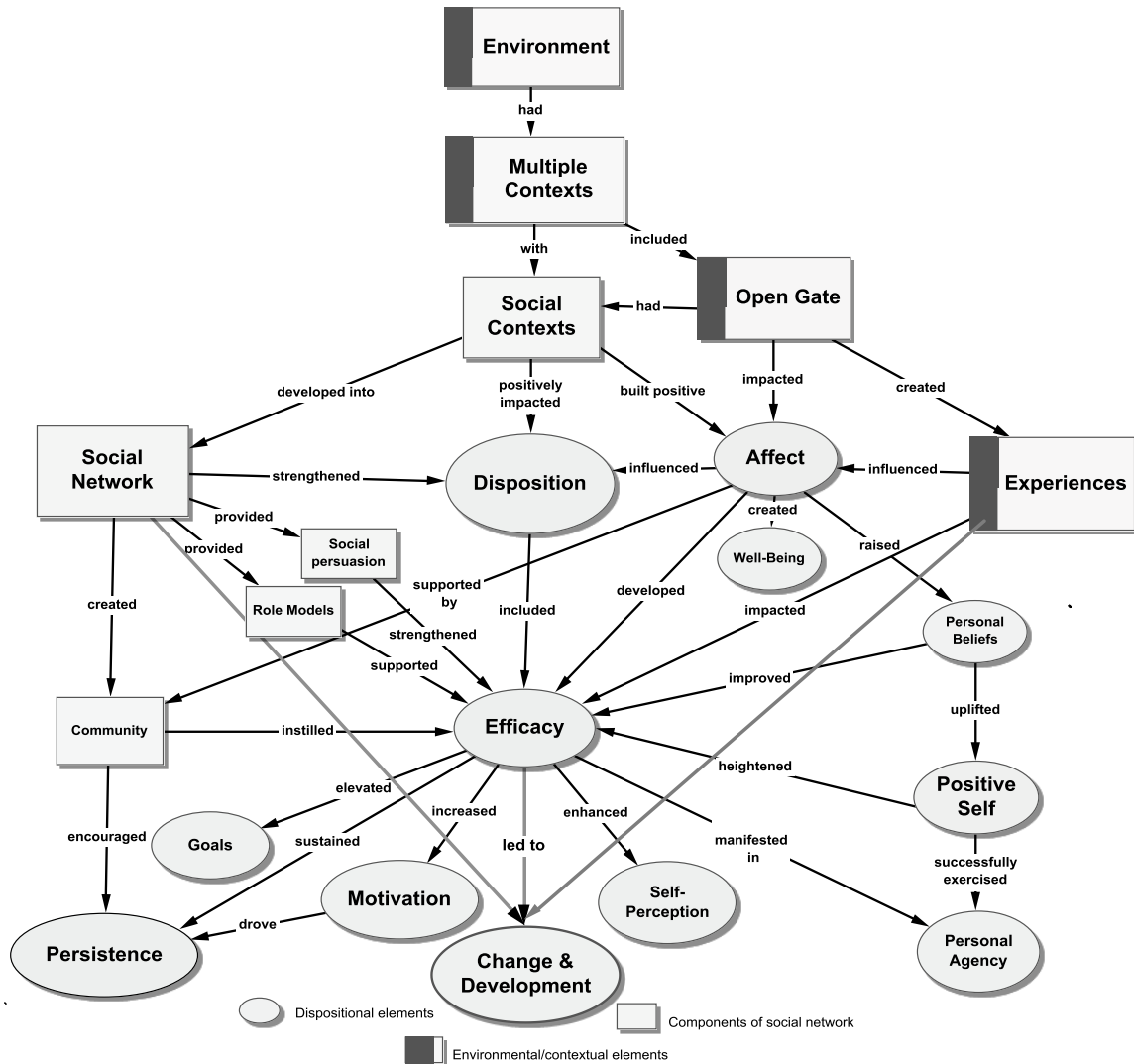
Figure 5.2. **The Open Gate experience: social influence on dispositional change.** The Open Gate program context, influenced positive dispositional change, which resulted in positive behaviors. Heightened efficacy resulted from program experiences but mainly from the nurture of the program's social network.

"reward" was based on a specific, measurable outcome, such as a grade level increase, the number of credits earned, or the attainment of a diploma. Open Gate offered similar motivation and persistence supports: for example, stipends that were tied to grade performance and other benefits such as class fees, books, and supplies that were not tied to outcomes. In the literature, it was revealed that the motivation and persistence incentives, even the financial supports for

poverty-stricken participants, were of minimum consequence in effecting significant improvement in persistence. The situational barriers often proved too powerful a deterrent to participation. In the case of Open Gate, the incentives were also a minor factor in the persistence decisions of the participants in this study. Though situational barriers were a ubiquitous presence in their lives as well, Open Gate participants deferred the importance of the program's incentives in favor of more significant factors related to the social context and related experiences to the program, all of which had dispositional impact.

   Dispositional support. This study of the Open Gate program and its participants support the literature that advocates for a dispositional approach in assisting at-risk adults to persist in their programs. The strategy would encompass building positive affect because of its positive correlation to persistence (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). This study's findings revealed that as the dispositional states of Open Gate participants became stronger and more positive, participants' self-efficacy also increased in strength. The influence of efficacy on dispositional factors like motivation (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009) was revealed in the participants' post program educational efforts and their aspirations of higher goals. These findings give support to authors like Prins et al. (2009) who advocate for more focus on dispositional elements as factors to sustain education participation. Her advocacy has greater implication when considering the findings of this study where the emergence and edification of the positive self (Comings et al., 1999) not only led to participants' goal achievement but also impacted the trajectory of their lives.

   One focus promoted by Nash and Kallenbach (2009) is the support of affective needs through the establishment of community. Feelings of community and the support of the social context were critically important to the dispositional well-being of the Open Gate participants.

They referred to their community with terms like "family." The friendships and helping relationships they found were reminiscent of the support cited by participants in the studies examining the persistence of poor adults in literacy programs (Cuban, 2003; Prins et al., 2009; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014). Similar to the experiences of Open Gate participants, the social contexts in these studies allowed participants to persist in their programs despite their difficulties due to the emotional and empathetic support they received.

Social support. The research shows that for participants, these social relationships evolve into their social supports and social networks (Comings et al., 1999; Cuban, 2003; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Prins et al., 2009). Pickard's Acknowledgement and Accommodation Perspective on persistence (2013) describes how persistence barriers are created by environmental factors for at-risk populations. This perspective provides a link to another concept that explains this reliance on social support. The effects of past experiences and current external circumstances did affect Open Gate participants, and like many ABE participants, manifested what Quigley and Uhland (2000) called "field dependence": the reliance on others for a sense of well-being. The emotional and psychological impact of dysfunctional families and unstable lives was reflected in their affective need for social and personal support, which was evidenced by the strong family-like bond they shared. With absent or inadequate social capital in their lives to support their affective needs, the Open Gate participants, like the ABE learners in the studies, turned to their program's social context for dispositional well-being and support.

The support of the Open Gate's social context represented the low density network of Zacharakis' Social Network Theory (2010). In general, the primordial social groups of Open Gate participants' high density networks in their outside lives offered little of the needed continuing motivation and support for sustaining their program engagement. As the theory

posits, their strong influence tethered them from advancing in their lives. To counter that influence, participants had to access the weak social ties of a low density network, whose connections would lead to opportunities and life advancement. As the findings of the study revealed, however, this social network not only facilitated persistence and goal achievement, it encouraged personal development and growth.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory

The literature revealed the positive influence of social contexts and how in these ABE studies, social persuasion uplifted dispositions and efficacy, sustained motivation, and influenced persistence. However, Prins et al. (2009) were not as quick to make the direct connection of social support with persistence, but they did assert its importance in the enhancement of the general well-being of individuals. The influence of efficacy on dispositional factors like motivation reprises the discussion from the literature of well-being and its effect on efficacious beliefs. This leads to a review of Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and the examination of efficacy and other factors and how they were manifested in the experiences of the Open Gate participants.

   Social context and efficacy. The social context of the Open Gate program encompassed all the elements with which participants would interact. With earning a diploma as their goal orientation, participants had much to learn and derive from their interactions with this context. The context showed them social models: the program's graduates and the college's students against whom participants gauged their efficacy. From these models participants learned the requisite behaviors for goal achievement. This same context also proved crucial in supporting that efficacy by maintaining positive dispositions and participant well-being. Social Cognitive Theory situates all adult learning from interactions in social contexts (Bandura, 1971); therefore,

the negative influences were also included in the dispositional make-up of participants, which then mandated efficacy support. That came from the social network within the program where "credible others" provided mentoring and efficacious support. The dispositional support that provided positive affect (a sense of well-being) strengthened efficacy, which, according to Bandura's theory, initiates and determines action (Bandura, 2001), which would be manifested in behavior reflecting motivation and demonstrated by persistence.

Efficacy support was not always indicative of a dispositional deficit, but in this study, for some participants, it was a developmental necessity for optimum personal growth. The social context, in situating all adult learning, held opportunities for Open Gate participants to build on their efficacious beliefs. This occurred through the activities outside of the classroom, the positive benefits to efficacy and personal development, of which, have been previously discussed.

Efficacy and personal agency. The secondary credential was symbolic of the participants' effort to take control of their lives by taking a definitive direction and making this goal decision. Efficacy beliefs were critical to their success in determining their ability to interact with the social contexts that were associated with that goal. Since their program participation put this context inside the larger context of their lives, participants had to also become successful negotiators when the elements intersected both contexts. However, as the experiences of the Open Gate participants revealed, these instances challenged their efficacy and inclined them increasingly toward the program's social context. From there, in addition to the support they received, they also learned about themselves and their capabilities. This reinforcement of their efficacy was a dispositional strength that translated into more than a

programmatic outcome on a report. It was an etched part of that individual whose influence would extend beyond the program.

Framing this study with key concepts from Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory revealed the following from the experiences of Open Gate participants about context, efficacy, and development. The environment and the contexts that comprise it can create efficacious needs. However, that same environment can offer opportunities or create scenarios where individuals, in their exercise of personal agency, can gain efficacious insights that result in personal development and growth.

Figure 5.3 shows how the findings of this study linked to the research and conceptual literature in Chapter Two on social learning theories and dispositional factors to persistence.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE
LEARNING THEORY
Bandura, 1971; 2001

Environment

DISPOSITIONAL
APPROACHES
FOR PERSISTENCE
Comings, 2007
Mellard et al. 2012
Office of Vocational and
  Adult Education, 1997
O'Neill Thomson, 2013
Quigley,1997
Ziegler et al. 2006

Comprised of

POSITIVE SELF FOR
PERSISTENCE
Comings et al. 1999
Comings et al. 2001
Ziegler et al. 2006

Social
Contexts

SOCIAL NETWORK
THEORY
Zacharakis, 2010

provided   part of   exerted

Social
Networks

Role Models

influenced

Disposition   ◄impacted—   Social
                               Persuasion

influenced

affected   uplifted   elevated

Self-Efficacy   ◄—determined—   Positive Self

Figure 5.3. **Study's links to the literature.**

Implications for Adult Education Practice

Open Gate was a specially designed program for a targeted population that had to meet

specified demographic criteria and have documented histories of parental incarceration.

However, its participants—non-high school graduates, mainly lower income minorities, residing

in an urban center—mirrored the demographic of many ABE participants in programs across this

country. Though specifics of this program's origins and design distinguished it from the many

programs servicing adult literacy populations, the participants were very representative generally

of at-risk ABE participants. In spite of the specificity of the Open Gate program and the

demographic it served, what was revealed in the study about the participants through their

experiences was consistent with the literature's discussion of ABE populations and their

challenges. Therefore, the implications for adult education practice are based on the findings of

this study.

Individualizing

"Students make decisions with their feet." This statement from a colleague states the fact

that situational barriers are not always the reason why ABE participants exit from programs.

Their choice to leave implies that they also can make the choice to remain, but the factors that

encourage retention and facilitate persistence are what research has attempted to identify. The

findings of this study indicated participant receptivity to being recognized, treated, and respected

as individuals. Feelings of self-worth add to efficacy, which in turn impacts motivation and

thereby persistence. Adult education practice must recognize the individual in the ABE

participant.

Open Gate did not have the resources to do mass recruitment for its program. Often

enrollments were a result of a one-on-one encounter that was a pre-arranged meeting or one of

happenstance as occurred with a couple of the participants. However, what participants

experienced about those one-on-one encounters confirmed their decision to enroll in the

program. The adage of first impressions applied in more than one instance in regard to the

positive impression Joseph had on one particular participant. This participant's decision to enroll

in the program was not based on the benefits and incentives---of which he was not completely

aware at the time---but because of the warmth and sincerity of the person who represented the

program. Moreover, though a GED credential was thought to be his one option, Joseph's full

review of this participant's school records posed the more expedient and practical route of credit recovery for a high school diploma. This individualized attention to the participant's goal, especially because of the participant's need for expediency, increased his motivation and likelihood for persistence.

The descriptions of the program administrator in this instance were typical of those from other participants. Joseph's mentoring, guidance, and general demeanor were described as kind and patient. The case study by Perin et al. (2006) reinforced the criticality of learner support services in sustaining persistence, but the field dependence common among at-risk populations indicates an imperative to consider the holistic servicing of participant needs. This holistic approach means not just accommodating needs that are academic, but also those that relate to the entire individual, such as social and emotional needs, which support positive affect. The dispositional make up of every person is a unique composite that is specific to that individual. Therefore, if an individual responds positively to a support intervention, this would indicate the specific need was addressed. This personalized focus would be recognition and acknowledgement of that individual's importance, and it would have a positive impact on disposition: the goal of advocates for this approach to persistence.

Persistence

The literature substantiates the continued elusiveness of answers to solving the persistence issue. The implications for persistence in adult education practice being set forth in this next section are neither novel nor new. However, the response of the participants to these persistence factors and elements is what gave them merit and basis for consideration.

Relevant learning. Adults want and need relevance and application of their learning (Cranton, 1994); such learning encouraged Open Gate participant persistence. Classroom walls

do not isolate individuals from the external realities of their life context. Adult education

practice must include life as part of the ABE experience to instill relevance and application into

the learning. Real life, applicable activities and discussions must be an integral part of the

learning experience as well as activities that facilitate various social interactions. This was

accomplished in the Open Gate program through program-related activities and experiences.

They expanded participant experiences and guided their educational and career goals. On a

deeper and more significant level was the impact of these experiences on their dispositions: the

enhancement of perspectives, personal development, increased efficacy, and a willingness to

pursue new ventures and opportunities—all life relevant learning. When learning is this

personalized and relevant, motivation and persistence would be inherent to it.

Atmosphere. Persistence was also supported by the atmosphere of the Open Gate

program. The mood and feeling of the program room encouraged participants to meet and

socialize before and after class and at their weekly luncheons. They conversed, assisted each

other with homework, laughed, commiserated, discussed, bantered, and cared for one another.

This community had shared bonds that reinforced shared values and provided the needed

efficacy support for participants to persist in their goals. Though it was not an academic

intervention or a designed support incentive, the program atmosphere that surrounded the

participants' social network was a pivotal factor to Open Gate participants' success. The

literature implicates situational barriers as major deterrents to participation against which

program contexts can exert leverage. Establishing an environment where individuals feel safe,

secure, and comfortable is one way. The literature also emphasizes the importance of social

support to learner persistence. Therefore, the persistence strategy plans of adult education

programs should include settings with an atmosphere where participants can feel comfortable, form social networks, and benefit from interactions with their supportive communities.

A second look at persistence interventions. However, how is atmosphere created? How was it created in the Open Gate program? For this, attention must be directed to the personnel who work with ABE populations and how they contribute to the atmosphere of the program environment.

Joseph was a prominent factor in the persistence of these Open Gate participants because of the atmosphere he established in the program. His presence provided a model of behavior that was replicated among the participants with each other: one that reflected respect, sensitivity, friendliness, honesty, and support. Though he was well aware of the many challenges program participants carried with them into the program, his relationship with and regard for the students were absent of any condescension or deficit biases. His optimistic expectations for them were revealed by his ready availability, concern for their welfare, his patience, and his endless encouragement. He was a parental figure for some of the participants and a mentor, counselor, advisor for all of them. He was the "head" of the family community that developed in the program, and his modeling of expectant behaviors and his interactions with participants created an atmosphere where participants felt safe, secure, and comfortable. Joseph's exercise of sensitivity and patience created and perpetuated the positive social atmosphere of the program. It was an atmosphere that encouraged social exchange, networking, and bonding: all comprising the social support that proved critical to the persistence of the Open Gate participants.

This "Joseph Model" is a composite of characteristics that positively influenced program atmosphere and program participants. It is a model of respectful behavior toward others and of requisite participant behaviors for success in the exercise of personal agency. Its composition

includes characteristics of understanding, sensitivity, respect, and patience: necessary affective strengths required of those who work with marginalized populations. It is hoped that such traits already exist in those who would be practitioners in this work. However, enhancing the depth and breadth of those traits should be the focus of professional development in order to develop more Josephs.

Another means for creating atmosphere like the one in the Open Gate program is a resource that is already present in ABE programs. With Open Gate, a space was provided and role behavior was modeled by the program administrator, who also established the tone. But the main resource that perpetuated the atmosphere of positivity and support was the participants themselves. As potentially the most critical element to the persistence of their peers, the Open Gate participants—in mirroring goal-oriented and efficacious behaviors, values, and support— were largely responsible for their own success. Therefore, in spite of the laudable efforts of programs discussed in the literature that incorporated incentive as motivators for persistence, adult educators should take a second look at their resources and see the potential that exists among their own learners to assist and support each other. Ultimately, it was the dispositional support of the social network that facilitated participants' goal achievement, thereby adding further support to the advocacy for dispositional approaches to facilitating persistence.

Marginalized but Not Marginal Expectations

There was a program participant whose affective and motivational needs were not as acute as some of his peers. Chris, on the surface, may not have been considered as high a risk an individual as some of the others in the program, but I differ with this assessment. He was equally at-risk, but not in the "traditional" sense when referring to this category of adult learners.

If it were not for the opportunities afforded by Joseph, Chris would have been at-risk of not having his full potential realized.

Because of program accountability pressures, the work with ABE populations has become outcome-oriented. This focus on basic requirements, however, may subsume the importance of educational enrichment. There is a moral implication in this neglect, as benign as it may appear. If adult education programs, in their desperation to meet funding measures, offer and accept no more than the minimum from a Chris, then this complacency makes them complicit with the same forces that ascribe individuals like Chris to society's margins. The rationale of meeting outcome measures for program survival at the cost of minimizing human potential is antithetical to the humanistic responsibility of education for its learners. This malign neglect provides no opportunity for educational growth, enhancement, and the relevant learning necessary for personal development and for transference for success in lives beyond the classroom. Adult education practice has to embrace the broader vision of its purpose to promote life learning and develop and maximize human potential. It must recognize the potential of every individual and the human and societal consequences if that potential is unrealized. Adult education practice must assume the responsibility to enhance learner potential and expand possibilities so that learners do not just succeed but can excel.

Considerations for Future Research

Based on the literature and the findings of this study, persistence is an issue that merits continued research. With the future and advancement of lives dependent upon the services of literacy programs, it is imperative that adult education practice continues to be informed and guided by the data and best practices. Because of their great influence on Open Gate participant experiences, I recommend several considerations for research.

Persistence

Zacharakis' Social Network Theory (2010) had application in this study, since the program's participants became the main social support for their peers. How these relationships develop, how they can be supported, what comprises their interactions, what dispositional influence they exert, and how they influence persistence are among the questions that can be investigated. From the programmatic point of view, practitioners can learn how learners benefit from participating in peer mentoring, how to encourage peer mentoring relationships, and how peer mentoring can support learner persistence.

Since participants benefitted in multiple ways from the Open Gate program-related activities, the value of offering these supplementary activities should be studied for their impact on participants and on their persistence. These studies could probe the kinds of activities learners find most interesting, most relevant, or most beneficial and how they are influenced by their engagement in these activities. In addition, studies of programs that provide outside classroom experiences could inform programs on the value of these activities for their influence on learner motivation and persistence.

As part of the theoretical framework of this study, social contexts and their importance to dispositional and efficacious support for persistence is another area of study that merits focus. The literature identified the social support factor as key to the persistence of the ABE learners in these studies, but there was a dearth of detail that specified what helped create that positive self. Qualitative studies that allow participants to share their experiences and feelings would enhance the understanding of how the interactions inside social contexts raise dispositional and efficacious states. Related to this social context is the community aspect. The Open Gate participants frequently referred to their community as family, and for all the participants, this

family filled a personal void. Therefore, research could inform programs of the considerations that would apply to creating and supporting a community as the one in Open Gate, whose contribution to its members could prove as valuable.

As discussed previously, the participants in this study were young. Whether their youth accounted for how they responded to their experiences is a point that the literature generally needs to investigate. Yet with the highest odds for longevity among the adult literacy's population and therefore the most to gain from educational commitment, this age group posts the highest attrition rates (Ziegler et al., 2002). In research on persistence, the youth factor must be a consideration, because both their future and that of this country will be significantly affected by that generation of individuals.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory

The most intriguing aspect of Bandura's theory came into play when Open Gate participants had to reconcile situations created by their external context by accessing support from the program context. How they responded to these situations invariably led to a dispositional change in perspective, efficacy, attitude, and action, resulting in personal change. Bandura's theory discusses the influence of context on learning, stating that all learning is socially-situated, occurring as a result of interactions with the social context. I support research that investigates what individuals learn, how they are affected, and how they respond when social contexts intersect. Studies could investigate how participants negotiate between and with elements of the contexts, how their behavior is impacted, what actions they take, and how they are dispositionally affected in areas such as efficacy. Their response to these situations and the factors influencing their actions could inform adult education practice on how to best support learners to sustain their program participation.

Transformative Learning Theory

Because all participants experienced change in perspectives, attitudes, efficacy, self-worth, life direction, and/or goals, the application of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow & Associates, 2000) comes into question. However, this study did not focus on transformation; rather, it focused on understanding the participants' experiences. It was interesting, though, that some of the data seemed to connect with basic concepts from Transformative Learning Theory. Therefore, consideration for research would be an investigation of how dispositional change and resulting behaviors parallel conceptual underpinnings of Mezirow's theory (Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

Final Remarks

An Inspiring Community

With over 20 years of experience as an ABE instructor and program administrator, I am intimately familiar with the issue of persistence and the consequence of attrition in lives challenged by economic and social disadvantage. In my decision to pursue this study of participants in a program with persistence support, my expectation was that participant responses would center on the program's support elements: the financial and material supports, e.g., tuition and fees, transportation, textbooks, and supplies; and the program administrator. Since Bandura's theory provided the framework for this study, these supports were to be examined as part of the program's context for their influence on participants' disposition.

Participant responses and the review of that data revealed that the "material" support components of the program had minor influence on their persistence decisions. Of the support features designed into the Open Gate program, the most impactful was that of the program administrator. The positive impact of his mentoring, guidance, and atmosphere of the program's

social environment was revealed in participants' comments about him. As they credited Joseph for their persistence and success, I took the opportunity to ask participants a hypothetical question: if given the same program benefits, but without the presence of a Joseph, would they have succeeded in completing the program? The universal answer was, "No."

However, as reliant as many of the participants were on the individual and personal support Joseph gave, and as important as that constancy of presence was to the stability of the program and to their participation, as a group, these participants were as key to their own success as was Joseph. With Joseph, the participants formed their own community, more often referred to as a family. Participants used familial and parental descriptors like "brothers and sisters," "siblings," "father," "grandpa," and the kinds of interactions they described were reminiscent of what would be associated as occurring in families. Participants spoke about caring for one another, helping each other, and sharing bonds of understanding and empathy about life situations. Though not part of the program's original conception, this community filled the social and affective voids that otherwise would have suppressed and limited the positive self and participation. This community of support capacitated participant motivation and persistence.

With this support, this community and the Open Gate program not only facilitated the ability of participants to accomplish their immediate goals of achieving a secondary credential, but they also enriched these lives by increasing participants' sociocultural and economic capital. Participants' social capital was increased by the addition of the social network of the Open Gate program, providing the support a number of participants needed but lacked in their outside life context. Participants' sociocultural capital was enhanced by the outside classroom activities. These activities gave participants opportunities to investigate, exercise, and pursue new skills and interests and personally enriched them by adding depth and diversity to their experiences,

development, and knowledge. Increases in economic capital were also a positive outcome and

potential for the future as a result of the participants' Open Gate educational achievements. This

was evidenced by their accomplishments in the workplace and their college program enrollment.

In Conclusion

Adults bring their experiences into the classroom and base new learning from those

experiences. If they are to learn, what they learn must have relevance to their total lives, not just

to what is in front of them on paper or on a computer screen. With pressures of contingency

funding on ABE programs, is adult education too goal-focused in its attempts to meet outcome

measures? Are interventions to encourage ABE classroom motivation and persistence too

narrow in their scope? If educational design is confined to a strategic plan, will hard data

suffice as the sustenance ABE participants need to survive when they leave the classroom?

I do not minimize the need for program accountability and the importance of baseline

data. However, the findings of this study implicate a responsibility of adult education that

transcends report data and classroom outcomes and extends beyond the classroom. The study of

Open Gate participants revealed that just as the influences of past experiences were imprinted on

their lives, the influence of their classroom and classroom-related experiences had potential for

the same indelible effect. Where the impact of experiences can be positive and possibly even life

changing for ABE participants and the lives they touch, their facilitation becomes not just the

responsibility of adult education, but a moral and social obligation.

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Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
Please print all information.

Date_____

Name_____
(Last)   (First)   (Nickname)

Age_____   Gender_____   Race/Ethnicity_____

Marital Status_____

Address_____

I live with/at_____

_____

Phone Number_____   Your Phone Number?   Yes   No

Best time to call_____   Employed?   Yes   No

Last school attended_____ City_____

Last grade completed_____   Open Gate participation: started _____

Educational goal_____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your high school experience.

    a. What attempts have you made to finish your education?

    b. What caused you to not complete each time?

2. How did you learn about the Open Gate program?

3. What made you decide to enroll in this program?

4. How did you feel when you first started this program?

5. Compare your previous educational experience with your Open Gate participation. What is

    the same? What is different?

6. How does your Open Gate participation fit into your outside life?

7. What do you expect or hope for from your Open Gate participation?

8. What have you found challenging about participating in this program?

9. What keeps you coming to the program?

10. What hinders you from coming to the program?

11. In what ways has being an Open Gate student affected you? (How you see yourself; any new

    perspectives, attitudes; awareness; new knowledge)

12. Tell me about an experience that made you feel good about being in this program.

Interview Comment Sheet

Participant_____

Interview Date_____   Interview Time_____   Interview Duration_____

Interview Location_____

Question	Comments/Reactions

1. Tell me about your high school experience.
   a. What attempts have you made to finish your education?
   b. What caused you to not complete each time?	

2. How did you learn about the Open Gate program?	
3. What made you decide to enroll in this program?	
4. How did you feel when you first started this program?	
5. Compare your previous educational experience with your Open Gate participation. What is the same? What is different?	

6. How does your Open Gate participation fit into your outside life?	
7. What do you expect or hope for from your Open Gate participation?	
8. What have you found challenging about participating in this program?	
9. What keeps you coming to the program?	
10. What hinders you from coming to the program?	
11. In what ways has being an Open Gate student affected you? (How you see yourself; new perspectives, attitudes; awareness; new knowledge)	
12. Tell me about an experience that made you feel good about being in this program.	

Participant	
Reflections	
Miscellaneous	

Interview Question Alignment with Research Questions

Research Question (RQ):
What are adult students' experiences with persistence support in ABE programs?

Subquestions:
- (SQ1) How did program participation influence learner perspectives related to past and current obstacles to persistence?
- (SQ2) What influences did the program environment exert on participant disposition and behaviors?

Interview Question	Research Question Addressed

1. Tell me about your high school experience.
   a. What attempts have you made to finish your education?
   b. What caused you to not complete each time?
	SQ1

2. How did you learn about the Open Gate program?	RQ
3. What made you decide to enroll in this program?	RQ
4. How did you feel when you first started this program?	RQ, SQ2
5. Compare your previous educational experience with your Open Gate participation. What is the same? What is different?	RQ, SQ1, SQ2
6. How does your Open Gate participation fit into your outside life?	RQ, SQ1
7. What do you expect or hope for from your Open Gate participation?	SQ2
8. What have you found challenging about participating in this program?	RQ, SQ1
9. What keeps you coming to the program?	RQ, SQ2
10. What hinders you from coming to the program?	SQ1
11. In what ways has being an Open Gate student affected you? (How you see yourself; new perspectives, attitudes; awareness; new knowledge)	RQ, SQ2
12. Tell me about an experience that made you feel good about being in this program.	RQ, SQ1, SQ2

Codes by Category

BARRIERS CATEGORY CODE DETAILED

Subcategory	Code Word	Code	Detail
Institutional I	Education	I-1	Bad history; Non-accommodation; Dissatisfaction; lost transcripts
	Penal/Court System	I-2	Incarceration: individual's own & parents
	Agencies	I-3	Social Services
Situational S	Economic	S-1	Poverty; Employment
	Family/Social Networks	S-2	Family issues; Lack of; Conflicts; Sabateurs
	Environment	S-3	Life in "hood"; Home setting
	Living Situation	S-4	Homelessness; Transience; Abuse; Instability
	Physical/Mental Health Issues	S-5	Self and Others (e.g., family)
	Schedule/Logistics	S-6	
Dispositional D	Efficacy/Confidence	D-1	Views of self-competence
	Motivation/Focus	D-2	Lack of
	Life Circumstances	D-3	Impact of experiences, trauma, crisis
	Affective Needs	D-4	Affirmation; Love; Care; Support
	Fear	D-5	Of failure; Own safety; Being judged

DISPOSITION CATEGORY CODE DETAILED

Subcategory	Code Word	Code	Detail
Motivation MO	Before Program	MO-1	
	Goal	MO-2	Identified goal as motivator
	External	MO-3	Prompted by life circumstance; life experience
	Program Influence	MO-4	Supported; enhanced; changed
Self-Image SI	Before Program	SI-1	
	During Program	SI-2	
	Post Program	SI-3	
Affect A	State at Entry	A-1	
	Wants/Needs	A-2	
	Responsive To	A-3	
	Program Impact	A-4	
Outlook for Future O	Before Program	O-1	
	During Program	O-2	
	After Program	O-3	
Self-Efficacy EF	Before Program	EF-1	
	During Program	EF-2	
	After Program	EF-3	
State	Hopeful,Positive	ST-1	
	Not Positive	ST-2	

CONTEXT INFLUENCES ON…CATEGORY CODE DETAILED

Subcategory	Code Word	Code	Detail
Behavior **B**	Initial	B-1	
	Influencing	B-2	
	Modeling	B-3	
	Supporting	B-4	
Goals **G**	External Prompts	G-1	
	Program Influence	G-2	
	Future	G-3	
Perspectives/Outlook **P**	Initial	P-1	
	Establishing	P-2	
	Supporting	P-3	
	Enhancing	P-4	
Social Networks **SN**	Initial	SN-1	
	Identifying	SN-2	
	Maintaining	SN-3	
	Supporting	SN-4	

PERSISTENCE CATEGORY CODE DETAILED

Subcategory	Code Word	Code	Detail
Incentives INC	Expenses	INC-1	Fees; Books; Supplies
	Stipends	INC-2	
	Amenities	INC-3	Food; Job Shop; College activities
	Situational Sup	INC-4	Transportation; Daycare; Food Stamps; Healthcare
	Advising	INC-5	Counseling; Mentoring
Program Context PC	Setting	PC-1	Program, college, institutional, office environment
	Classroom Exp	PC-2	
	Activities	PC-3	Field trips; Speaking engagements
	Academic Support	PC-4	Mentoring; Counseling
Social Support SS	Family	SS-1	
	Other External	SS-2	
	Staff	SS-3	
	Program Peers	SS-4	
	Social Models	SS-5	
Life L	Event	L-1	
	Circumstance	L-2	
Motivation M	Internal	M-1	
	Successes	M-2	
	Commitment	M-3	Promises made to, expectations of others
Goal Orientation G	Supported	GO-1	
	Heightened	GO-2	
	Guided	GO-3	

CURRICULUM VITAE
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Education
    University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI   August, 1999
    MS Administrative Leadership and Supervision in Education

    University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI   May, 1972
    BS Secondary Education

Dissertation Title
    A Qualitative Study of Adult Students' Experiences with Persistence Support

Teaching Experience
    Milwaukee Area Technical College-Milwaukee, WI   2005-2006
    Instructor-GED/Adult High School: Pre-College Division

    University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI   2004-2006
    Adjunct lecturer- School of Education-Dept. of Administrative Leadership

    Oak Creek High School-Oak Creek, WI   1972-1980
    English instructor

Education Administration Experience
    Milwaukee Area Technical College-Milwaukee, WI   2006-2016
    Associate dean-School of Pre-College Education

Publications
    Co-Author: "Transformational Theory and the Urban Context"
    New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. Wiley Publications

Presentations
    Adult Education Research Conference-St. Louis, MO   June, 2013
    Roundtable Presenter: "Reprising Roles: A Study of GED Repeater Persistence"

    Midwest Research to Practice Conference-Milwaukee, WI   September, 2005
    Presenter: "The Context of Transformative Learning for the Urban Poor"

    Adult Education and Research Conference: June, 2003
    Asian Diaspora Pre-Conference-San Francisco, CA
    Presenter: "The Early Chinese American Immigrant Experience"

    Adult Literacy & Workforce Development Conference-Milwaukee, WI   June, 2003
    Presenter: "Issues of Race, Gender, and Culture in the Learning Environment"

    Midwest Research to Practice Conference-DeKalb, IL   October, 2002
    Poster Session Presenter: "Creation of the Yellow Peril"