PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN A
GENERAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

by

Sherrie LeMay Mitchell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded General Education Development (GED®) program located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia. Specifically, transformative learning theory and its overarching themes was applied to the perspective of the individuals who shared the experience of transformation. The queries of the study were to determine: (a) how the participants understood transformation, (b) how the participants described their experience of transformation in a federally funded GED program, (c) what transformation(s) were described and perceived from the GED program, and (d) what circumstances were involved with the experience of transformation. After seaming together the participants’ lived experiences of transformation through the GED program, the following textural and structural themes emerged: (a) transformation in confidence, (b) transformation into autonomous individuals, (c) perspective of the GED, (d) the GED program was the best option, (e) compared the GED school as more positive than high school, and (f) influence of others to transform.

Keywords: transformation, General Education Development, transformative learning theory.
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Dedication

First, I would like to give the glory to God as I hopefully worked His plan during this study. Second, I dedicate this manuscript to my husband who showed great patience and support through this long journey. Always a mother first, my son had to share my time during my educational pursuits so I dedicate this manuscript also to him. I hope that I taught my son about following his own dreams and about perseverance through difficult tasks. I also want to thank my extended family and friends who watched me over the years always writing, writing, and writing some more. Thank God I took a class on teaching the college student at Liberty University that taught me about balance. I went from the bookworm always studying and writing to a human being that learned how to balance her life. Lastly, I dedicate this manuscript to the youth who inspired my passion to learn more about their transformations; it was a passion that sustained me through this study.
Acknowledgments

As I learned through this study, there is always someone in our lives that helps us on our paths. For me, I felt like I had several people that were freely helping me on my path: Dr. Gary Kuhne, Dr. Fred Milacci, and Dr. Theresa Lawrence. Early on in this dissertation process, I realized that these three individuals were there to help me and were supportive of my success. I also realized how much the staff at the GED site was supportive of my efforts; if it was not for their cooperation, this study would not have taken place. And finally, I dedicate this manuscript to the eight participants who took time out of their lives to share their stories and insights with me; they truly touched my life, and I was transformed because of them.
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List of Abbreviations

Adult Basic Education (ABE)
American College Testing (ACT)
American Psychological Association (APA)
General Education Development (GED®)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Masters in the Art of Teaching (MAT)
Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)
Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)
Workforce Investment Act (WIA)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

I will begin by telling the story of why I became interested in studying the transformational experiences brought about through the General Education Development (GED®) program. My interest in this project started when I heard a story from a young male that enrolled in the GED program where I work. As he wrote a statement about being withdrawn from high school, he looked up and asked if I wanted to know why he dropped out. He told his story in a soft voice that he was in prison for the past two years. Now 19, he explained that he lost two years of education because, according to him, there was a lack of schooling in the adult prison. He continued telling me that he wanted to get the GED diploma to turn around his life. I began to think of all the other young adults who look to the GED credential as a way to transform their lives. It was at that moment that I became compelled to know more about the shared experience of transformation that some individuals undergo through participation in a GED program.

Background

There are more than 39 million high school dropouts in America according to the GED Testing Service (2014). The economic cost of high school dropouts (ages 18-24) is exorbitant: They are much more likely to live below the poverty line compared with credentialed GED earners and high school graduates (U.S. Department of Education Institute, 2012). Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reported that high school dropouts earn on average $10,000 less per year than their credentialed peers. The cost to society was valued at close to $300,000 over a lifetime in lost wages, lost tax revenues, and higher incarceration rates (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009). These aforementioned problems were tied to individuals who
have dropped out of school and lack their GED credential (Sum et al., 2009). Although the GED does not stand for *General Equivalency Diploma*, many view the GED credential as the equivalent to a high school diploma because GED credentialed individuals can enter college or the military and are treated as high school graduates on the U.S. Census report (Bridwell, 2012; Penner, 2011; Sum et al., 2009; Quinn & Pawasarat, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In this study, the GED credential was explored not only as equivalent to the high school diploma but also as a transformational catalyst that can help with the problems associated with the high school dropout problem.

The phenomenon of interest: transformation “…an act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed” (Transformation, n.d.) is at the core of transformative learning theory. The principles within transformative learning theory of (a) realizing the inner qualities of a person, (b) feeling more capable, (c) addressing self-defeating practices, and (d) changing the paradigm of understanding knowledge, the world, and self (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; O’Sullivan, 2003) provided a theoretical framework for this study. For the purpose of this study, the ten transformation phases described by Mezirow (2000, p.22) served as rubric for transformation: (a) disorienting dilemma,(b) self-examination, (c) critical assessment of assumptions,(d) recognition that one’s dissatisfaction and the process of transformation are shared, (e) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, (f) planning a course of action, (g) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, (h) trying new roles, (i) building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships, and (j) reintegrating into life dictated by new perspectives.

**High School Dropout Problem and the GED**
In addition to addressing transformation from the GED program, the connection between the GED program and the high school dropout problem was explored: Many GED seekers were first high school dropouts. The high school dropout problem is a multifaceted problem that has been persisting for decades and is well documented (e.g., Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Pagani et al., 2008). Consequences exist from the high school dropout problem on society such as (a) increased health problems, (b) engagement in more risky behaviors including criminal activities (Stanard, 2003) reported that 82% of the prison population is comprised of high school dropouts), and (c) drain to the economy evidenced by the fact that high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, earn less income over a lifetime, contribute less tax revenues into the economy, and are more likely to be recipients from state funded entitlement programs (e.g., Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.; House, 2009; Ikomi, 2010; Stanard, 2003).

**Existing Research**

Existing research on the GED has shown that GED attainment can be transformative (Snider, 2010; Tuck, 2012) and contributed to human capital gain (e.g., Cao, Stromsdorfer, & Weeks, 1996; Caputo, 2005; Penner, 2011). Numerous qualitative studies have been conducted on transformative learning in other educational settings: (a) a narrative study of nursing students in an associate degree program (Kear, 2013), (b) the transformational journey of career-changing women who were in STEM careers and moved to secondary educational careers (Snyder, 2011), (c) the outcomes and processes experienced by participants of a doctoral education program (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012), and (d) the transformative learning experiences during an adult learning workshop (Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2012). Experiences with the GED program have also been studied: (a) a narrative study on the Adult Basic Education (ABE)
instructors’ perceptions of their pedagogy (Davis, 2012), (b) a narrative study of transformation and the GED (Bridwell, 2012), (c) an action research of perspectives of the value placed on the GED (Tuck, 2012), (d) a practitioner’s perspective on the prison GED program (Thomas, 2013), and (e) a phenomenological study of the shared experiences of teachers working with court-mandated community corrections in the GED/ABE program (Mottern, 2013). The GED constitutes have been quantitatively studied through the framework of human capital gain theory: (a) the effects of GED credentials on wages and employment of women (Cao, et al., 1996), (b) predictors of health and economic for GED credentialed individuals (Caputo, 2005), and (c) differences in post secondary outcomes for GED earners (Penner, 2011). Studying the transformative experiences of young adult GED seekers at a federally funded GED program, expanded existing literature on the GED, transformative learning theory, and provided an audience to the GED participants who have experienced transformation.

**Research Gap**

Since the inception of Jack Mezirow’s theory in 1978, transformative learning theory has been a topic of debate and investigation in the arena of adult learning studies including “…over 40 unpublished empirical studies that were completed by graduate students for doctoral dissertations” (Taylor, 1998, p. 9). Numerous authors have published papers on various aspects of transformative learning and have collectively identified factors which produce transformational learning in adult students (Taylor, 2000). Qualitative designs have been employed (case study, narrative, action research, interviewing) to describe or understand the experiences of the GED participants. Quantitative studies on the GED were located in the body of literature (e.g., Berry & Mason, 2012; Boudett, Murnane, & Willett, 2000; Penner, 2011; Song, 2011; Zajocova, 2012). Past phenomenological studies at the GED level were also located
that focused the following phenomena: (a) efficacy of GED students (Bayles, 2012), (b) prisoners’ experiences of court mandated GED programs (Davis, Mottern, & Ziegler, 2010), (c) experiences of GED graduates in college (Dunn Carpenter, 2011), (d) retention in the GED program (Grover, 2013), and (e) the phenomenon of college readiness of GED recipients (Gunby, 2012). To date, a phenomenological study designed to understand the transformational experiences of young adults in a federally funded GED program was not located in the literature.

**Situation to Self**

I am a 50 year old White female. I worked as an instructor for a Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funded service provider as an instructor for in school youth at two different high schools and one alternative school with students aged (14-21); I also served as a work experience coordinator for youth in those programs. The WIA funded program also offered a separate accelerated GED preparation program for out of school youth aged (17-21). Peripherally working near the GED program brought me into contact with young adults: Many of these were teen mothers, homeless, or recently released from prison. I witnessed hope from the moment young adults enrolled into the GED class. Without a formal study, I could only see transformations anecdotally; through this study, I was able to hear participants articulate what it was like to experience transformation through participation in the GED program.

In addition to describing how this study situated to my personal narrative, I brought my philosophical assumptions of theology and constructivism to the study. For example, a theological viewpoint was involved in that the GED program is considered a second chance in education, and may be the catalyst for transformation which is much like the transformations experienced through a belief in monotheism, particularly, Christianity. A constructivism viewpoint of multiple perspectives and socially constructed realities also guided this study to
determine the experience of transformative learning through the GED program (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Mertens, 2010). According to Gall et al., constructivism posits that social realities are constructed by the individuals (2007). The constructivist position is one that allows the inquirer to focus on “multiple social realties” (Gall et al., 2007, p.21) created by different participants as they interact with the same environment: In this case, the GED program. This constructivist epistemological view aligned with the research design of phenomenology in which knowledge of the phenomenon, transformation, was constructed by multiple perspectives from the individuals that experienced the phenomenon and then synthesized later in the inquiry to form the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Problem Statement**

The problem of the study was the lack of qualitative research understanding the transformational experiences that some young adults undergo through participation in a federally funded GED program. The problem at large was the need to understand the transformative experiences of high school dropouts as they transitioned to GED seekers. Through understanding the value and transformative effect of the GED program, one can make a difference for society: When students drop out of school it is not just a problem for the individual but also for the community at large because permanent high school dropouts are more likely to have increased health problems, participate in risky behaviors including criminal activities, and make up a higher percentage of welfare recipients and incarcerated individuals (e.g., House, 2009; Stanard, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

There was also a need to improve the credibility and acceptability of the GED program (Adult Education Linkage Services, 1987). For example, the military, some colleges, and some employers deemed GED holders less desirable than high school graduates for enlistment,
admissions, or employment opportunities (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1988; Marines, 2015). The addition of knowledge that this study yielded may enhance the credibility of the GED program. Second chance education such as the GED program allows participants to challenge the perceptions of how dropouts are viewed: lazy and deviant (Bickerstaff, 2009).

There was also a need to change the perception of the GED diploma as a final credential outcome. Once a college degree is earned, it pays off equally as well for GED recipients as high school diploma earners (Maralani, 2011), yet a lower number of GED recipients enrolled in post secondary schools compared to high school graduates (Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1997; Penner, 2011). While Adult Basic Education (ABE) and GED programs are being utilized more, they do not receive adequate funding (Zachary, 2010). Because correlations have been empirically shown between health outcomes, crime referrals, recidivism, and the condition of poverty with individuals who withdrew from high school (Boudett et al., 2000; Caputo, 2005; Ikomi, 2010; Zajacova, 2012), the transformational experiences was explored beyond the GED content to one of a changing view on life as one GED seeker declared: “…Okay, I’m done and I’m going to start school. I invited Christ into my heart. If I could just get my GED I knew it would all be Okay” (Davis, 2012, p. 232).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how young adults experienced transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia. The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) which involves a paradigm shift of the participants was referred to throughout this study. For this study, transformation was defined by the processes and outcomes
of transformation experienced by the GED students at a federally funded GED preparation site in a small urban area in the southeast part of Georgia.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was that it expanded the body of knowledge, informed funding agencies, and potentially helped citizens. Shedding light on the shared experiences of transformation from GED seekers can benefit the pedagogy of Adult Basic Education (ABE) instructors and might help high school dropouts overcome barriers as they look to GED programs as a catalyst for change (Breslow, 2012; Sum et al., 2009). Lastly, this study may aid in changing the perspective of society on GED seekers from dropouts to transforming students and learners (Schwartz, 2014).

**Expand Knowledge**

Knowledge was expanded on the theoretical framework of transformative learning and the impacts of the GED program. Studies on transformative learning have been conducted at higher levels of education: nursing programs, universities, workshops for educators, and doctorate level programs (e.g., Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Glowacki-Dudka et al., 2012; Kear, 2013; Snyder, 2011; Stevens-Long et al., 2012), and at the GED level through narratives (Bridwell, 2012). The GED program has been studied qualitatively and quantitatively for other issues such as: experiences, economic impacts/human capital gain, post secondary outcomes, non-economic impacts, recidivism, and instructor student relationships (e.g., Davis, 2012; Tuck, 2012; Mottern, 2013; Penner, 2011; Schwartz & Schwartz, 2012; Snider, 2010; Song, 2011; Zajocova, 2012). Prior work in transformative learning and the GED was built on through this study.

**Inform Funding Agencies**
In addition to expanding knowledge, agencies may be informed from this study. Because the site at the time of this study operated through federal funding, this study was important to the site’s organization as well as for other federally funded GED programs. Money filters from the federal government down through state governments and lower agencies such as the Workforce Investment Act entities; these agencies have established their own entry requirements for GED participants restricting the number of students that can be served in each contracted GED program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Because of the correlations shown with GED attainment and reduced recidivism, paroles are often mandated by the courts to attend GED classes (Mottern, 2013).

Also, school districts used GED diplomas to reduce dropout rates by excluding certain populations or pushing low performing students to enroll in GED programs according to Zachary (2010). This growth in the GED student body was not always met with adequate funding. Increases in the use of GED programs heightens the need for funding: “Adult educators need substantially more funding, at both the state and national levels, if they are expected to reach these students and meet the challenge of educating this country's K-12 dropout population” (Zachary, 2010, p. 82). For example, the site in this study could only serve 50 students per year under their prior provider contract. The findings of the transformative processes and outcomes through the GED program yielded through this study may prompt funding agencies to increase their budgets thereby helping more individuals who withdrew from high school towards transformation, human capital gain activities, integration back into society, and other emancipatory goals (e.g., Akinyemi & Norhasni, 2013; Bridwell, 2012; Christle et al., 2007; Maralani, 2011; Snider, 2010; Song, 2011; Sum et al., 2009).

**Benefit Citizens**
On a wider scale, this study could affect change to citizens. High school dropouts could benefit from this study if there is more access to alternative education programs (Bickerstaff, 2009; Maralani, 2011; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008). GED classes have been shown to help marginalized adults integrate into society through transformative learning (Bridwell, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). Incarcerated/paroled youth could benefit from the findings of this study: Eighty percent of 16- to 24-year-olds in the prison population are high school dropouts (Sum & Harrington, 2003; Sum et al., 2009; Zachary, 2010); a high percent of incarcerated males are functionally illiterate (Thomas, 2013); and, GED attainment reduces recidivism which reflected a great need to reach this population with alternative education programs (Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). Society at large is affected because demonstrating transformation through participation in a GED program can lead to greater numbers of GED recipients which can help offset the costs to society attributed to permanent high school dropouts such as: (a) increases with violent crime referrals, (b) correlations with health outcomes, and (c) cost to the economy (e.g., Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.; Breslow, 2012; House, 2009; Ikomi, 2010; Rogers, Everett, Zajacova, & Hummer, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Institute, 2012).

Research Questions

In order to view the phenomenon of transformation from all possible angles and to serve as a way to guide toward “…seeing, reflecting, and knowing” a better depiction of the issues involved (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59), the following research questions were asked:

RQ1. How did young adults in a federally funded GED program understand transformation?

This question aligned with Van Manen’s (1990) notion in phenomenological studies that allow the researcher to understand the participants’ understanding of a particular phenomenon: In this case, transformation.
RQ2. How did participants describe their experience of transformation in a federally funded GED program?

This question was the structural portion of the study. It helped me look at the conditions and context of the transformative experience(s). It was designed to allow the researcher to examine how transformative learning played a role in their transformational processes (Creswell, 2013; Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Snyder, 2008).

RQ3. What transformation(s) were described and perceived from the GED?

This question helped lead to the textural description in this transcendental, phenomenological study. It was an open-ended question that allowed me to bracket out of the study by allowing the experiences to emerge from the viewpoint of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In addition, this question helped to expose the introspective private thoughts of the participants (Husserl, 1925/2011) and allowed the participants to articulate their own transformations (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008).

RQ4. What circumstances were involved with the experience of transformation?

This question provided a more complete description of the participants’ transformational experiences “…variations, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Furthermore, asking about circumstances provided in-depth information in this phenomenological study (Gurwitsch, 1966).

Research Plan

This qualitative study was conducted using a transcendental phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach was best suited for the description of experiences, in this case young adults’ transformational experiences through participation in a federally funded GED program (Moustakas, 1994). Using a phenomenological approach allowed the essence to
become observable upon synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions of transformation using transformative learning theory as a theoretical framework (e.g., Bridwell, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; Snyder, 2011). Moustakas (1994) explained transcendental phenomenology as a way to describe phenomena without bias or assumptions. A Phenomenological approach was warranted in this study because it allowed the participants’ perceptions and internal meanings to be described from their lived experience rather than using preconceived notions of transformation within the context of the GED program. Furthermore, phenomenology illuminated the phenomenon of transformational experiences through participation in a GED program, a concept born from an idea, by connecting what is perceived to what actually exists (Husserl, 1925/2011; Moustakas, 1994).

**Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations for participants in this study included the following criteria: (a) ages 18-24, (b) documented barriers (standards set by the funding agency), (c) current or past enrolled GED clients in the federally funded GED preparation program located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia, and (d) withdrew from school at least six months before entering the GED program. Court-mandated participants were excluded from participation in this study. There were no limitations placed on race or gender.

Limitations of this study were the identification of participants who have experienced transformation. It proved difficult to locate a substantial number of participants who met the sample criteria. The concept of transformation can be vague. Because transformative learning theory has evolved over time, the decision was made to use the constructs of the theory along with the participants’ descriptions to define the phases, processes, and outcomes of transformation (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 2000).
Definitions

1. *Adult Basic Education (ABE)* - an area of education that provides general education development preparation courses, literacy skills, and English language instruction to adults (Mearns, 2010).

2. *American Council on Education (ACE)* – an education association for higher education institutions and partners in the GED® Testing Service with a focus to provide access to higher education for students (American Council on Education, 2015).


4. *American Psychological Association (APA)* - is the writing and publication manual used by scholars and writers for standardized writing style rules in social and scientific fields (American Psychological Association, 2010).

5. *Autonomous* - a goal in transformative learning for adult learners to become social responsible thinkers who make their own decisions and create their own plans (Mezirow, 2000).

6. *Attitude* - is a predisposition of the mind that can be positive or negative, and can be changed during the process of transformative learning (Dirkx, 2012; Fetherston & Kelly, 2007).

7. *Communicative* - is a transformative learning theory term in which the transformed adult learner is able to better understand what other individuals are saying (Mezirow, 2000).

8. *Counter-space* - a term in critical race theory that is used to describe an educational space that provides marginalized students with an alternative to racist institutionalized spaces (Schwartz, 2014).
9. *Critical Discourse* - is one of the ten phases of transformative learning in which the adult learner has dialogue with other adult learners to assess beliefs, feelings, and values (Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008).


11. *Critical Reflection* - is one of the ten phases in transformative learning theory processes where the adult learner examines prior assumptions, actions, beliefs, thereby uncovering new insights (Taylor, 2000).

12. *Disorienting Dilemma* - is one of the ten phases during transformative learning in which the adult learner has a trigger event or crisis that starts off the desire to learn something new (King, 2002; Mezirow, 2000).

13. *Emancipatory Learning* - is a goal of transformative learning in which the adult learner shifts towards empowerment during learning: From just acquiring knowledge to that of self-regulation and participation in the democratic process (Bridwell, 2012; Freire, 1972).

14. *Frame of reference* - is a way of knowing through assumptions and perspectives that individuals use to make sense of the world and situations (Gunnlaugson, 2007).

15. *General Education Development (GED®)* – describes a credential that is used as an alternate to a high school diploma by individuals who did not complete school; it is awarded to individuals who pass a series of tests to demonstrate similar content knowledge of a high school graduate, the GED® is joint venture by American Council on Education and Pearson (American Council on Education, 2015; Dunn Carpenter, 2011; Gall, 2014).
16. *General Education Development Programs* - are adult basic education programs that
provide GED preparation classes to adolescents and adults to prepare them for the GED
tests and provide instruction for literacy and other work readiness skills (U.S. Department

17. *Habits of mind* - are a set of embedded assumptions that individuals hold that can be
shifted to new perspectives during transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

18. *Human capital enhancing activities* - are activities such as company training, military,
and post secondary education that invests in human capital (Murnane et al., 1997).

19. *Human capital gain theory* - a theoretical framework emphasis on the economic side of

20. *Impressionistic* - a transformative learning theory term in which the adult learner learns
how to make better impressions (Mezirow, 2000).

21. *Institutional Review Board (IRB)* - is a committee at Liberty University that assures
that faculty and student researchers conduct their studies ethically and protect the
rights and welfare of human participants (Institutional Review Board, 2015).

22. *Interpersonal* - relationships between people (Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

23. *Intrapersonal* - a relationship with the internal self that adult learners can use for self-
reflection and healing (Schwartz, 2014).

24. *Masters in the Art of Teaching (MAT)* - an alternate teaching degree used by individuals
with various undergraduate degrees to become teachers (Snyder, 2012).

25. *Normative* - a transformative learning theory term in which the adult learner begins to
understand how to shift his or her behavior to the norms of the group (Mezirow, 2000).
26. *Patience* - a desirable trait of an effective GED teacher (Wade, 2011) and a characteristic that can be transformed during transformative learning process whereby the transformed individual is less hasty to react and can appreciate differences in other individuals (Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

27. *Place* – a term in critical race theory that describes the physical setting of the GED classroom (Schwartz, 2014).

28. *Presencing* - is a concept in transformative learning theory where adult learners begin to gain their understanding from emergent knowledge rather than from their past experiences (Gunnlaugson, 2007).

29. *Recidivism* - an act where individuals either return to prison or relapse into criminal behavior (Nuttall, Hollmen, & Staley, 2003).

30. *Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)* - a test administered to access students’ college readiness (SAT, 2015).

31. *Self-esteem* – a state of how individuals view their worth or image (Thomas, 2013).

32. *Self-formation* – a description of when education brings out the inner qualities of an individual (Dirkx, 2012).

33. *Spatial justice* – a term in critical race theory where oppressed marginalized learners from urban schools are provided with counter-spaces such as a GED programs that reintegrate them back into learners (Schwartz, 2014).

34. *Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)* - A pre and post assessment used by adult basic educators to determine the basic math and reading skills of adult learners in ABE and GED programs (McGraw-Hill Education, 2015).
35. *Transformation* - a profound change in individuals that involves more awareness of their own assumptions, shift in attitudes, more openness to new ideas, and modification of prior assumptions (Kear, 2013; Mezirow, 2000).


37. *Workforce Investment Act (WIA)* - a 1998 federal act that was implemented in Georgia in 2000 that funds regional One-Stop service centers that provides adult education programs, youth programs, training, and job seeking services to dislocated workers and youth. These WIA programs are funded and regulated by local WIA boards consisting of appointed individuals for each region (Georgia Workforce Development, n.d.).

**Summary**

Within this chapter, the background of the problem was outlined. The phenomenon of interest *transformation* was defined and the theoretical framework of transformative learning theory was presented. Existing research was evaluated and the research gap in the body of literature was demonstrated. The study and situation to self was revealed. The purpose of this phenomenological study to describe how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program was stated. Research questions were formulated to determine how participants understood transformation, described their experiences with transformation through their participation in a federally funded GED program, what transformations occurred, and what circumstance were involved with their experiences. The research plan was outlined and justified. Delimitations and limitations for the study were spelled
out, and definitions that were applicable to this study were defined and substantiated by literature.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of conducting the literature review was to search, evaluate, and synthesize past empirical and theoretical literature that: (a) drove the purpose of the study, (b) assisted in formulating research questions, (c) defined terms, (d) illuminated relationships between prior and new findings from the present study, (e) provided support for this study, (f) determined how the topic of the GED® evolved over time, (g) learned about constructs, terminology, processes and outcomes of transformative learning theory, (h) searched for guidance in qualitative methodology, (i) grew understanding of phenomenology and physiological underpinnings, (j) sought insurance of ethics and trustworthiness, (k) improved interviewing techniques, and (l) find gaps in the body of literature.

Through the process of researching the literature, primary resources were retrieved from secondary sources. Relevant and related topics on transformation and GED constitutes from various sources was evaluated, and then synthesized into headings and subheadings using the purpose of this study as a guide. Major categories guided by the problem and purpose of this study helped define the parameters and scope of the literature review terminology searches. For example, terms used to research the high school dropout problem included: high school equivalency, adult learners, literacy, postsecondary, high school dropout, dropout characteristics, dropout identification, dropout prediction, dropout research, and high school graduation rate. Terms to search theoretical framework included: transformative learning, constructive-developmental theory, personal transformation, social transformation, transformation, transformative learning theory, transformative learning processes, transformative learning outcomes, and identification of transformation. Search parameters for
General Education Development included: GED and college, GED and prisoners, GED and Recidivism, GED and labor market, GED and military, History of GED, Adult Basic Education (ABE), ABE educators, GED and poverty, alternative education, and second chance education.

In addition, other search terms included: comparisons of GED certificates to high school diploma, barriers of GED, outcomes of the GED, human capital gain activities, human capital gain theory, and GED and transformation.

After the themes emerged from the findings, the body of literature was searched again to look for corroboration, convergence and extension of the findings in previous studies; terms included: GED and confidence, GED and autonomy, value of the GED, perceptions of the GED, and transformative outcomes. Archived publications were included in the literature review because of the essential value yielded by the primary research; for example, phenomenology researchers and psychologists, transformative learning theorists, and historical research on the topic of the high school dropouts, the GED, transformative learning theory, and phenomenology were deemed necessary for inclusion. Older articles were excluded if they were not primary sources, were non-empirical studies, or irrelevant to this study’s overarching research question.

The scope of the literature review included the following dates which expanded through the progression of the study: 2009-2013 at the onset of the study, and later narrowed to 2010-2015 towards the end of the research and writing phase of the dissertation. The following databases were searched for the review of literature: Academic Search Complete, Academic OneFile, JSTOR, ProQuest Central, Education Research Complete, and ERIC (Ebsco). The majority of resources were retrieved from Liberty University Online Library, Google scholar, and primary books.
The concept of transformation in the context of a federally funded GED preparation program was described within this literature review by looking at (a) the theoretical framework of the transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2000); (b) past and current literature on the GED and the connection to the high school dropout problem; (c) the history of the GED; (d) GED programs; (e) comparisons of GED recipients, high school dropouts, and high school graduates; (f) the GED and prisoners; (g) the GED and human capital gain theory; (h) the GED and transformation; (i) the value of the GED, and (j) transformative learning in other educational settings. This chapter concluded with a description of what has been revealed from previous studies and potential discoveries that lay ahead from this study on transformation through participation in a GED program.

**Theoretical Framework**

The transformative learning theory was used to ground this study. Researchers in various topics in the past of adult learning have looked to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory for over thirty years to help adult learners achieve their fullest potential (Bridwell, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). Transformative learning theory has since evolved into a plethora of constructs and practical applications (e.g., Dirkx, 2012; Fetherston, & Kelly, 2007; Gunnlaugsson, 2007; Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Taylor, 2000).

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Narrowly looking into the world of transformative learning literature, will inevitable show the reader that there are alternative conceptions of the transformative learning theory (Taylor, 2000). The theory rooted from Jack Mezirow’s 1978 study on perspective shifts of women returning to community college has since sparked: “… a diverse body of theoretical, empirical, and practical work” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 399) as well as numerous unpublished doctoral
dissertations (Taylor, 2000). To better understand how transformative learning theory added to this study the following was described in detail: (a) the constructs, (b) the processes and outcomes, and (c) the identification of transformative learning.

**Constructs.** Although Mezirow (2000) established the transformative learning theory, there are contrasting viewpoints for the constructs (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 2000). For example, Mezirow described transformative learning as shifting perspectives within the adult learner while Dirkx looked at transformative learning as self examination and from a more subjective holistic approach (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). Taylor (2000) suggested three alternative perspectives of transformative learning different from Mezirow’s: (a) psychoanalytic view or the adult learners process of discovery of new talents, confidence, deeper understanding of self, and increased self responsibility; (b) psycho developmental view that describes transformation as a continuous process; and (c) social emancipator view which is an appreciation for the role of relationships: “…social transformation by demythicizing reality, where the oppressed develop a critical consciousness” (p. 8).

**Terminology.** The terminology and categories for different forms of transformative learning have been expanded: One instance is the added categories of consciousness such as multiple intelligences, evolutionary consciousness, and shifting states of consciousness (Gunnlaugson, 2007). Another quality of transformative learning described by educational researchers is self-formation which reflects the belief that the purpose of education is to bring out the inner qualities of a person (Dirkx, 2012). Self-formation involves a critique of the self within social constructs, examines self-defeating practices, and encourages the authentic self (Dirkx, 2012). Mezirow (2000) established terminology related to the processes of transformative learning including: *impressionistic, normative, and communicative*. These words denote learning
how to make better impressions, shifting behavior to the norms of the group, and having a better understanding of what others are saying.

**Processes.** The following processes in transformative learning do not represent an exhaustive list. For the purpose of this study, the processes that were used to describe the participants’ transformational experiences included the ten phases described by Mezirow (2000, p.22): (a) disorienting dilemma, (b) self-examination, (c) critical assessment of assumptions, (d) recognition that one’s dissatisfaction and the process of transformation are shared, (e) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, (f) planning a course of action, (g) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, (h) trying new roles, (i) building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships, and (j) reintegrating into life dictated by new perspectives.

Other researchers identified the transformative processes as those that are brought about by experiences that interrupt the individual’s existing understanding of the world (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). As Mezirow states in “Learning to Think Like an Adult,” transformations occur once self introspection of old postulations and awareness for the need to change occurs (2000); thus, reflection is considered a necessary component for transformation (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). Gunnlaugson (2007) referred to the reflective processes as *presencing* which helps move adult learners from understanding the world through their past schema to the present. Critically thinking is another part of the transformative learning process that involves examining evidence and alternative points a view (Mezirow, 2000). To become critical thinkers, Mezirow (2000) warranted the following: elaborating on existing paradigms, establishing new paradigms, transforming paradigms to more tolerant ones, and examining biases through reflection.
Outcomes. The goal of transformative learning as stated by Mezirow is for the adult learner to become an autonomous thinker and a socially responsible individual (2000). According to Dirkx (2012), another outcome of transformative learning is that individuals become conscious of their defense mechanisms that shape their behaviors and ways of understanding the world. Additionally, Mezirow defined the outcomes of transformative learning as when adult learners acquire an awareness of assumptions, the ability to imagine alternatives for existing schema, and improved interpersonal skills (2000). Other outcomes of transformative learning revealed by previous research are confidence, self-esteem, and perception of identity (e.g., Illeris, 2014; Tennant, 2012). Another definition of what transforms is self-perception or the concept of identity (Illeris, 2014; Tennant, 2012). The concept of identity was established by Erick Erickson (1950, 1968) where the perception of self is said to be the same internally but also involves how individuals wish to be presented to others; thus self identity according to Erickson is both internally and in relationship to the external world. In order for transformations in identity to occur, motivation to transform must be addressed, defense mechanisms must be overcome, and competence needs to be developed by adult basic educators according to Illeris (2014).

Identification of transformative learning. Besides knowing the constructs, terminology of transformative learning, and processes and outcomes, identification of transformative learning was considered for this study. For example, Snyder (2008) reviewed empirical studies on transformative learning and found a range of methods used to identify transformative learning: (a) Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning, (b) four ways of knowing, (c) specific elements of transformative learning, (d) shifts in attitudes, (e) changes in behavior, (f) openness to changing assumptions, (e) increased engagement, (f) self-
empowerment, (g) acquisition of new skills, (h) increased self-awareness, (i) categories of authenticity, and (j) adult learners’ self-articulation of transformation. Because the nature of a phenomenological study required the researcher to set aside predetermined beliefs during the Epoche process (Moustakas, 1994), the identification of participants who have experienced transformation for this study was identified through self-attest statements and third party referrals (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Snyder, 2008) which allowed the phenomenon to be described anew.

**Related Literature**

**Connection to High School Dropout Problem**

The high school dropout problem has not changed in over 30 years (Christle et al., 2007; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009). There are a number of reasons why high school students are dropping out: Townsend, Flisher and King wrote that there is a “bewildering number and diversity” of factors found to have been associated with dropping out of school (2007, p.312). Some of the reasons for dropping out of high school that was commonly cited in the body of research included the following: (a) lack of parental support, (b) student disengagement, (c) falling behind academically, (d) excessive absenteeism, (e) negative influences by peers, (f) dysfunctional family life, (g) the need to make money, (h) teen pregnancy, (i) behavior issues, (j) substance abuse issues, and (k) juvenile arrests (e.g., Bowers et al., 2013; Christle et al., 2007; Hirschfield, 2009; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Pagani et al., 2008). Risk factors for high school dropouts vary depending on race according to Lee et al. (2011): Black students and Hispanic students drop out at higher rates than White students, but the strongest predictive factor according to Christle et al. (2007) was whether students are classified in the lower socioeconomic status.
Notable findings from studies on the dropout issue were that students from rural or urban communities as well as different ethnicities contributed to the dropout rates in almost equal proportions in a study conducted in the state of Virginia; however, Lee et al. (2011) found that a higher percentage of dropouts came from families classified as having economic barriers. Pagani et al. (2008) also compared what they deemed as high risk predictors for high school dropouts against low risk factors and found that when a student has all three predictive factors (e.g., a mother without a high school diploma, growing up with a single parent as a child, and being retained a grade) strongly correlated with not finishing high school. Pagani et al. (2008) discovered that themes of students who had attention and hyperactive disorders and lower levels of parental supervision emerged as risk factors for not finishing high school. Taking these studies into account points to the conclusion that there is no one reason for the high school dropout problem.

**Graduation rates.** In addition to the risk factors for dropping out of school, there was a disconnect between the public’s perceptions of graduation rates and actual statistics discovered; for example, administrators and teachers reported that graduation rates were 90% or higher, yet in fact the national graduation rates fall between 68% and 75% (Bridgeland et al., 2009). The true numbers of high school dropout percentages tended to be skewed as there was no standardization in calculation for reporting graduation rates; for example, some schools did not count incarcerated youth in their graduation rates while others include GED diplomas and alternative certificates towards the numbers of successful graduation completion rates (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007).

**Consequences of the high school dropout problem on society.** There is no doubt that a high school dropout problem exists, but exactly what are the consequences of not addressing this
issue? Bridgeland et al. (2009) looked at the consequences to society, individuals, and the economy, and in their report cited President Barack Obama as saying: “Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country” (p.21). Several studies and reports concluded that the decision to drop out of school cost the individual and society (e.g., Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.; House, 2009; Ikomi, 2010; Stanard, 2003; Sum et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Institute, 2012).

Individually, the consequences include lower wages, increased unemployment rates, and the increased odds of more health problems associated with increased rates of poverty (Stuit & Springer, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). The costs to taxpayers are high as noted by House: “Dropouts cost taxpayers millions of dollars each year” (2009, p.9). While this is a bold statement it is a justified based on the number of studies conducted across the United States on the costs that permanent working age high school dropouts have on society (e.g., D’Andrea, 2010; House, 2009; Stuit & Springer, 2010). For example, taking a closer look at the findings of dropouts impacts on the state of Wisconsin showed: (a) reduced overall state fiscal income by approximately $5 billion per year, (b) a threefold higher unemployment rate for permanent high school dropouts, (c) over $100 million dollars lost in tax revenues, (d) a cost to the state of over $200 million in Medicaid costs due to twice the number of Medicaid enrollees are identified as dropouts, and (e) a twofold increase in incarceration rates for dropouts over high school graduates which costs the state of Wisconsin over 150 million dollars (House, 2009).

Likewise, Rath, Rock, and Laferriere (2011) viewed costs of lack of high school diploma or GED credentials to the state of Connecticut, and determined that individuals who do not obtain a high school diploma or a GED credential cost the state over $500,000 in a lifetime due
to loss of wages and tax contributions and increases in state funded entitlement programs and increased incarceration rates. The findings in the states of Wisconsin and Connecticut were derived from two studies; multiple works, too many for this literature review, have listed the consequences of dropouts to society as lower tax revenues, increased reliance on government assistance, and a correlation between dropouts and crime (e.g., House, 2009; Ikomi, 2010; Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013; Stuit & Springer, 2010).

There is no differentiation between a GED credential individual and a high school graduated on the U.S. Census Bureau and most states (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; House, 2009 U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Because the GED credential is treated as a passport to post secondary options and has been empirically shown to increase the earning potential of GED earners through participation in higher education activities such as college and trade schools and entrance into certain branches of the military, the GED earners were not attributed as having the same costs to society as permanent high school dropouts (House, 2009; Mid-Plains, 2014; Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010).

**History of the GED**

The GED came about in 1942 as a way to increase military enlistments for men and women who wanted to join but did not have their high school diplomas (Meeker et al., 2008; Tuck, 2012). The first GED exam was specifically designed for veterans; it was based on the Iowa Test of Educational Development to help veterans enter post secondary schools on the GI Bill (Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2010; Tuck, 2012). In addition, the GED diploma served as a way for people who were high school dropouts to obtain college degrees; by the 1950s, civilian GED credential seekers outnumbered the veteran GED test seekers (Heckman et al., 2010; Meeker et al., 2008). There are many successful people who have earned their GED
diplomas including: Bill Cosby, Michael J. Fox, and United States Senator, Ben Nighthorse (Meeker et al., 2008).

In the 1990s, schools started establishing GED programs to overcome the high school dropout problem. In the past, the GED credential was differentiated from the high school diploma on the US Census Bureau questionnaire, but currently GED diplomas are not differentiated from high school diplomas on statistics taken by state and local educational districts (Heckman et al., 2010; House, 2009; Tuck, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Since its inception over 65 years ago, more that 18 million people have earned their GED diplomas (American Council on Education, 2015) and approximately one million people who have withdrawn from school seek GED attainment each year (Tyler, 2005).

Over the last 35 years, there has been an increase in the trend for youth to seek out GED attainment over traditional schools (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2010). A typical GED student is in their mid twenties, completed the 10th grade, has been out of school for approximately nine years; while the remaining 25% of GED seekers are adolescent students ages 16 to 18 years old (Gewertz, 2011; Riffle, 2010). Courses to prepare for the GED are less expensive when compared to traditional schools (Tuck, 2012). The GED Testing Service has become a public and private cooperation that features a national testing program as an alternative to the traditional high school diploma (Medhanie & Patterson, 2009; Zachary, 2010). In one case study, three out of four GED programs that were administered through community colleges were funded by local WIA boards to help move students to jobs and training (Mearns, 2010, p. 241). In 2009, over 700,000 people took a portion of the GED and 69% received their GED credential (Tuck, 2012).

There have been five different GED test series since the inception of the GED test: (a) the 1942 GED test series focused test taker outcomes on entry level employment and military
entrance accessibility; (b) the 1978 GED test series emphasized the real-world needs of adult learners; (c) the 1988 GED test series reflected the transition from the industrial age to the information age and focused on information technology, critical thinking, democracy and society, and college admission; (d) the 2002 series prepared GED seekers for entrance and advancement in the labor force; (e) and, the 2014 GED test series was designed to align with high school standards and career and college readiness standards to prepare more adult learners for college and open up the door for their career pathways (GED Testing Service, 2015). The current GED Testing Service is a joint venture of American Council on Education (ACE) and Pearson, and consists of a series of four content areas: mathematical reasoning, reasoning through language arts, science, and social studies, and is designed to match current high school standards and prepare adult learners for college and careers (GED Testing Service, 2013).

GED Programs

**GED testing centers.** The GED tests are administered by official testing centers that are governed by state and federal funding agencies yet have different policies and jurisdictions regarding entrance requirements, hours of operations, instructional strategies, resources, staff members, and test preparation materials, and some of these differences have been shown to affect achievement gaps on the GED tests especially in math (Medhanie & Patterson, 2009). GED programs are often used by individuals who were unable to complete their secondary education due to various reasons such as being incarcerated, aging out of public schools, and as a tool for entrance into the military (Gewertz, 2011).

**Funding.** GED preparation programs are primarily funded through grant money that originates through the U.S. Department of Education Adult Education and Literacy program that provides funds to states that filter down through local programs that provide adult basic
education and workforce literacy services (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). There are more than 2500 programs that provide GED preparation programs through various entities such as public schools, community colleges, technical colleges, libraries, and regional Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funded providers (Georgia Workforce Development, n.d.; Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014) Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, the initiatives are designed to invest in young adults to prepare them for post secondary education and careers with investments upwards of 1.9 billion dollars and over 1.2 million adults participated in adult education programs back in 2011-2012. The majority of the GED program providers provide free GED preparation classes, but differ in their delivery method: self-paced, teacher led, curriculum based, and use a variety of GED specific published materials available to assist GED instructors prepare GED students for the 2014 GED series of tests (GED Testing Service, 2015; Medhanie & Patterson, 2009).

In addition to providing free GED preparation programs, different regional WIA funded ABE/GED programs provide services that reflect the needs of their prospective populations. For example, some of the GED programs that are funded by WIA boards also paid for the eligible participants’ GED preparation books, transportation, childcare, and the GED tests (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Having access to GED programs is a consideration for individuals who do not hold a traditional high school diploma (Gall, 2014). The value of GED programs has been demonstrated by showing the outcomes of access to alternative education resources through previous research. For example, the value of the GED program was demonstrated qualitatively by Gall (2014) whose participants stated that they would not have been able to acquire their GED credential thereby furthering their education and future careers if
the GED program was not available for them (2014, p.46). Some GED programs are funded through government entities while some are supported through charity and volunteerism. For example, the GED program in Bowen and Nantz’s (2014) qualitative case study was supported primarily through donations and utilized volunteers as GED instructors.

**GED instruction.** Effective instructional practices in GED programs have also been studied. In 2010, Mearns used a case study to determine what constitutes exemplary practices in GED instruction. Mearns interviewed GED program administrators, GED teachers, and GED students in a case study at four different community colleges and found common themes that contributed to the description of effective GED learning environments (2010). The students in Mearns (2010) study perceived five practices that contributed to a good learning environment: (a) keep trying, (b) clear expectations, (c) work with others, (d) hands-on activities, and (e) modeling how to work out problems. The GED instructors revealed seven effective strategies: (a) keep trying, (b) work with others, (c) flexibility, (d) teach the basics, (e) real-life examples, (f) set goals, and (g) break up lessons into manageable parts (Mearn, 2010).

Effective GED teachers were described as ones that have superb communication and interpersonal skills, and have the ability to work with diverse student populations (Wade, 2011; Vanuatu Institute, 2011). Based on Wade’s phenomenological study on the attributes of effective GED teachers revealed that there are both innate personal and professional attributes that make up the characteristic of an effective GED instructor (2011). Wade (2011) find that attributes of effective GED instructors include: a sense of encouragement and motivation to their adult learners, instruction that is focused on personal needs, conveyed confidence in students abilities to learn, basic skills are broken down into mini lessons, and sense of a learning community was established.
**GED climate.** The administrators in a studied GED program did not identify themselves as formal school administrators; they communicated less formally with teachers and students and did not conduct formal classroom observations as often as a k-12 administrator according to Mearns (2010). Mearns (2010) reported that a common message communicated to GED students by teachers and GED administrators was that the GED credential should not be viewed as an endpoint but instead the purpose of the GED is to help transition students to college and jobs.

In addition to past studies on GED programs and GED teachers, another factor that emerged through past literature was the GED classroom environment. Another finding by Mearns (2010) was that the GED classroom environment was described as a good learning environment; participants’ descriptions included: (a) relaxed, (b) welcoming, (c) individualized, (d) sense of community, (e) measured outcomes, and (f) good rapport between students and teachers. Schwartz (2014) used an ethnographic study to explore the concept of the differences between the spatial environments of GED programs and high schools environments, and how those differences played a role in the participants’ success in passing the GED. Schwartz (2014) used the critical race theory as the theoretical framework to describe and interpret how the African American male youth participants’ urban high school experiences were thwarted by toxic urban school environments: “Bullying, guns, gang fights, general chaos, and tension permeated many of their high schools, and the young men reported feeling unsafe physically and emotionally” (p. 116). In a similar study, high school was perceived as Eurocentric marginalizing spaces counterintuitive to learning, and traumatizing due to the daily exposure of attacks (verbal, emotional, and physical) by peers and even faculty (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2012); thus, the GED school became a healing experience that induced reengagement in the
learning process because it was perceived as a place that was safe and comfortable (Schwartz, 2014).

The complexities of GED programs have been extensively researched. The GED program as a federally funded entity with different jurisdictions, rules, and funding sources was discovered and shared. Former studies and government agency documents that were gleaned elicited a better understanding of the parameters and dynamics of GED programs including the testing sites, funding sources, effective instruction, and climate.

**Comparisons of GED Recipients, High School Dropouts, and High School Graduates**

Within this literature review, contrasting viewpoints were found on the plight of GED recipients compared to high school graduates, and between GED recipients and permanent high school dropouts. In an older study, Cameron and Heckman (1993) set out to quantitatively compare the differences in long term education, employment, and wage income between high school graduates, GED recipients, and permanent high school dropouts. In their paper, Cameron and Heckman (1993) pointed out that the U.S. Census treats GED certificates and high school diplomas equally; but they suggested that GED diplomas were not equivalent to high school diplomas. In their casual comparative study, they determined statistically that high school graduates were more likely to attend four year colleges whereas GED recipients were more likely to attend vocational or technical trade schools; thus, they did not earn the same wages (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). Although the GED credential opened the door to college; Cameron and Heckman (1993) found differences for college attrition: Only 73% of GED recipients returned for the second semester at college while 95% of high school graduates returned.

In contrast, Penner (2011) conducted a study that compared the college performance between undergraduates with high school diplomas and undergraduates who entered college with
GED diplomas in a Nova Scotia college and determined that there was no difference for female and older students who had GED diplomas with college students who had high school diplomas: Males age 25 and lower did show a difference. Penner (2011) recommended that policies should support GED opportunities as a result of this study. Maralani (2011) similarly found that once the college degree is earned it pays off equally as well for GED recipients as it does for high school graduates.

In a recent dissertation, April D. Miles quantitatively determined that college students who enter community college with a high school diploma fared better during their first semester of college than individuals who entered college with a GED credential (2014). A statistically significant difference was found between the GPAs and the number of credit hours earned after the first semester for high school graduates who had higher GPAs and earned more college credits than that of their peers who entered college using a GED credential (Miles, 2014). Although there were statistical significant differences between the two groups during the first semester of college, there was no statistically significant difference found between the two groups for graduation rates from community college according to Miles (2014). In some cases, GED credentials afforded their holders the same benefits as the high school diploma rising to the top percent of income earners. One researcher deemed it the Bill Cosby Effect named after one of the most famous GED recipients whose rise to the top defies the odds (Cameron & Heckman, 1993, p.16).

**Comparisons between GED recipients and permanent drop outs.** In light of the comparisons between GED recipients and high school graduates, there were also comparisons between GED recipients and permanent high school dropouts. In order to determine the value of the GED, comparisons between GED recipients and permanent high school dropouts were
gleaned from the literature. Boudett et al. (2000) conducted a quantitative ex-post facto study on women who dropped out of school. In their study, they used the Bureau of Labor Statistics for data collection to research how women fared after GED certificate attainment. The research showed a statistically significant increase of predicted ten year earnings for women who earned a GED diploma to women who did not earn one (Boudett et al., 2000). Boudett et al. (2000) found that high school dropouts were more likely to live in poverty than people who earned their GED diplomas (Boudett et al., 2000): This sediment was echoed in the report by the U.S. Department of Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics (2012). Almost 98 percent of colleges accept the GED credential, and GED recipients earn more than twice as much as permanent high school dropouts annually (Mid-Plains 2014). There were similar findings for health outcomes such as depression and physical health: GED recipients fell in the middle between high school graduates and high school dropouts according to data (Caputo, 2005). In Caputo’s study, the GED was used as a predictive factor for life, health, and economic well-being (2005). In the quantitative causal comparative study, Caputo (2005) compared mid-life health and financial status of GED recipients, high school graduates, and high school dropouts using data from a 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 Cohort, and compared that data with the respondents’ health-related measures from 2002 interviews. Caputo (2005) concluded that permanent high school dropouts were more likely to live in poverty than those who acquired their GED diplomas.

**Barriers of the GED**

According to Cameron and Heckman all fifty states use the GED test as a resource for non-credentialed individuals: “By 1963, all fifty states use the GED exam to certify high school dropouts” (1993, p.4). Even though GED classes appeared to be so readily available to youth,
research has shown that barriers do exist for GED participation. For example, King (2012) conducted a quantitative study to look at barriers encountered by GED students and found nine potential barriers: (a) course quality, (b) perceived inability, (c) time constraints, (d) motivation, (e) family constraints, (f) logistical barriers, (g) personal priorities, (h) learning styles, and (i) physical barriers. Differences in participants’ genders and race in GED programs were also studied; statistically significant differences were found between female and male GED students and for urban and rural students (King, 2012; Van Horn & Kassab, 2011). Other barriers noted by King (2012) were family constraints barriers including: lack of family support, inadequate attendance, and lack of childcare. King (2012) made suggestions for GED facilities to involve families in the GED program, extend hours, and possibly add childcare services.

**Human Capital Gain Activities**

In addition to the connection between transformation through the GED and the high school dropout issues, another factor was that the GED afforded participants with credentials needed to engage in more human capital gain activities. Murnane et al., (1997) phrased this concept as “human-capital-enhancing activities” which is defined by increases in company training, non-company training, military service, and post secondary education when compared to permanent high school dropouts (p.2). Human capital gain activities postulates that the investments made in education will lead to human capital gain. For the most part, individuals do not have access to these human capital gain activities until they have credentials such as the GED diploma. For example, Penner writes: “Second chance options include the GED, which provides adults with the credential required to gain better employment and further education” (2011, p. 27). Likewise, in a quantitative study, Murnane et al. (1997) looked at longitudinal data from the
National Longitudinal Survey from the years 1979 to 1991 and determined that GED recipients had a greater probability for entering post secondary options such as military or college.

The main human gain impact from GED attainment is that it opens doors for participants to enter post secondary schools and the military according to Maralani (2011). The human capital gain theory grounded from economics postulates that through the accumulation of education, increases in performance, productivity, and capacity will result (Akinyemi & Norsasni, 2013; Becker, 1964). Thus, obtaining GED credentials may be considered a viable option towards human capital investments (e.g., Becker, 1993; GED Testing Service, 2014).

Some of the common constructs of the human capital gain theory include the following: (a) investments made in humans benefits the individual through increased income, (b) investments made in humans benefits society through economic growth, (c) investments in education help individuals leave the condition of poverty, (d) individuals begin to feel more capable of higher education that could help them change careers and possibly their lives, (e) money and time is spent for the sake of future financial and non financial returns, and (f) intellectual supply is acquired through education (e.g., Akinyemi & Norsasni, 2013; Becker, 1964; Blaug, 1976; Murnane et al., 1997).

According to human capital gain theorists, investments made in humans whether through the investments they make in themselves or through the investments made on their behalf will benefit both the individual and society (e.g., Akinyemi & Norhasni, 2013; Becker, 1964). Investments in humans can be considered abstract such as investments in time for going to school or searching for a job, or they can be more concrete such as money spent on health care or money spent on education such as: GED programs, professional learning, training activities, vocational schools, or higher education (Blaug, 1976). The benefits of these investments could
result in the individual’s ability to earn higher wages, better prospects in the labor market, and even nonacademic benefits such as health outcomes (Boudett et al., 2000; Song, 2011; Zajocova, 2012). Therefore, the theory supports the idea of individuals making investments through education such as ABE/GED programs to help individuals leave the condition of poverty (Becker, 1964).

**GED and Prisoners**

In addition to considering the economic human gain investments of being able to enter secondary schools or the military with GED credentials, another factor is the non economic yields gained through GED preparation programs in prisons that have shown to increase self esteem, improve family relationships, and reduce recidivism rates (Nuttall, Hollmen, & Staley, 2003; Thomas, 2013). Thomas (2013) conducted a qualitative research study on the perspectives of prisoners in a prison-run GED program. Through the study, it was determined that the participants’ intellectual development, writing skills, goal setting, and interpersonal skills were improved due to GED acquisition (Thomas, 2013). The GED was viewed as a positive change that lead the participants towards setting goals for future aspiration and for improving self-esteem (Illeris, 2014; Thomas, 2013). Nuttall et al. (2003) conducted a study to determine the effect of earning a GED on recidivism rates and found that people who attained GED credentials during incarceration had lower rates of recidivism than people who did not earn their GED diplomas. It was also determined that people age 21 or younger had an even lower recidivism rate when they earned their GED diplomas while incarcerated (Nuttall et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2000).

**GED and Transformation**
Besides the studies that tie the GED investments to human capital gain activities there were also a collection of quantitative and qualitative research studies reviewed on the GED and transformation. Both the GED and the concept of transformation is viewed as positive changes that leads to setting goals for future aspirations, improving self-esteem, and having positive outcomes (Stevens-Long et al., 2012; Tuck, 2012). Thomas (2013) demonstrated that through the prison GED program, participants experienced transformation in the following areas: (a) intellectual development, (b) expanded social perception, (c) goal attainment, (d) self-esteem improvement, (e) enhanced life opportunities, and (f) improved family relationships. Likewise, in a meta-analysis study on prison run GED programs the following was noted in regards to transformation of the participants: “Educational programs may have an advantage over work programs in this regard, for they are overtly transformative, that is, expressly designed to increase the knowledge and cognitive skills of participants” (Wilson et al., 2000, p. 364). Also aligning with the acquisition of new skills within the transformative learning theory, a quantitative pre/post experimental design indicated that after receiving instruction in writing strategies, the participants improved their ability to write expository essays for the writing portion of the GED exam (Berry & Mason, 2012).

Qualitatively, a narrative study of transformation of homeless Black women seeking their GED yielded three main findings: (a) the women’s ways of knowing, (b) construction of knowledge, and (c) transformative learning (Bridwell, 2012). Bridwell (2012) noted that the women in her study appeared to have experienced increased self-esteem, inspired to help other low-income women, had new perspectives as role models for their children, and became better advocates for their own rights as a result of participation in the GED program. Furthermore, the narratives revealed that the participants learned how to get information and how to broaden their
knowledge (Bridwell, 2012). The connection between reductions in recidivism also points towards a transformative learning experience brought about through participation in GED programs (Nuttall et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2000). Thus, some people who participated in a GED program in prior studies appeared to have experienced transformative learning (Bridwell, 2012; Nuttall et al., 2003; Thomas, 2013; Tuck, 2012).

Transformation has different meaning to different people; within the research community, transformation is considered a “moving target” (Snyder, 2008). For example, transformation can be defined by the phases of transformative learning, shifts in thinking, acquisition of new skills, increased autonomy, discovery of new talents, or social emancipation (Snyder, 2008; Stevens-Long et al., 2012). “Transformative learning involves profound shifts in our understanding of knowledge, the world, and ourselves” (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007, p.267).

The participants in this study were young adults, all of whom are former high school dropouts, in a GED program who have shared the experience of transformation. Their true transformative experiences could only be described once preconceptions from the outside were set aside; thereby allowing the essence to emerge from the participants themselves (Husserl, 1925/2011; Moustakas, 1994).

The Value of the GED

The worth or value of GED programs and the GED credential have been studied. There were economic and non-economic values attributed to the GED based on findings from past research on the GED. Economic benefits have been shown such as annual increases in wages by $3500 per year after earning a GED diploma reported in previous studies (Bowen & Nantz, 2014; Song & Patterson, 2011). Various studies were conducted to determine the worth of the GED credential. Studies on literacy gains through GED programs have also been researched.
For example, one researcher who conducted a case study determined that literacy gains can be viewed as a financial resource because literacy afforded female participants of a women’s adult learning center with access health, social, economic, political, spiritual and as a way to further the education and careers of GED recipients (Brandt, 2001). The participants in another study revealed that literacy gained by earning the GED credential was perceived as stepping stone to more education, jobs, and careers (Bowen & Nantz, 2014). The emancipatory quality of GED attainment to move out of poverty was considered a value by some participants. For instance, Tuck (2012) found that urban youth place high value on the GED because GED attainment was perceived as a way to help escape an inadequate school or bad situation and was perceived as a way to open access to college.

Anticipated economic values of the GED have been empirically shown to promote returns on time and money investments towards earning a GED credential through more job opportunities, promotions, and careers (e.g., Cao et al., 1996; Caputo, 2005; Penner, 2011; Song & Hsu, 2008). In previous studies, it was theorized that non-economic values (ones that are hard to quantify such as happiness, hope, and self-esteem) also occurred as a result of the economic gains experienced by the GED holders. For instance, the greater economic status experienced by many GED earners correlated with those same individuals more likely to become home owners, adopt healthier lifestyles, go on more family outings such as vacations, museums, and sporting events and other enriching activities thereby experiencing unquantifiable outcomes from the GED program (McLendon, Jones, & Rosin, 2011).

Values other than economic ones associated with earning a GED diploma and participation in a GED program were determined by Bowen and Nantz (2014). For example, participants in the study shared increased participation in political and community activities such
as passing citizenship exams, acquiring drivers licenses, and becoming volunteer mentors; increasing family literacy by reading books to their children, gaining library cards, and learning about health and diet through reading (Bowen & Nantz, 2014). Bowen and Nantz’s participants reported feeling stagnant in jobs and in their socioeconomic status before the GED program and reported having feelings of better lives for them and their children after the GED program (2014).

In an older study, Bingman, Ebert, and Smith (1999) reported data from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants in Tennessee (Merrifield, Smith, Rea, & Shriver, 1993) that determined positive effects from participation in adult basic education programs including: (a) greater self-esteem as measure by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, (b) gains in employment, (c) community involvement, and (d) literacy practices. Literacy skills gained by GED programs were shown to transfer to the workplace in an expansive report of changes in individuals’ lives who participated in adult literacy programs (Bingman et al., 1999). Likewise, Bingman and Ebert (2000) found that individuals have increased pride, confidence, described feeling better about themselves, and gained interpersonal skills through a GED program.

**Debate of equivalency to high school diploma.** There were differing opinions of the value of the GED in the labor force. Cameron and Heckman (1993) studied the equivalency of the GED credential to that of the high school diploma, and used longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY 1979) to challenge the equivalency factor of the GED. In the past, GED stood for General Equivalency Diploma. Cameron and Heckman (1993) challenged the equivalency of the GED and through their findings determined that GED earners earned lower wages, were less likely to attend four year college, had lower scores on military entrance exams, and experienced more time unemployed as their high school graduate peers.
Cameron and Heckman’s overall conclusion from their study was that GED earners were statistically no different than high school dropouts and that GED programs do not produce fiscal returns that warrant government investments (1993).

At the time of their article the GED tests measured non-relevant standards that were valued by employers (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). In light of the changes to the GED tests that took place in 2014 (GED Testing Service, 2013) whereby the standards and outcomes of the tests have been aligned to match high school standards and College and Career Ready standards, Cameron and Heckman’s (1993) study has become more of a historical document. Perhaps, a similar study like Cameron and Heckman’s (1993) can be conducted to determine the equivalency of the GED diploma to the high school diploma after the 2014 changes to the GED tests were made.

**GED value as a passport to post secondary options.** Most individuals cite reasons they chose to attend an ABE/GED program as educational ones such as access to college, technical programs, or employment ones such as increasing odds of obtaining employment or progressing on the job (Carbol, 1987; McLendon et al., 2011). The majority of colleges and technical schools (close to 98%) accept the GED as a credential as part of admission requirements (Mid-Plains, 2014). Another reason many individuals obtain GED credentials is to enter the military.

For this literature review, I searched the eligibility requirements for all of the United States armed forces for using the GED diploma as a credential to enlist for new service members. As of this writing, the United States Army and Navy readily accepted the GED credential as equal to a high school diploma on their enlistment eligibility websites. For example, on the United States Army’s general qualification webpage, the GED was listed as an accepted credential for enlistment for new active service members (U.S. Army, n.d.). Likewise, the
America’s Navy website included the GED along with a high school diploma as one of the education requirements for enlisted members as entry requirements for new service members (America’s Navy, n.d.). The United States Coast Guard accepted GED diplomas as a credential to enlist under special circumstances (U.S. Coast Guard, 2015). On the enlisted overview link of the U.S. Air Force website, individuals with GED diplomas must also have 15 college credit hours in order to enlist in the Air Force (U.S. Air Force, 2014). The Marines was the only branch of the armed forces during this review of literature that excluded the GED diploma as a credential on their chart of requirements to join the Marines (Marines, 2015). Thus, all of the armed forces except for the Marines accepted the GED as of this writing to meet enlistment requirements for new service members.

**Emancipatory value of GED programs.** In addition to the outcomes realized through the GED program, GED classroom environments have been shown to reengage minority learners. For example, Schwartz (2014) used the critical race theory concept of spatial elements to describe how the GED program became a *counter space* or the antithesis to the racial unfairness experienced by minorities in many educational institutions; the four factors that contributed included: (a) *place*-the GED classroom was perceived as safer and more comfortable; (b) *temporal*-GED students participated in discussions that brought an awareness to shared institutional racial injustices; (c) *intrapersonal*- GED students were provided time to reflect and read silently in contrast to noisy and chaotic filled high school classrooms; and, (d) *interpersonal*- the participants felt safe to share stories without judgment in groups during peer writing feedback and group discussions. Schwartz (2014) concluded that the GED program should be viewed as more than just a second chance alternative program, but rather as a valid...
choice to overcome social and spatial injustices that are often experienced by young African American males while in urban high schools.

**Abstract value.** In addition to opened access to college, careers, and jobs, and literacy as a resource provided through the GED program, there were also abstract values denoted from the GED. Although values such as self-esteem, happiness, and hope derived from the GED were difficult to quantify, previous longitudinal studies have determined that individuals reported having higher self-esteem, assumed more civic duties, enjoyed more cultural events, and adopted healthier habits (McLendon et al., 2011). Studley (2010) quantitatively looked at the non-economic benefits of several variables: (a) arrests, (b) cigarette use, (c) marijuana use, (d) binge drinking, (e) hard drug use, (f) number of sexual partners by coding each variable with a binary code the data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) survey. Studley (2010) used regression statistics to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the isolated variables for individuals who received the GED credential and with those who dropped out of school, and with individuals who earned their high school diplomas. Statistically significant decreases were shown in the number of arrests, cigarette use, marijuana use, binge drinking incidents, hard drug use, and sexual activity for individuals in the NLSY97 survey who earned a GED compared to individuals who did not complete school; for example, a 200% decrease in number of arrests was attributed to the GED credential (Studley, 2010). Studley concluded that there are non-economic attributes of the GED credential (2010).

Another researcher examined how seven GED participants perceived their self-confidence, motivation, and their view on learning after participating in a GED program through a qualitative applied research (Gall, 2014). Gall (2014) used cross case study analysis and determined that there was a propensity for participants to have an increase in self-confidence as
compared to their k-12 educational experiences. Gall (2014) looked at isolated outcomes of change that may occur by participating in a GED program, how those perceptions compare with experiences in traditional k-12 educational settings, and what parts of the GED program contributed to those changes. The participants in Gall (2014) who were adults that ranged from early 20s to late 80s did not necessarily credit the GED program for increased levels of self-confidence, but through thematic analysis were shown to have changes in their self-confidence after going through the GED program. Gall’s (2014) quest to determine how the participants compared their former educational experiences evolved themes such as family, peers, and disabilities that were perceived as barriers to the participants’ former schooling experiences. Encouragement from the GED instructor, pre tests, and practice GED tests were cited as aspects that contributed to changes in motivation towards learning and increases in self-confidence (Gall, 2014).

**Transformative Learning in Other Educational Settings**

Aforementioned is the fact that transformative learning is a theory that has been studied empirically, used in practical applications, and is still evolving (Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 2000). Transformative learning has been studied in a variety of adult learner settings. For example, international exchange student experiences with transformative learning were examined in a case study, and Choi, Slaubaugh, and Kim (2012) indicated that the participants found the international exchange program helped them to broaden their perspectives and have a greater awareness of self and cultural understanding. Volunteers’ tourism transformative experiences were compared using Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning; Coghlan and Gooch (2011) found that the participants experienced transformations in: (a) learning, (b) exploring options for new ways of acting, (c) building their competence, and (d) acquiring new
knowledge and skills for implementing plans. A qualitative grounded theory was used to develop a framework for teaching transformation in an undergraduate conflict resolution class by studying specific elements of transformative learning: disruptive events and critical reflection (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). Transformative themes emerged from a qualitative narrative study on transformative learning of nursing students in an associate degree program (Kear, 2013). The participants were assessed for transformative learning using the three major phases in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory: (a) disorienting dilemma, (b) critical reflection, and (c) changed meaning perspective.

Transformative learning theory was also used as the framework in a mixed method study to examine the experiences of perspective transformation in a professional learning development course in educational technology at the graduate level (King, 2002). Similarly, the transformational journey of career-changing women who were in STEM careers before entering secondary education careers through the Masters in the Art of Teaching (MAT) was explored with a qualitative case study using the three phases of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Snyder, 2012). At the opposite spectrum of education attainment from the GED program, the outcomes and processes of transformative learning were examined for participants of a doctoral education program through a qualitative study using self-administered questionnaires: Transformation was seen as an outcome and transformative learning as a way to shape the adult learner (Stevens-Long et al., 2012). In the Steven-Long et al. (2012) study on doctoral students, the participants were described as having cognitive, personal, and behavioral transformative outcomes by having changed perspectives, increased tolerance, and more resilience.
Summary

Through this literature review, connections to the high school dropout problem and transformative experiences through the GED were highlighted. Also, through this literature review, a gap was identified for this phenomenological study that described how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program. Key points derived from the body of literature on the transformative learning theory (Dirkx, 2012; Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008; Taylor, 2000) were brought to light. The theory was tied to this study by showing how individuals transformed through GED factors in previous studies (Bridwell, 2012; Thomas, 2013). An overview was provided of the high school dropout problem (e.g., Christle et al., 2007; Schwartz, 2014; U.S. Department of Education Institute, 2012). Also presented in this review was descriptions of how graduation rates are skewed that could hurt permanent dropouts through reductions in funding to GED programs (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Moreover, the consequences of increased number of dropouts were shown by revealing the magnitude of costs that permanent dropouts have on individuals and society (e.g., Rath et al., 2011; Stuit & Springer, 2010; Sum et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). The ways historically the GED diploma has provided individuals with the ability to enroll in the military and post secondary options were revealed in this literature review (Penner, 2011; Meeker et al., 2008).

Comparisons between permanent high school dropouts, high school graduates, and GED recipients were also made. While high school graduates were shown to fare better than GED credential earners, GED recipients were shown to fare better then permanent high school dropouts on both human capital gain actions (Penner, 2011; Maralani, 2011; McLendon et al., 2011) and transformative ones (Bridwell, 2012; Thomas, 2013). This literature reviewed was garnered for transformation in all areas of adult learning settings as a way to determine the
methods used in transformative learning research and as a way to look for the gap in the literature. Although both the transformative learning and the GED have been empirically studied over many years (Bridwell, 2012; Mezirow, 2000; Snider, 2010; Snyder, 2008), a lack of descriptions on how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program was demonstrated. For one, an argument was made to increase funding to handle the exponential growth of high school dropouts/GED seekers, and second the findings in this phenomenological study informed society, agencies, and citizens about the transformations experienced through participation in the GED program which could benefit individuals and society (e.g., Bridwell, 2010; Mottern, 2013; Tuck, 2012; Zachary, 2010) and society (e.g., Mottern, 2013; Tuck, 2012; Zachary, 2010).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The nature and purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED® program located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia. Within this chapter, decisions and procedures for participants and site selection along with the researcher’s role will be explained. The following will be described in detail: the design, research questions, procedures, data collection, and data analysis. Lastly, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations will be identified and addressed.

Design

The methodology of this study was qualitative using a transcendental phenomenological design. Phenomenology was appropriate because it served as the lens to describe the common lived experiences of GED seekers as they transformed from dropouts to GED students, and the transformation(s) that occurred during the process. The decision to use a transcendental phenomenological lens was that it allowed me to focus on describing the experiences rather than focusing on the interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Immanuel Kant’s version of transcendental phenomenology was a way of understanding “…things in appearance, that is, of experience, as the particular way of knowing…” (Aiken, 1957, p. 44). Thus, understanding a phenomenon can only be obtained by describing an experience in a particular space and time by the participants’ who shared the experience (Aiken, 1957). Furthermore, I utilized Husserl’s concept of bracketing out my own views and experiences so that the experiences were described from the participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Husserl 1925/2011; Moustakas, 1994). The...
data analyses processes described by Moustakas (1994) in phenomenological studies was used to present the essence of the phenomenon from the unique experience of the participants.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program. The following research questions were designed as a starting point to probe for textural and structural experiences of transformation:

**RQ1.** How did young adults in a federally funded GED program understand transformation?  

**RQ2.** How did participants describe their experience of transformation in a federally funded GED program?  

**RQ3.** What transformation(s) were described and perceived from the GED program?  

**RQ4.** What circumstances were involved with the experience of transformation?  

**Setting**

The site “GED PREP” [pseudonym] is a federally funded corporation located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia that provides accelerated GED preparation classes. GED PREP served GED students in three counties located along the Atlantic coast in the state of Georgia. These three counties are classified as both urban and small urban cluster areas based on the 2010 Census report (Georgia Department of Transportation, 2012). GED PREP supplies GED preparation materials, instructor-led classes, tests, and financial incentives for attendance and for successful completion of the GED. Minimum entrance requirements included age, income barriers, and test scores on the TABE. The contract was mandated through a grant that outlines objectives for at-risk youth, and money was filtered down through a regional workforce agency board. GED PREP typically served 50 youth per
year. Each class was 20 days long; the first week was a module on career readiness. The remaining three weeks were used to prepare participants for the series of GED tests. The main objective of the site’s organization was for 70% of participants to receive their GED diplomas within the contract year. Another objective was for participants to obtain jobs, to enlist in the military, or to enroll in post secondary school upon completion of the GED program. As part of the directive from the contract, each participant had (a) goals set, (b) case notes maintained, and (c) monthly follow up counseling notes for one year following the end of service date. Within the site, there was one program manager, one GED instructor, and one case manager/in-school instructor. I worked as an instructor in the in-school programs for the organization and as a case manager that facilitated work experience with local business work site partners. The programs that I facilitated were separate programs from the GED program and were designed for high school juniors and seniors. I was not the GED instructor at GED PREP but I did occasionally come in contact with the GED students when I happened to be in the office at the time of their enrollment or on other occasions such as when they were taking breaks from their class. Any prior knowledge of a participant was disclosed in the bracketing process and included in the findings chapter.

Participants

The participants consisted of individuals who volunteered to take part in the study that attended a federally funded GED program within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia and were referred to this study. Eight participants who experienced transformation through the GED program were included in the study for the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The participants were selected through a two-stage process: Beginning with asking for referrals from staff of the organization who were familiar with the
GED students then followed by a brief survey that self-rates the participant on aspects of transformative learning (Appendix A). Permission was obtained from the organization on official letterhead with the program manager's signature before the recruitment process commenced. A referral form (Appendix B) was hand-delivered to each referring person to complete and returned to the researcher. Using this two step process increased the validity and reduced researcher bias for selection of the participants (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A graphical representation of participant selection process to identify participants as experiencing phenomenon of transformation using a two stage filter process to reduce researcher bias (Baker, 2012; Snyder, 2008).

The participant selection process allowed the participants to self-attest to their transformations and increased the richness of the information gained on the phenomenon of transformation. In previous studies, participants were able to self-articulate their own transformation(s) because there wasn’t a standardized instrument to measure all aspects of transformation (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Snyder, 2008). Also, I used this participant selection process because it was similar to a prior study on spiritual transformation in which participants were referred for the study by individuals who perceived their transformation (Baker, 2012).
A total of eleven individuals were referred to this study; after three months of recruitment efforts, a total of eight individuals were successfully recruited to participate in this study. I recruited the participants verbally on the phone or in person using a recruitment script (Appendix C). As the instrument of data analysis, I determined that saturation was reached when no new codes or information was returned from the data during data analysis. I also established that saturation was reached when the coded data yielded information that began to overlap, themes began to repeat, and the findings became redundant (Mason, 2010). Although there is no standardized required number of participants prescribed in phenomenological studies, I held out for a minimum number of eight participants in order to collect a sufficient amount of data to uncover different perspectives and experiences with the phenomenon while also reaching sufficient depth. Creswell (2013) recommended a range of five to 25 participants and Morse (1995) recommended a minimum of six participants for phenomenological studies. I analyzed the data further to uncover new different aspects of the participants’ experiences until I felt confident that saturation was reached.

I scheduled the eight individuals individually to meet me at the GED site or at another agreed upon location to discuss the research, answer questions, and go over the consent form as defined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, and obtained informed consent. The participants ranged in ages (18-22) and had documented barriers as defined by the funding agency; court mandated GED seekers were excluded from the study. The participants included current and former GED clients in the funded GED program. All participants entered the program by meeting a minimum score on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) (McGraw Hill, 2015). The TABE is commonly used by GED facilities to determine the reading and math levels of GED seekers. At the GED program used for this study, the minimum TABE score was
set to 7.4 for both the math and reading levels which is equivalent to seventh grade fourth month upon entry into the program. The participants included individuals who were out of school for at least six months which allowed enough time to pass for the students to go through a transitional time period between withdrawing from a traditional school and enrolling into a GED program. The decision to delimit participants to this time period is because the participants may be out of traditional school long enough to get more information on the phenomenon of transformation. Because one of the challenges of this study was defining transformation, the sampling procedures allowed for participants to be referred to the study from other people who have witnessed their transformations (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Mezirow, 2000) then by having the participants self-attest their transformation through a brief researcher-created survey (Appendix A) that was administered after the participants gave informed consent (Appendix D). Identification of participants who have experienced transformation in this two step process aligned with the phenomenological aspect of ideas, intuition, perspectives, and judgment (Husserl, 1925/2011; Moustakas, 1994) and allowed the participants to describe how they understand transformation and served as part of the data body.

**Procedures**

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before conducting the study see (Appendix E). Participants were identified as having experienced transformation through the GED program through a two step process: a referral from a GED instructor or the GED program manager (Appendix B) followed by a brief self-attest survey of transformation (Appendix A) completed by participants who gave informed consent (Appendix D). At the initial meeting, I verbally went over the informed consent form (Appendix D) and encouraged the participants to ask questions reminding them that their participation in the study was voluntary, confidential,
and that the interview would be audio recorded. The participants were provided with a copy of the consent form. The surveys were completed in person soon after the consent form was secured because the surveys were part of the screening process for the study (Figure 1).

Preconceptions of the phenomenon, the GED, and the participants were disclosed up front and throughout the study. Three forms of data collection were used in this study: interviews, a focus group interview, and documentation. I transcribed the interviews verbatim. The interviews were validated by going back and forth to participants with a hard copy of the transcribed interview to allow their input on my interpretation (Buchbinder, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I employed the data analysis approach as described by Moustakas (1994) by highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes using Atlis ti software, delineating units of meaning, then clustering those units of meaning together to form themes. Common themes and unique themes were extracted. A textural description, the “what” they experienced with transformation, and structural description, the “how” the experience happened were synthesized into a composite (the gestalt) that presented the essence of the phenomenon (transformation) to its own meaning from the unique experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Husserl 1925; 2011; Moustakas, 1994). Because each participant experienced transformation in a non identical way to other participants within this study, the knowledge reported resulted from the lived experiences that emerged and later synthesized into an essence of meaning (Abawi, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

The Researcher's Role

My role as the researcher was to obtain permission from the IRB, solicit referrals, recruit volunteers for the study, suspend my judgments, disclose my bias, gain consent from the site and the participants, collect data, analyze the data, and synthesize the data into a written essence of the phenomenon: transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program.
located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia. The interest in the phenomenon grew from perceptions of transformations that I believed to be seen in students at a GED program. The desire to know more about the phenomenon also grew through personal experiences such as: A husband who earned his GED credential years ago and went on to earn a Master’s degree and seeing young adults search for the GED diploma as a way to turn around their lives. These intuitive thoughts and encounters were inspirations for describing how young adults transform through participation in a federally funded GED program (Moustakas, 1994).

Because an important step in phenomenology is the Epoche, another role was to bracket out fixed ideas of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This was accomplished by writing my perceptions and bias throughout the study and by using a third party referral participant selection process. I was the instructor at the in-school youth programs funded by a WIA program and taught in the county to the north and the county to the south where GED PREP site is located: I was not the GED instructor at GED PREP and was not the GED instructor for the participants in this study. I bracketed out any prior knowledge that I had of participants in more detail in chapter four.

**Data Collection**

Triangulation was used during data collection to acquire rich, thick, in-depth information. Rigorous and varied data collection techniques were employed including: (a) interviews, (b) focus group interview, and (c) documentation (Abawi, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1984).

Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with participants using open-ended questions that were broad and general in nature so that participants could describe how they were transformed and the processes they went through (Moustakas, 1994). An interview protocol was created similar to the one in the Moustakas text.
(1994). The interview protocol included the time, date, place, name of interviewer, name of interviewee using a pseudonym, and the questions as described in Table 1; the interview was recorded using a microphone through Audacity on a laptop that was later transcribed verbatim by myself. Before conducting the interviews, the program manager reviewed the questions and pilot interviews were conducted to make sure of word clarity (Milacci, 2013). The interviews were conducted at a private location that was mutually agreed upon. After the first three interviews were conducted, I realized that the interview questions were not eliciting enough information; I consulted with one of my committed members who critiqued my interviewing skills, commented on the interview questions, and provided a resource for collecting and interpreting qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The interviews that followed the intervention were more in-depth and yielded more information: Three of the participants were interviewed twice. According to Moustakas (1994) it is best to begin with two broad questions that ask what the participants have experienced in terms of the phenomenon and the contexts or situations that have influenced their experiences with the phenomenon; it is also appropriate to ask other open-ended questions or probing questions for a deeper understanding (Creswell, 2013: Moustakas, 1994).

Table 1

*Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
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*Transformation from the GED*

1. What have you experienced from the GED program?
2. What will the GED mean for you?
3. What was it like for you to become a GED student?
4. How did/do you feel about your circumstances or life in general now that you completed the GED program?
5. How have you changed after participating in the GED preparation class?
6. What circumstances have influenced you to become a GED student?
7. What was the process like for you?
8. What do you plan to tackle next?
9. What plans do you have for your future?

Moustakas (1994) suggested that participants should only be asked two broad questions to get to the textural and structural description of their experience; thus question one was developed with this in mind. Question two was designed to reveal whether the participants went through the transformative learning phase of integrating back into society with new perspectives such as feeling more capable of higher education that may lead to change in careers and possibly their lives (Dirkx, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). Research has shown that people who receive a GED credential fare better in society than permanent high school dropouts through having an equal chance at college as well as an increase in economic and non-economic outcomes (e.g., Bickerstaff, 2009; Maralani, 2011; Meeker et al., 2008; Mid-Plains, 2014; Penner, 2011; Zachary, 2010). Question two was also designed to elaborate on the emancipatory aspect of transformative learning (Taylor, 2000).

Questions three and four were stated in such a way that allowed the participants to make meaning of their own experiences (Bridwell, 2012); furthermore, these questions allowed the
participants to reveal several of Mezirow’s phases of transformation: (a) experienced a disorienting dilemma, (b) underwent self-examination, and (c) conducted a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2000). These questions led to answers that revealed how the participants transformed, and highlighted whether they have explored options for new ways of acting, building competence, and increased their self-confidence in new roles as part of the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 2000).

Questions five and six were constructed so that the structural descriptions could be exposed (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, these questions allowed the participants to divulge other components of the transformative learning phases on how they: (a) shared and analyzed personal discontent and similar experiences with others, (b) acquired knowledge and skills for action, and (c) tried new roles and assessed feedback (Mezirow, 2000). Also, circumstantial layers were revealed with these questions (Gurwitsch, 1966). Question seven was designed to ask the participants to recall the processes they encountered during the GED program. It was worded in such a way that allowed for an open interpretation of what those processes meant for each individual thereby allowing for probing questions to further understand the participants’ understanding of transformation. Questions eight and nine were similar in nature, and were designed to determine the short term and long term goals of the participants after they have completed the GED program.

Focus Group

A focus group interview was conducted at a private location in a central part of the same town as GED PREP and was scheduled on a day and time that all of the focus group participants agreed upon. The focus group interview was conducted after each participant had the
opportunity to member check their individual transcribed interview. The five members who participated in the focus group interview engaged in critical discourse revealing their shifts in consciousness and brought new information into focus (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012; Dirkx, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). The focus group questions outlined on Table 2 were designed to enable the participants to share and analyze personal discontent and similar experiences with others (Mezirow, 2000) and to look at the transformations within social and cultural constructs (Dirkx, 2012).

Table 2

*Focus Group Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformation from the GED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What does or will it mean for you to obtain your GED?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In what ways has your life changed because of coming to the GED class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How did or will obtaining the GED affect you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What were the GED classes like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What circumstance influenced you to become a GED student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What was the process like for you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Documents
Field notes were kept for interactions and insights that came about during the study and for the bracketing process in the form of a research journal. Supplementary documentation included changes made to initial interpretations of the interviews through member checking and peer reviewer comments. In addition, the surveys (Appendix A) used at the beginning of the study as part of the participant selection process were included as part of the data because these surveys provided additional documentation of the participants’ perception and understanding of their transformation through the GED program.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis used in this study resembled the approach spelled out by Moustakas (1994) for transcendental phenomenological studies. The first step was to bracket out preconceptions. Bracketing was conducted by disclosing my opinions and prior knowledge on: (a) the phenomenon of transformation, (b) the site, (c) the GED program, and (d) the participants that volunteered for the study. I bracketed my personal bias by maintaining a research journal during the study and by writing a full account of interactions with each participant in the findings chapter (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were transcribed verbatim by me. Utilizing ATLIS computer software, significant statements, sentences, or quotes were coded as part of the horizontalization step of data analysis by treating the statements as having equal worth (Moustakas, 1994). Extreme care and diligence was given to the coding process by intentionally slowing down the process and immersion in the data. As I coded the data, I continued to remind myself of the purpose of my study: To describe how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program. I pushed aside my inner voice, and instead listened to what the participants were saying about their experiences. After rigorously conducting multiple passes of the data during the coding process, the significant statements
began to magnify and present themselves. I extracted significant statements and grouped them into units called “meaning units” of common and unique themes (Moustakas, 1994). During the writing process, I distilled the meanings further using the free imaginative variation process by making decisions as to which of the themes were essential for describing the phenomenon (Kleiman, 2004). Using a refractive lens view in phenomenology Abawi (2012), the phenomenon was brought in and out of focus from different angles and synthesized from multiple perspectives from the participants who experienced the phenomenon (Abawi, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

The diverse participants’ experiences were woven and displayed into textural and structural themes (Moustakas, 1994). The themes and subthemes were written in a detailed manner to provide a rich account of their experiences reflecting a given time and place so that the description of the phenomenon could provide relevancy to other settings (Carlson, 2010). A composite of the textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to depict the essence of the transformation into its own meaning (Husserl, 1925/2011; Moustakas, 1994). Because of the multifaceted character of the data and interpretations, the essence was written using a fusion of creative and academic writing style, so that the shared interpretations of the participants’ inner thoughts could be revealed (Denzin, 1984).

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several techniques were employed such as: triangulation, member checking, peer review, field notes, clarifying researcher bias, and a thorough write up using thick, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1984; Milacci, 2013).

**Triangulation.** To increase credibility, triangulation was used by collecting multiple levels of evidence from different viewpoints and at different times authenticating the emergent
essence of the phenomenon of transformation through the GED program (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three methods were used to collect data: individual interviews, a focus group interview, and documentation in the form of research journal.

**Member checking.** As a vital part of credibility and validation, I met with the participants individually to member check a hardcopy of their transcribed interviews. Each participant was provided an opportunity to verify the text for accuracy, to withdraw their words, and to add input to the emerging themes (Buchbinder, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants in the focus group interview were also given an opportunity to member check their portion of the focus group interview individually before incorporating the focus group interview text into the data body for analysis. To protect the authenticity of the inner world perspective of multiple participants, member checking was conducted primarily at the beginning of the data analysis phase as early themes began to emerge and any changes that came during the member checking process was acknowledged in the narrative account (Buchbinder, 2011; Carlson, 2010).

**Peer review.** Validity was increased through peer review from my committee who provided external confirmation and critique throughout the research progression (Creswell, 2013). Documented logs of the peer review sessions were maintained in the form of printed emails and in written comments in my research journal.

**Field notes.** To gain a better insight into the phenomenon, notes and ideas were written down as they happened during the data collection and data analysis phase. These reflective moments that came about during the study became part of the data body (Abawi, 2012). To increase transferability and confirmability, these field notes served to outline the process and situations that arose during the study providing documentation of the constructed knowledge that
arose from the study and were written down in the form of a research journal (Abawi, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The research journal is a 3-ring binder that contains journal entries, printed emails of peer review comments from dissertation committee members, my reflective thoughts, memos, and field notes. The research journal will be destroyed after three years. The topics of the journal entries include: (a) field notes, (b) member checked transcribed interviews, (c) peer reviewer comments (primarily in the form of printed emails), and (d) surveys (Appendix A). The participants did not write in the journal. The journal entries were written in a way that strips all of the personal identifying information for the participants by maintaining pseudonyms established earlier in the study and by storing the journal in a locked cabinet in the primary investigator's home office in a separate location from the coding book.

**Researcher bias.** To address researcher bias, I used bracketing throughout the study. Researcher bias was addressed during the participant selection process by utilizing a two step process that included third party referrals who referred individuals to my study using a referral form (Appendix B) and then having the participants self-attest to their transformation through the GED program using a GED Participant Program Survey (Appendix A); this two stage participant selection process prevented pre-selection of the participants (Figure 1). To increase the dependability and trustworthiness, my opinions were included in the study up front allowing the reader to have a window into my paradigms within the context of the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

**Thick, rich descriptions.** In order for the research to become meaningful, transferrable, and to establish credibility, the study was written using thick, rich descriptions as a synthesis of the textural and structural transformational experiences in a manner that detailed accounts of situations, relationships, and feelings from the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013;
Denzin, 1984; Moustakas, 1994). Rather than merely reporting facts, the narrative accounts were depicted with an unassuming and magnified detail that perhaps will allow readers to vividly relive the participants’ experiences (Denzin, 1984; Wertz, 2005). The essence of the experience of transformation was written as a detailed descriptive account of what and how the participants experienced transformation through the GED program, and finished with what Moustakas (1994) suggested by using a “…creative close that speaks to the essence of the study” (Creswell, 2013, p.228).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethics and other issues were considered throughout this study by: (a) requesting permission for published materials, (b) gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting research, (c) properly adhering to American Psychological Association 6th edition (2010) guidelines for citations and syntax, (d) following informed-consent rules, (e) outlining intellectual property of the study, (f) respecting the site and collecting data without disruption, (g) respecting confidentiality, and (h) participants’ privacy were protected by not sharing information and data was stripped of personally identifiable information, (i) securing records of IRB approval, site consent forms, and participant consent forms, (j) securing data in a locked cabinet and passwords were used on digital files, (k) pseudonyms were used while coding data, (l) submitting the manuscript for publication to only one journal, and (m) disclosing if anyone will profit from the research as specified by the CITI Program (2014) and Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (2015).

**Summary**

Within this chapter, the methodology of this qualitative study and phenomenological design were outlined and justified. The overarching research questions were stated. The setting
of the site was described in detail including the region and the specifics of the GED program’s organization. Followed by the description of the setting, the number of participants, participant selection process, inclusion criteria, and justifications were disclosed. An account of the procedures of the research was written in order of the process. My role in the research process was disclosed by sharing the actions that I took, and personal biases that I brought to the study. A detail description and rational was written concerning the data collection methods employed. Data analyses approach was outlined and rationale was shared. Methods used to ensure trustworthiness and ethical considerations were disclosed.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how young adults experienced transformation through participation in a federally funded GED® program located within a small urban area in the southeastern region of Georgia. The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) was referred to in this study. In the following section, common characteristics of the participants and a brief portrait of each individual participant will be followed by the textural and structural themes and subthemes that emerged to describe the findings as to how the participants experienced transformation through their participation in a federally funded GED program.

Participants

Eight individuals were included in the study after being referred and successfully recruited to participate in the study: Allison, Beth, Calvin, Dannaliah, Emily, Fantasia, Greg, and Harold. Pseudonyms were used to disguise the identity of the participants and to ensure confidentiality. The commonalities of the participants that were precursors to their inclusion in the study include: All eight of the participants ages (18-22) attended the same GED preparation program located in the southeastern United States. Prior to the study, all eight individuals met entrance requirements to become students in the GED preparation program; the eligibility standards were set by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding agency in the state of Georgia: One of those requirements was for participants to meet low income guidelines as defined by the state of Georgia. Before being invited to volunteer in the study, all eight participants were identified as experiencing transformation by a two stage filter process: Third party referrals (Appendix B) were used by GED staff members who witnessed and perceived the
individuals’ transformations, and participants used a survey (Appendix C) to self-attest to their own transformation using a researcher-created survey (Lawrence & Mitchell, 2014). The GED Participant Program Survey, to self-attest to their own transformation. The survey (Appendix A) used a five point Likert Scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to provide a cogent to include the participants in the study and to add to the description of their transformational experiences. The participants scored a minimum mean score of 4.0 out of 5.0 on their self-perception of transformational experiences through the GED program on The GED Participant Program Survey (Appendix A).

Besides the inclusion criteria, the eight individuals volunteered to share their stories and be part of this research with a startlingly eagerness, so much so that several of the individuals walked to the interview sites on several occasions in spite of transportation issues. One of participants, Fantasia, even came prepared to write an essay that she wanted to publish in the newspaper about how she has changed from the GED. All of the individuals provided signed informed consent, consented to being audio recorded, were given a copy of the consent form (Appendix D), completed the survey (Appendix A), and scheduled interviews at mutually agreed upon locations and times.

In hopes of painting a richer description of the phenomenon of transformation (Van Manen, 1990), vignettes describing background information, my interactions, and the beginnings of their experiences with transformation are depicted for each individual in the following section. These vignettes will hopefully aid as background information to how the themes, that will be discussed later, emerged.

**Individual Biographical Vignettes**

Although race or gender did not serve as criteria for inclusion, they will be included in
the portraits of the individuals to enrich the descriptions and to increase the transparency of my
own potential biases as I report the findings from this study (Table 3).

Table 3

*Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dannahiah</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Allison.** Allison is a 19 year old African American female. She was referred to this
study by both the program manager and the GED instructor. I knew from the recruitment call
that she had a newborn baby at home and that the time to be part of this study was precious. She
was handed the three page consent form to read; I decided to read it alongside her: Remembering
that it was not that long ago that she earned her GED credential. Allison seemed eager to start
the interview as if she could not wait to tell her story. The interview was conducted in a small
room inside the GED school after GED class hours. The room was chosen because it afforded
the most privacy. Allison was asked to pick a pseudonym name that began with the letter “A”.
She thought for a just a second and said “Allison” as if she wished it were her real name. I asked
her the interview questions as if reading from a script. She answered each question in a deep
soulful voice and smiled occasionally after her answers. Because the first interview was
conducted too quickly, from a lack of my own interviewing experience, a second interview was conducted with Allison a month later.

The second interview was conducted in a small reference room in the only public library in the county. The room was quiet and scholarly housing reference books, historical books, and photos. Allison and I had our own conference table. The rapport between us grew between the two interviews; we were both more experienced with the process. Armed with new interviewing skills, acquired after I met with one of my committee members to improve my interviewing skills in October, 2014, Allison and I completed a second interview that yielded a deeper story of her experience with transformation. In this vignette, Allison described circumstances that led to her decision to seek out a GED and the beginnings of her transformational experiences, “As far as circumstances, I got kicked out of school, I was pregnant, and I needed to get off my feet and stop being lazy cause I had a child that I was bringing into the world, and it wasn’t about me anymore: It was about my baby, so I had to do something, so I could provide for my baby.” In addition to describing getting kicked out of school and the influence of having a baby as a motivator for change, Allison describes her dilemma of not being able to find a job or getting into college, and a sense of a new beginning that came after the GED program, “Well before I got my GED, I couldn’t find a job, I couldn’t get into college, I couldn’t do anything without it so it’s a new beginning because it helps me get further into what I need to do: Gets me going with further steps.” At the time of her interview, Allison was working at a new job, and enrolled at college. Allison shared how being pregnant, getting kicked out of school, having a baby, and not being able to find a job or get into college, were part of the genesis of her transformation. Allison viewed her circumstances after receiving her GED as a more blessings, better circumstances, and things falling into place: “So, I would say circumstances, everything is
transitioning more and more, better and better, there are more blessing coming every day: Ever since I received my GED, everything is just falling into place.”

**Beth.** Beth is a 22 year old African American female. Like Allison, two separate interviews were conducted before gaining enough information. Beth is one the participants who did not have her GED credential, but was referred by the GED instructor and the GED program manager as experiencing transformation. Beth had been coming to the program on and off for over two years since 2012. The reason that it took Beth so long to enter the GED program was because she didn’t earn a sufficient score on the math portion of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) test as part of enrollment requirements by the GED program in this study. Beth attended remediation with the GED instructor in order to get a high enough score to become a GED student. She made it into the GED preparation class towards the end of 2013. The GED series of tests and instructional materials were changed on January 2014 (GED Testing Service, 2015). At the GED program site of this study, there was a push to get all former GED students to complete their tests prior to the change because they were required to retake the entire series of GED tests if they missed just one part of the GED test. Beth passed all but one of the 2013 GED test series; therefore, Beth had to retake the entire GED series of tests over, yet remained persistent in her effort to earn her GED. In full disclosure, it was Beth that made me curious whether the mere participation in the GED program rather than just the GED credential could be a catalyst in transformational experiences.

Beth consented to take part in this study and scored her survey: Self-attesting with all fives indicating that she strongly agreed with the transformation statements. Beth also selected her pseudonym. Like Allison, Beth seemed happy with the name she chose; in fact we had a discussion prior to the interview about how she would like to change her name for real. The first
The interview was conducted at the GED school after business hours. The following is a description of her excitement to become a GED student:

To become a GED student was very exciting for me because before I wasn’t enrolled in no kind of program, so to be enrolled in a GED program it meant that I will have a better opportunity and I will be able to step out and be independent, and it meant that I will learn new things, and the things that I once failed in, I would be able to bring em back up topped to game.

The above quote from the first interview highlighted the excitement that Beth felt about becoming a GED student. The location of the second interview was changed to increase the effectiveness of the interview by making sure that Beth knew this research was not part of the GED program. Other errors that were made from naïve interviewing techniques were corrected such as microphone placement and the use of probing questions. In the second interview, the microphone was moved off to the side, the interview was held at a sandwich shop, and Beth relaxingly shared why she sought out the GED program and the difference it made in her life:

Because before I just didn’t care; I didn’t care about school, I didn’t care about anything, but once I seen my other friends finish school and go and get good jobs; I wanted to do something with my life: I wanted to go to school and do better for myself. I didn’t want to do it because I wanted to do it: I did it because I knew it would make me a better person, and I would have a better chance of having a better life, and I’m glad that I joined, so the only thing that has made a difference in my life is the GED.

Even though Beth had not earned her GED credential at the time of her two interviews, she perceived and described transformational experiences. At the time of her interview, Beth
revealed a changed perspective, “Um, I’m a better person.” “And I stride, and I work hard to get it.” Beth was working at two jobs at the time of the interview. Later in the themes section, a more complete portrait of Beth’s transformations will be revealed.

**Calvin.** Calvin is a 19 year old African American male. He was referred to this study by the GED instructor after telling her how much his life has changed because of the GED program. After the GED instructor and Calvin’s encounter, the GED instructor called me at my home and referred him to this study. I immediately began the recruitment process. Calvin agreed to meet me at the GED school to do the interview after he got out of work. Although Calvin was friendly and smiled often, he did not seem to open up during his interview. I felt that perhaps it was because I am a middle aged Caucasian female. Our first interview lasted a mere three minutes and did not yield enough information. Although Calvin smiled after each response in that first interview, he answered each question as if he was doing a job interview: Answer done, answer done, smile, and repeat. During that first encounter, I felt like I did not know how to elicit more information from him. After leaving that first interview with Calvin, I felt horrible, and realized that I had to get better interviewing skills before I conducted any more interviews [I met with Dr. Lawrence, October, 2014].

About a month later, I interviewed Calvin a second time. I utilized the interviewing techniques that were gained through meeting with Dr. Lawrence, practicing probing questioning techniques, and reading the text by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) the second interview was more productive. Calvin opened up more about his experiences. He described his circumstances of how being incarcerated caused him to get behind in school, and how the GED program aided him in gaining his place back in society regarding his education:

> Uh, the circumstances of just the way the government is set up for people who
end up going to jail, and like just, you know what I’m saying, in jail there is no education going on, and like, the GED it helps you kind of get back in place to where, you know, you can go to college with people you went to school with instead of watching people leave, and then you… like… have to wait, and then you behind; now you have to work double the classes, and try to maintain a job and all when all you got to do is get your GED, and just suck up your pride.

Calvin shared that he had to set aside his pride to seek out the GED. He explained that he got into trouble as a teenager, and further described how the GED played a role in turning around his life, “Yeah, you know, and instead of being behind, I ended up being ahead because I ended up getting in trouble being a teenager, you know, doing dumb stuff, and going to jail, but when I got out, I went and got my GED, and it actually saved me from being behind; it let me actually be ahead.” Calvin was only seventeen when he was incarcerated; this next description bares an insight into the role the GED played in his transformation: After he earned his GED, he got money ($150.00 incentive for earning the GED), walked across the stage (a graduation ceremony for GED graduates) and a started a job the next day after his GED graduation ceremony, “Well before I got my GED, I was walking just gotten out of jail, and..um, trying to figure out what to do but after I got my GED and I got the little boost of money and then I got a job after I walked, walked across the stage: The next day.” Calvin shared his new outlook on life: “I have experienced the chance to be able to, be able to get financial aid, scholarships; you know just…um…a new outlook on life.” At the time of the interview, Calvin was working six days a week, and was in the process of registering to retake his American College Testing (ACT) test for his college applications.

**Dannaliah.** Dannaliah is a 19 year old Caucasian female. She spent most of her youth
growing up in the foster care system and in group homes. Dannaliah described how she was adopted, but left the adopted family after the adopted father passed away, “Um, I moved from Savannah because I was...um...technically I have an adopted family, and um...my dad passed away; technically my adopted dad.” It was a program that serves runaway youth that introduced Dannaliah to the GED program. It was upon her introduction that she began thinking about the future:

Um, where I was going through high school or in the group homes...um...I didn’t really think I wanted to do college, I just thought I wanted to do a minimum wage hourly job then with the GED I realized that I...it gave me some hope to further my education, it gave, I started thinking about what I wanted to do for the future, pretty much.

In the preceding biographical sketch, Dannaliah described leaving a bad situation, getting help from an organization that helps runaway youth, changing her outlook from wanting to just work a minimum wage job to that of going to college and thinking of the future. The interview was held at Dannaliah’s dorm at the college she was attending. Her pink and purple room was decorated in typical college freshman fashion. She eagerly showed off her pet mouse that she had hidden under her bed and an oversized printed scholarship check in the amount of $1500.00 from the organization that helped her after she ran away from her adopted home. At the time of the interview, she seemed to suddenly become aware of all of the things that she accumulated after coming to the GED program: She described going from owning a book bag full of belongings to an entire dorm room full of stuff:

… so it was a lot to move in one small little car; especially, since I accumulated a lot cause at first I had-I didn’t have a lot. I maybe had a book bag full and then it
turns into like two suitcases and a big hamster full, and oh no a hamper-hamper-not hamster. A hamper and then a big tall box, taller than me full of stuff. How do I get like this?

At the time of the interview, Dannaliah was beginning to realize her changes as a freshman in college. Her transformations will be described more in depth in the themes section.

**Emily.** Emily is an 18 year old African American female. At the time of her interview, she was a brand new mother with a three week old baby. She was in the maternity ward of the hospital during the first recruitment call. One of her relatives who answered the phone was going to patch the call to her hospital room, but I told him it could wait. A couple of weeks later, she came in to the office to show everyone her baby. I called her later that day using my recruitment script. The interview was conducted at a long term hotel where she was living at with her mom. A hotel receptionist called her room to announce my arrival. Moments later, Emily appeared out of a second story room overlooking an outside balcony, and signaled me up to her room. As I entered the darkened room, I noticed that her mom was sleeping in one of the beds while her newborn baby was sleeping on the other. Emily and I sat at a small dinette table during the interview where she disclosed how she saw the GED as her last option, and how it was the influence of friends and family that pushed her towards the beginning of her changes:

Hmm…I kind of seen it as my last option, and my, I have my sister, and my cousins, and some friends go to GED PREP [pseudonym] and that GED program and get their GED, and become successful with it, so that helped me out a lot cause I was thinking, I was kind of dreading it; like I have to go and get a GED and stuff, but hearing about and getting some positives about it, and like you know, it helps, and seeing them with jobs and stuff, and I was like: Okay, I can do
this, and so they told me about it and I went and I took the test and I passed, so I was like that was a big influence and a big help, so definitely friends and family were the main thing.

Emily continued sharing her insights, and spoke of how she went from initially being pushed to get her GED by others, to that of pushing herself. Emily vocalized how the GED program taught her to mature, “Um…it taught me like to grow up.” She also disclosed how she experienced a shift in thinking from not caring and wanting to give up to opening up her mind to the future:

Like opening my mind and stuff to the future cause I was kind of, I was kind of at the point where I was like I just want to give up, and I don’t even care, and I just don’t want to do it, and everyone was pushing me like, you know, get your GED and stuff, and there were some days I was just like-I don’t want to wake up and go; I’m going to just stay home, and they were like no you are going, you have to go, and I was like it’s just one day I’m missing, and, but I’m glad I was pushed and I was able to, but towards the end where I was like I have to go: I was like I want to and I’m not missing a day and stuff.

Emily’s description of the beginning of her transformation was at a time when she was experiencing the change of becoming a new mom. Later in the themes section, a more in depth view will be shared how Emily experienced transformation through the GED program.

**Fantasia.** Fantasia is an 18 year old African American female. She was pregnant at the time of her interview. Fantasia came through the GED program at the end of 2013. When Fantasia showed up to the interview, which was at the public library in the conference room, she came in with a notebook and exclaimed that she wanted to write an essay and publish her story in the newspaper. She explained to me that she really wanted to share her story because she was
felt so happy that she earned her GED. I explained the parameters of my study, and that I would be using a pseudonym. The following vignette highlights Fantasia’s previous feelings about school and teachers, and how after she got kicked out of school she came to the conclusion that she needed to seek out her GED:

Getting kicked out of school, and I was fighting all of the time, really didn’t care about the teachers cause I didn’t feel like they cared about me. So, when I got kicked out of school and I tried to get a job, and it was just like you can get a job until...it was just like working at...fast...you going to be working at fast food all your life or even: You can’t do anything without a GED or a high school diploma. Like, you can’t get a good job, you can’t make a set career, you always going to be bouncing from job, to job, to job, and with a GED it’s just like you can have a set career until you are ready to move up.

Fantasia went on to describe how she believed she changed into doing what she wanted to do, to becoming a stronger person, leading her to want her GED, and to wanting to succeed in life:

I’ve changed because...um...because it’s, it’s like, I got pushed to do what I wanted to do. I got pushed, it’s like, they made me into a stronger person, and like, they... it was like this is what you need to succeed in life. You need this; they drilled in my head: You can’t do anything without a high school diploma or a GED. So, with that being stuck in my head, it just encouraged me to want it, and want to succeed in life.

Fantasia completed the GED preparation class and obtained her GED credentials by the end of 2013. Towards the end of 2014, she was referred to this study by the GED instructor.

Fantasia disclosed her transformed view of herself when she stated, “So it was like…I would say
it was like they helped me become a better person because now I could; now I came through my GED classes, and now that I’m done with my GED classes I can go to college and not have to worry about anything in the past.” At the time of the interview, Fantasia was working at a restaurant as a hostess, she was about six months pregnant, and talking about her plans to go to culinary school after her baby was born.

**Greg.** Greg is a 21 year old African American male. I did not have many interactions with Greg before he was recruited to this study. Greg was referred to this study by the GED instructor. At the time of this study, Greg had not completed all of the series of GED tests needed to obtain his GED credential, but was still attending classes to prepare for the GED tests and staying after class with the GED instructor. I interviewed Greg in the conference room at the public library. In the following depiction, Greg shared how it was the birth of his daughter that made him want to change:

It’s just after I had my daughter it’s just everything just started sparking up. Things starting turning around; I almost gave up: I really did…I almost gave up. My daughter came at the worst time but made the best out of what I had, that, and that sounds so weird, but she came at the worst time but she made the best out of every situation, she made me strive to want to do better, she makes me strive to want to get this, and get that: I wouldn’t have nothing if it wasn’t for her. That’s how I feel…I, I give all of the glory and I give all of the thanks to her because she…her coming made me say: Well, I’m going to do this.

Greg revealed that his daughter influenced him to want to change. He described how he made the conscious decision that if he was going back to school he had to change his attitude in order to make a real change:
I just knew I couldn’t come back to school no matter what school it was I just couldn’t come back with the same attitude I left because that same attitude got me kicked out and that same attitude got me to the point where I was nothing. I felt like if I changed my attitude and changed my ways, something might come good out of it and it did; it ended up coming out real good.

Greg described how his life is up to him. He talked about taking better care of himself, and how he didn’t even like looking at himself in the mirror: It was as if he is was using the mirror to not only to tell about how he used to feel about himself, but how he used the mirror to reflect his wakeup call as he looked at himself in the mirror:

Yeah, I would just say it gave me the motivation to want to be better; want to better myself like starting to go taking care of myself, looking at myself in the mirror sometimes like, I used to not even want to look at myself in the mirror because I knew… it was just… I wasn’t happy with myself, I wasn’t exited about anything, but when you look yourself in the mirror and you understand the person who you is: Is the person you going to be… regardless. It’s up to you how you make your situation happen: You can make the best out if or you can make the worst out of it: Either you going to fly high and soar or you going to float low and sink. So, I mean, it’s just, it’s just a wakeup call like I said.

At the time of the interview, Greg was working at a restaurant and was still in the process of completing the series of GED tests. Along with Beth, Greg was referred to this study by the GED instructor who witnessed and perceived a change in him regardless of the fact that he did not have the GED credential.

**Harold.** Harold is a 21 year old African American male. Harold came through the GED
program in 2013 following his younger sister’s success earning her GED. During his time in the GED program, Harold impressed the program manager so much so that she placed him in two different work programs, and one of those businesses ended up hiring him full time after the work experience program ended. Harold described his decision to come to the GED program after a failed attempt with Job Corps and seeing his sister successfully earn her GED:

My sister she went to it, and she said she finished. And, it take I think like a couple of weeks: Like 3 or 4 weeks. And I was just like: I could do that cause it wasn’t as long as Job Corps. I wouldn’t have to sit a whole year just to relearn everything that I already knew. It’s like I just have to sit a couple of weeks; she’ll walk us through some of the stuff that’s going to be on the test, and I’ll be done. So, I guess some of the circumstances was like just the Job Corps circumstances, I guess that’s what made me want to do the GED program because I know anything else, I wasn’t going to finish, so I guess I made this a plan to finish.

Harold continued sharing how he felt about himself before joining the GED program. He described how he didn’t have anything to look forward to, but afterwards began thinking about his future and started to feel better about his circumstances:

I feel a lot better…umm…before it’s like things I was going through without my GED; it just didn’t add up. It’s like…umm…I guess you can say that I was a bad kid before I decided to go back to school…um…it’s just like I didn’t have anything to look forward to, but after I got my GED it’s like I actually started to get my life back together. It’s just I guess; I thought about what I had to do after I got my GED and stuff to better me and my family. So, yeah, I guess the circumstance is really good after I got my GED.
Harold briefly described his transformational experience, “Um” “It just” “I guess to make it short...(laughs)….it was a pretty good change. It just gave me whole different outlook on life. I don’t look at nothing the same way.” Harold elaborated on his experience by stating how he had a complete transformation through the GED program:

  Umm, I guess you could say that I changed a lot; um I’m actually like doing better. Like right after the program, I got a job. Um, and before it was just hard for me to keep a job; before, it’s just like I wasn’t motivated to do anything, but after I completed the program I got a job. I started to look at colleges and stuff that I could go to. Umm, I…guess I did a whole 180, I just turned my life around.

In addition to Harold experiencing a turned around life, he described allowing himself to see things differently: “Before I had a one track mind. Like, it’s just, it’s just like I looked at things I kept that way.” At the time of the interview, Harold was talking about a gaming company that he was forming, his future college plans, and making a life with his girlfriend and daughter.

A deeper insight into Harold’s experiences with transformation through the GED program will be synthesized later in the themes section of this chapter.

The preceding portraits of the participants provided a brief insight into the beginning of each of their transformational experiences: How they decided to go to the GED program, what made them decide they needed to change, and how they began to have different outlooks. In the next section, the resulting themes that were developed through data analysis will be described.

**Results**

The resulting themes that emerged from this study were described and categorized into textural themes (what was experienced with the phenomenon) and structural themes (how the phenomenon was experienced) then followed by a synthesis of the themes describing the essence
of transformation through a federally funded GED program. The textural themes describing what the participants transformed through their participation in the GED program included: (a) Transformation in Confidence, (b) Transformation into Autonomous Individuals, and (c) Perspective of the GED. The structural themes included how situations, circumstances, and context (Moustakas, 1994) the participants’ transformations were experienced through their participation in the GED program: (a) The GED Program was the Best Option, (b) Compared the GED School as more Positive than High School, and (c) Influence of Others to Transform.

**Theme One: Transformation in Confidence**

The first textural theme of transformation in confidence was shared by the participants explicitly or comparatively during the individual interviews as well as in the focus group interview. Participants revealed inner thoughts of coming to the GED program with feelings of doubt, insecurity, and lack of self-confidence that was transformed into feelings of faith in their abilities and confidence. It was during the member checking process that this theme came to fruition. The journeys towards transformation started when the participants enrolled in the GED program. Many of the participants entered the program with hope for change, with a hope for something different, something better than before, and that hope was placed in the GED program. Beth paralleled the GED program to a shelter that encouraged her to have faith in herself. With the beginning of hope, the participants’ feelings of insecurity and uncertainty transformed into believing that everything is possible: Their confidence had transformed by being motivated to believe in themselves. Although each participant’s experience was unique, there was a ubiquitous schema of change in confidence. Subthemes include: (a) self-confidence, (b) confidence in accomplishing goals, (c) confidence in future possibilities, and (d) confidence in education and job abilities. These subthemes reflect different areas of confidence that were
shared by multiple participants.

**Self-Confidence**

Transformations in self-confidence were verbalized explicitly by several participants: Beth, Calvin, Dannaliah, Emily, Fantasia, and Harold. During the focus group interview, the conversations by Emily and Beth yielded more insight into the broadness of the change made in confidence. In the focus group dialog Emily disclosed with the rest of the group members, “I feel more confident.” Beth asked Emily, “And, when you say confident, what areas are you more confident in?” Emily replied, “Um, everything.”

During his individual interview, Calvin summed up his transformational experience in one word: “Confident.” Calvin who was incarcerated in an adult prison for the latter part of his high school career described coming to the GED program feeling like he had lost his education. Being forcefully removed from high school due to his incarceration, Calvin regretted the loss of his high school experience. Calvin said that there was no real education program in the adult prison; he described how after he got released back to his home town and was walking around not knowing what to do. He found himself in the GED program where his confidence grew because he earned the GED credential in the same time frame that he would have graduated from high school. Calvin reveled in the fact that he had educationally caught up with his former high school peers in spite of his incarceration, “Um, way more confident; I love rubbing in people’s face.” Calvin furthered the description of his newfound confidence by telling how not only had he caught up with his former high school peers, but he also was considered one of the graduates in the family, “Uh, like I said before: Confidence, and just you know; it’s good going to your family saying you know: I am one of the graduates of the family.” Calvin’s uncertainty that he felt when he was first released from prison changed to confidence after he became a GED.
graduate.

Like Calvin, the growth in confidence was vocalized enthusiastically by Dannaliah, “I’m not decided on what I want to be yet, but I know I feel more confident now that I have my GED.” Dannaliah was in college at the time of this study, and as stated, she was undecided on her major, but Dannaliah was armed with new dreams, ones she did not have before the GED program because she didn’t even think she was going to college. Dannaliah described her self-confidence as going beyond confidence in her educational skills: She described a full embodiment of confidence:

I am more confident with things like in my classes now I can say: Yes, I learned this cause it was covered in the GED criteria before the test. Um…um, let’s see; I um, it, self-confidence too it’s helped me with- not just with my confidence in my education.

Emily, who made it to her senior year in high school before she withdrew from high school, sensed disappointment from her extended family members for not graduating from high school. Emily revealed that because other people would comment on how they could not wait to attend her graduation ceremony, her self-disappointed in the fact that she dropped out from school was amplified. Emily disclosed that once she realized that her family and friends were proud of her for earning her GED, she gained confidence:

I didn’t really think I was going to do it, and I was like just like having other people see it cause… like I know a lot of people was like, you know I finally made it: Twelfth grade. You know, and everyone was like: I can’t wait to go to your graduation and all that, so I kind of felt like dang. I kind of felt like I let everyone down, so to see people proud of me for getting my GED that was kind
of like-I got confidence.

Like Emily, Fantasia described the encouragement of others as a catalyst to her self-confidence. Unlike Emily, for Fantasia it wasn’t the encouragement of her family members that she described, instead she credited the teachers at the GED program as her source of encouragement. Fantasia compared her high school experience as one where she felt like the teachers did not care about her which in turn left her with a cavalier attitude towards school. As she began to attend the GED school and realized that she had the power within herself to make changes and because her attendance at the GED school was voluntary, she felt encouraged to transform:

  Before going to the GED school, I never really went to school, I just skipped school all the time, and just didn’t really care because I felt like the teachers didn’t care; I just felt like they were just there for a paycheck. I mean, but now, it’s just like now, being, when I was in that classes like either you going to do it or you just not going to be anything. And it was just like they want…they encouraged me to do it and it gave my self-confidence.

Harold, who obtained his GED credential expediently, described a sense of relief that he earned an educational credential. During his interview, Harold contemplated every question, and every answer was a labored effort as he searched through his mind to describe how the program had changed him: He concluded that because he had the GED, he had more confidence in himself to do things:

  Umm, it just made me feel better knowing that I have my GED. I guess it’s like I have more confidence in myself to do things. I mean it’s like; I guess the program changed me. It’s just like knowing that I have the GED and that. Like, I guess it’s just…I don’t know it makes you feel better knowing that I have some
type of, some type of education.

For some of the participants, their transformed self-confidence came about through earning the GED credential; for others, it was the encouragement of others. Their feelings of doubt and insecurity transformed to confidence as a textural part of several participants’ transformational experience.

Confidence in Accomplishing Goals

In addition to transformed self confidence that many participants described, all of the participants described transformed confidence in accomplishing goals through completing the GED program. Six of the individuals (Allison, Calvin, Dannaliah, Emily, Fantasia, and Harold) accomplished the goal of obtaining their GED credential while two of the individuals, (Beth and Greg) depicted a sense of accomplishment simply by completing the GED program. In the following narrative, Allison described experiencing relief upon earning her GED diploma. She depicted her accomplishment as a weight being lifted. Allison spoke of the tangibility of the GED certificate which served to remind her that she had accomplished a goal in spite of leaving behind traditional high school experience. Allison explained the sense of accomplishment that she finished her secondary school education, and could finally enter post secondary education:

I feel like a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders…cause now I have something to look at, I can open my GED folder and see my certificate in there which shows me that I accomplished something. I accomplished a goal; I finished the first beginning of school now I am on to my second beginning of school which is college, and then maybe I can further my education after I finish that.

For some of the participants (Allison, Beth, Emily, Greg, and Harold) their belief in the ability to
finish something they had started also transitioned. Allison’s use of the words *actually accomplished* in her narrative shed light into how she was surprised in herself that she accomplished her goal:

Let’s see…I finished; I actually accomplished a goal that I wanted to accomplish. Which was get something…a diploma, GED, something…to get forward to get to college. So, I would say; yeah, I accomplished furthering my education: To continue to further my education.

Beth also used the word *actually* in her narrative as if she was surprised at herself that she completed something. Beth viewed coming through the GED program as something that she conquered. Beth shared that it took her an extensive amount of time, almost two years, to complete the program (the program is a 20 day program). For Beth, merely getting accepted into the GED program gave her confidence that she can overcome bigger goals, “To become a GED student it made me feel very good about myself; it made me feel like very ambitious knowing that I can accomplish anything if I could just take this first step to obtain my GED.” Emily revealed how she felt hopeless before gaining her confidence, “I felt stupid and I felt like I wasn’t going to pass, and I felt kind of hopeless in a sense like I’m going to just be jobless and education less and stuff and I was just like.” Emily described a sense of nervousness when she thought that she was not going to make it through the GED program, and shared how her confidence grew after she earned her GED:

Cause I was nervous; I didn’t think I was going to pass at all, but getting it and like having it, and like it was confirmation that I can do anything as long as I put my mind to it and I study and stuff I can: You know, it was a positive thing for me-I was very happy that I got it.
Calvin reported a sense of pride for being able to participate in a GED graduation ceremony, and pointed out that his experience was just like *regular people*. This statement further provided insight into how being incarcerated and thereby hindering his education caused Calvin to doubt whether he would be able to accomplish his goal of graduating, “Um, for me becoming a GED I got to walk across the stage just like any other people who graduated; I got my robe, my hard back copy, and they ended up finding a Hope Scholarship, so I’m proud to say I got my GED.”

Once Calvin accomplished his goal of graduating he shed light on how important the goal of graduation was for him and the sense of accomplishment he felt: “Uh, accomplishment.” “Something that I can hold in my household, you know, saying that I graduated.” Similarly, it was Emily’s passing of the series of GED tests and earning her GED that brought about a transformation in Emily’s confidence in completing her goals. For Emily, earning her GED diploma was like earning her high school diploma: She felt like she graduated, “It means…it’s like, for me, it’s like confirmation that I like did it cause like you know when you graduate and you have your diploma and stuff; it’s just like, I made it; I did it. Like, I still feel like that’s my diploma, like that’s my GED, like I did it-I passed.” Emily wasn’t expecting to pass the GED test; she described how amazed she felt when she received the news from her mom who took the phone call from the GED school:

> It was great! Like, just I was just…I didn’t know what to expect; Like, I just went in there: I was nervous, took the test, and I just left, and I was just like: Okay what now? Then I got the phone call, and it was like you passed! And I was just like…Oh my goodness, I passed! It was weird; I wasn’t expecting that at all, and my mom actually got the phone call, and she told me, and like her face, and she was just so proud of me, and I was just like: This is amazing, like it felt good; it
felt like I was on stage getting handed a diploma.

The transformation in Greg’s confidence to accomplish goals involved more than just educational goals: He disclosed that after he dropped out of high school, he struggled to complete tasks. It was through the GED program that Greg realized that he could accomplish goals, and his confidence level changed. He described how he felt about accomplishing the goal of getting his driving license and enrolling in to the GED school where he emphasized by tapping on the table the words, *I tried and tried and then*, in the following:

> It will mean accomplishment. It’ll mean everything to me I’ve been looking for like I use to be struggling to get things accomplished. Like at one point, I was struggling trying to get me a license and trying to drive, but it was just like after I dropped out of school and a lot of things started going wrong for me. I tried, I tried; finally I ended up getting my license. Then, I tried and tried and then I finally ended up getting back in school, so it’ll just be a lifelong accomplishment like something that I can look back at later and be like: I did that…nobody had to help me…it’s a self accomplishment for myself.

Greg provided an insight on his low outlook on life: How he thought that he would never finish school or get a job. Being a GED student proved to Greg that he was able to do more than he thought he could do; Greg’s optimism about his future changed:

> It will mean something to myself like something that proves to me that I can do it that I’m not struggling like I thought was cause I really thought that I was at the bottom; Like, I thought that I was never going to get done with no school or ever get a job or ever do a lot of things, but I mean, I don’t know it’s looking up for me.
Dannaliah shared experiencing a transformation in feeling capable of self-actualizing. Probably for the first time in her young life as a ward of the state who was for the most part under the control of someone else, Dannaliah felt capable of becoming who she wanted to be: “I feel like I’m more capable of becoming who I want to be.” During the focus group interview, Beth who still has not acquired her GED credential, added that she was not finished accomplishing goals, “It kind of puts you in places in life, confidence, and I know that I have so much other, so many other things that I can accomplish…it just takes time and motivation.” In her individual interview, Fantasia contrasted her experience with individuals who earned their high school diplomas stating that she could still get scholarships with her GED just like a person with a high school diploma. Fantasia’s feelings of greater accomplishment came from being able to gain work and life experience earlier than high school graduates, “I feel way better; I feel that I have accomplished more than kids who got their high school diploma. Yeah, half of them may have scholarships and it’s not like I can’t get a scholarship; it’s like it’s not that I can’t get a scholarship, it’s just, I have, I have more life experience.” Harold described stalling from getting his GED because he didn’t think he would get through the program. Harold’s confidence grew after he came to the realization that the task of earning his GED was easier than he thought:

It was like, and I was like kind of stalled off of getting my GED for a while because I thought I wouldn’t get through it, so once I finally did it, and like she actually walked us through some of the stuff that was going to be on the test and stuff like that…I don’t know it was easier. It wasn’t; it wasn’t that hard.

For many of the participants, their confidence to accomplish goals waned, but through the GED program there was a shared experience of transformation in confidence to complete goals.

**Confidence in Future Possibilities**
Although their experiences were different, transformations in confidence in future possibilities was conveyed by all of the participants. The GED was viewed as the catapult for transformation in confidence in possibilities. Allison described her experience as having a new beginning because of being able to go to college and getting a better job, “A new beginning, better beginning, a better life cause now I have something on my background which is equivalent to a high school diploma because it is, so now I can start going to college and looking for a better job.” Beth revealed that her confidence grew knowing that her possibilities would be expanded through the GED program, “It makes me feel as if I can do this, there is so much more that I can do ‘cause I know that my possibilities could be expanded because of starting this program.” Beth divulged how the GED gave her an increase in faith in future goals and a chance at a better life:

Having the chance to go to college and just making a better life for myself, and just knowing that there are so many opportunities out there that I’m available to because I have something behind me such as a GED; knowing that once I complete the program, I’ll be able to step out and go forward because a GED or high school diploma is much needed now today.

Beth reflected on how the GED program made her feel complete, how it made her want more, and gave her an awareness of future possibilities, “A new step in life, a new phase in life, new opportunities, new goals, it just makes me feel complete. Having a better life, wanting more in life, knowing that there is more possibilities out there for me. I can start college now: I can…I have many possibilities.” Harold expanded on how his confidence in the future changed. Harold contrasted his life with and without a GED. Harold spoke of his future as having more chances or possibilities with better outcomes because of having his GED:
Um it made me feel like I had a better chance like to do the things that I wanted to do later on in life. Uh… like I could get like after college or whatever after I finish school… I could get better jobs than I would be able to do without my GED besides like part time jobs…. I could get jobs and make it my career and stuff like that. I mean, I guess it just gave me a better life.

Calvin elucidated his view of confidence by sharing is view for his future. He stated his life plan in an assured tone: Enter college, earn a welding degree, work at a welding company, and end up a millionaire by the age of 30, “College: My degree in welding and from there I’m going to work for a welding company. And, by the age of 30, I want to be a millionaire.” With an expectation for all things possible, Dannalilah described her confidence in the future gained through the GED program in the following statement, “It’s not only going to just help me in college; it’s going to help me go... hopefully everywhere I want that’s, that’s possible which is, is everything-hopefully.” Emily described feeling more assured in her future, “And, it was confirmation that I have a future and that I, I can move on and do stuff and be someone.” Fantasia explained that it was the encouragement she received from the GED instructor that promoted her growth in confidence to do more in life, “And, seeing someone want to let… knowing that someone want to see me succeed gave me the courage and the strength to do more than life.” Harold reported the shift in his view of opportunities, “There’s a lot more opportunities that I see now after completing the GED program.” Harold recounted a time before the GED when he didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life; then shared how his view for his future shifted to one with more opportunities for college, career, and business opportunities, “The, um… before I joined the GED program it’s just like I was going from job to job… I didn’t really didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I was just bouncing all over the place, but it’s like after, Uh, it gives me more
opportunities in life.”

The concept of transformed confidence was expanded during the focus group interview when Allison, Beth, Emily, and Greg shared their plans for the future. Emily discussed how her life changed due to the opportunities and her newfound confidence, “After getting my GED, my life has changed because I now have more opportunities, and I changed because I have confidence and taking on responsibilities of learning what to do with them.” Beth added to the group discussion by stating her plans for the future, “I plan to possibly go to college and start my career so that I can get my, a stable job: A well enough job so that I can provide for my family.” Greg furthered the discussion, “I’ll be able to make more money.” Then Emily added, “It’ll help me because I’ll be able to find a job and a career and help my daughter.” Allison described how the GED would help her have a better life and provide for her child, “I’ll be able to provide a better life for me, myself and my child.” Greg revealed how his view changed to a more positive outlook, “Um, I think things are starting to look up for me.” “I think like eventually I can see myself probably running a business or something.” During her individual interview, Dannaliah described her shifted outlook of her future; how she originally didn’t think she wanted to go to college, and how once she earned the GED she began to have hope for her future. Thus, the participants described a shared experience of transformation in confidence in future possibilities and opportunities through the GED program.

Confidence in Education and Job Skills

In addition to self-confidence, confidence in accomplishing goals, and confidence in future possibilities, several of the participants described experiencing transformed confidence in education and job skills. Allison described how her confidence grew in her job and educational skills after creating her first resume and gaining her first job through the program, “No, actually I
achieved getting a job through the program, and learned how to build my resume: I never knew how to do any of that stuff.” Allison continued by describing how she experienced developing work skills and educational skills through the GED program:

I experienced how to handle situations. Definitely I experienced working, building a resume, learning how to find a job, how to answers interview questions at a job correctly, it helped me build up my educational skills because math wasn’t a good subject for me, and it kind of helped me out with that…more hands on and focused.

Through a reflective stance, Allison became more aware of her skills and learning style. She described not only acquiring new job skills, but realized that she was also able to help others do the same. Allison recalled her list of new skills; then marveled at how much she had learned by finishing her thoughts with *I learned all that*:

I know how to do more things: I can help someone make a resume, I learned job skills as far as what to do on in an interview and what not to do in an interview, com., more computer skills, I can get on a computer and figure it out, what colleges would be best for me, what skills I have that I didn’t know I had like I’m cognitive and I’m more of a visual learner, so it’s good: I learned all that.

Dannaliah shared that she originally didn’t want to college, but soon after she earned her GED, she enrolled in college. She gained work experience through the GED program’s work experience program. Dannaliah, who was an adult in transition from foster care, found more independence living in a dorm at college: The dorm was a home outside of the state’s control. Dannaliah credited the GED program for her ability to go to college which allowed her live in a dorm; thus, Dannaliah was no longer a ward of the state, “It’s…for one it helped me get my
GED: I was able to gain work experience, and now I’m able to live in my dorm room and go to college.”

Emily equated her loss time of education after withdrawing from high school to that of a summer break; then she shared how she gained her confidence in her educational skills after passing the GED:

There wasn’t any school I could go to, it’s changed me a lot like I’m definitely more confident and like knowing that I did pass and study and stuff, I was like…aww…It just showed me like, it’s kind of like when you’re in school, and then over the summer you don’t do anything and then you finally go back to school and you’re just like…oh…like what am I going to do like I don’t know anything, and I wasn’t studying and stuff so it was kind of like that: I felt like I was going to totally blank out or something, but, I don’t know, I grew the confidence and I passed.

As part of their transformations in education and job skills, confidence in interpersonal skills was described by several participants: Allison, Dannaliah, Emily, and Greg. Allison explained that having to help other people and having to talk with other people during the GED program helped her transform into a *people person* in the following exchange between the participants (Allison, Beth, and Emily) during the focus group interview. Allison began the dialog, “I changed as a person because I don’t have a lot of patience, I don’t like dealing with a lot of people, so being in the GED program kind of helped me with that. We had to talk with each other, we had to help each other out in situations, so that kind of helped me become more of a people person.” Then Beth questioned her: “So are you saying before you joined the GED program, you were anti-social?” Allison answered, “Yes.” Emily agreed, “Yes.” Beth followed
up with another question, “And, is that working out for you?” Allison pondered, “I believe it’s about to come back.” Beth probed Allison a second time, “Then, why would you say that?” “Um, in order for you, so in order for you to um… go to college you would have some type of social skills, so are you working for it as far as preparing yourself for the college life so that you can be social?” Allison answered Beth and said, “Yes, I’m actually taking online classes for health service management with a Bachelor’s of Science.” Emily added to the discussion and said: “Online classes you don’t deal with people so…” Beth, who wanted to know more about Allison’s transformation and college experience asked, “How’s that working out?” Allison answered Emily and Beth, “Actually I do ‘cause I have live lectures with my teachers, and I… one of my assignments was to get in contact with my associate dean and ask him a couple of questions about issues that I had, and I told him.” Beth approvingly replied: “So, it sounds to me as if you are working on your social skills, so that’s a step ahead.” Allison concluded, “Hmm… yeah.”

While the dialog between Allison, Beth, and Emily illustrate how Allison understood her transformation in social skills, Dannaliah enthusiastically exclaimed how she transformed confidence in friendships during her individual interview: “I have a ton of friends now.” Dannaliah, who spent much of her youth in the foster care system, described a time before the GED program when she held back from fostering friendships. Dannaliah’s perception of friendships transformed after she completed the GED and began living on her own in a dorm room in college:

Before the GED program, my friends were far and few: I only had maybe two or three, and mainly I was holding myself back because when you make friends some friends like in high school they like sleepovers, and when you in a group
home or a foster home, you can’t really do that...So, I really mainly held myself back from that, and I always thought: Everyone was pretty much...when you say hi, and they are like: hi. They want to say oh, I want to be your friend, and I always thought that it was like some sign on my forehead or something that say: Oh, pity her she’s in foster care or she’s in a group home. So, I never thought that they wanted to be friends: My friends for me; I just thought: Oh they just want to do a charity case, and, and I mean most of my friends now ‘til this day say: I didn’t know until you told me... that you were, but you know at the time, I didn’t believe that, but now I do, I mean, I’m on my own, so that’s probably also helping it, but I mean, they’re not looking...I feel that they are looking at me for my personality and me.

Hence, many of the participants described transformations of education and job skills including confidence in interpersonal skills. The participants described the GED program as one that encouraged their confidence to transform. Entering the program with feelings of doubt and insecurity, the participants described experiencing a transformation in their confidence by being motivated to believe in themselves, by acquiring job and educational skills, and for some by having the GED credential as a way to open new doors.

Although all the subtheme areas were not shared by every participant, all of the participants described experiencing a transformation in confidence. For example, the concept of self-confidence was described by six of the eight participants. Allison and Greg did not emphasize their changes in self-confidence; instead described changes in the other subthemes of confidence (accomplishing goals, future possibilities, and job and educational abilities). Calvin, Fantasia, and Harold did not emphasize transformations in confidence in their job and
educational abilities, but focused on the other subthemes in confidence; thus, each participant described experiencing a transformation in confidence through the GED program.

**Theme Two: Transformation into Autonomous Individuals**

**Autonomy**

In addition, to sharing experiences in transformations in confidence, the second textural theme that emerged was a transformation in autonomy through the GED program. Using different verbiage, all of the participants expressed a change in autonomy (independence, making decisions, being more responsible, and creating plans) along with one subtheme (time and patience) as part of their transformational experience. Beth identified how she transformed to become more independent and more serious as she recalled, “I’ve changed: Umm, Uhh…I can say I’ve changed because I’ve learnt to be more independent and I’ve learnt to not play around anymore.” Beth reflected on how her transformational experience included learning how to manage aspects of her life, “I have experienced how to manage things in a way I couldn’t manage them before.” Beth stated that her ability for self-management was different than before she entered the GED program. Beth described learning how to become independent through learning how to take care of herself in a new way, “I’ve learned how to take care of myself in a way that I haven’t before I’ve turned to the GED program.”

While Beth described how she learned to manage her life differently, Allison described her transformational experience as becoming more independent as she moved forward towards her own college and career path. Allison’s independence grew through the GED program in steps. Allison came to the GED program with no prior job experience; it was through the GED program that she gained her very first job. She served food for the free summer lunch program through the local school district, and GED PREP was one of the free breakfast and lunch sites for
the program. Allison described her first job:

I had to clean the tables, serve the kids, mark down who had what, make sure everything was the same amount; I had to keep the juices cold, keep the food clean, keep the area clean, keep everything sanitized, and keep it quiet and peaceful as possible for the kids and for the program cause there was classes there too.

At the time of this study, Allison was working at job that she gained on her own. She described feeling proud for getting the job on her own at a local call center as a customer service representative and for the fact that she was now a college student. For Allison, the GED program provided her with the push to move forward towards her goals, “It’s transforming now because I’m independent, I’m working, you know, I’m trying to find another job, and now I’m a college student so that did kind of help me get on the right foot: It gave me that extra boost that I needed to keep going.”

In a philosophical stance, Calvin declared that how his life turned out was up to him, “Well always, always that’s always been it; um, I don’t like to look at negative things, but going on with your life you can always change your life; how your life turns out that is up to one person: That’s yourself.” Dannaliah’s glimpse into her transition in autonomy came through when she recalled how the agency that helped her as a runaway teen made the decision for her to enter the GED program. Dannaliah described how the runaway teen agency brought her to the GED program, filled out the enrollment forms for her, and then had her merely sign the consent forms, “Yeah mainly they did the, the only thing that I had to sign was stuff that was stating that I was an adult and I was consenting to it, but the rest they did for me.” However, after the GED program, Dannaliah shared that she made her own decision to go to college instead of Job Corps
going against the advice of the same agency that helped her get into the GED program, “Even though they weren’t happy at first that I went to college instead of Job Corps: yeah, they wanted me in Job Corps cause it had more structure.” Dannaliah spoke as if she was defiant to go against the runaway teen agency. At the time of the interview, Dannaliah was a freshman at college living on her own in the college dorm, and experiencing independence for the first time. During the interview, Dannaliah retrieved a copy of a college catalog and looked back and forth at several of options to major in; she described leaning towards majoring in law school or journalism. At the time of the interview, she was still undecided, but still, she described taking ownership of her future plans and the need to keep her grades up, “I’m going to want to keep my grades up because I want law schools to look at me seriously: If I go into journalism, I want to do political journalism.”

Emily described how making the decision to go to the GED preparation class shifted her mindset from a teenager who withdrew from high school to an adult making her own decisions. Emily was only 17 and pregnant when she first entered the GED program. Even though she finished the GED 20 day class in a short amount of time, Emily had to wait until after she turned 18 before she could take the series of GED tests. Because Emily was still a minor at the time of her enrollment, her mom had to provide parental consent in order for her to enroll in the GED, yet Emily said that it she made the decision to come to the GED program on her own. Emily described how she felt more mature as she began to make grownup decisions:

I felt mature cause I felt like still like leaving…still kind of like in the mindset like, you know like after you get out of high school kind of like a dropout; I kind of felt like a kid and stuff, but making the decision and going on my own and taking the GED classes and stuff, I felt like, I felt more mature like, you know
like, and there was people like in their 20s and stuff taking the class, so I felt like:

I’m making grownup decisions and stuff and I feel like it definitely helped me
become of age and really learn to you know, think like a grown up and stuff.

Emily disclosed that because she was in the GED class with adults in their 20s it made her feel
like a grownup herself; Emily described the experience further by comparing her prior decisions
before the GED program to after the GED program in which she stated that making the decision
to enter the GED program played a role in her change, “I was proud of myself like with a lot of
the decisions and stuff I was making wasn’t the best then after, I’d have to say, the decision to
go get my GED was the best decision and it’s opened up a lot of doors and changed me a lot!”

The transformation in autonomy that Fantasia discussed was how she learned to balance
her life through the GED program as she recognized that she could balance work and school,
“Like, I know, now I know how to balance my life; I know how to go to school and work and
this, that, and the other: I know how to, I can go to school and work and still have my college
classes.” During the focus group interview, Calvin revealed his new autonomy when he
described how being in the GED program changed him be motivated to work his plan. He
recalled how he went from not doing anything to constantly moving, “The GED changed me as
far as me being more motivated to not be a couch potato; now I just, I can’t stop moving, I don’t
like sitting still, and I’m motivated to moving by my plan.”

Greg came to an awareness that he had to take ownership for the chances that are given to
him, and discussed how it was the fear of losing everything that caused him to transform:

Everybody gets at least one chance; it’s up to you what you do with that chance:
If you mess up that’s on you. That’s just how your outlook on life is going to be;
you are just going to get that chance and give it up every time. And that’s what I
was doing in the process: Giving up every time. Until I got that one wakeup call like man you have to do right; if you don’t, you are going to lose everything, and that’s what really got to me: The fact of being scared of losing everything. Greg’s fear that he was going to lose everything helped him embrace changes in his life. Besides changing his behaviors and outlook on life, Greg revealed that part of his change involved taking control over his environment. Greg shared how in the past he didn’t like to do house chores, but through the GED program, he began to care about the cleanliness of his surroundings:

I’ve change a lot like, even at home like I used to didn’t want to do this and do that; clean up the house and do that…other things around the house, clean outside the house, make sure the cars and stuff are vacuumed out 24/7, and making sure the ceiling fans are clean…I mean going to that school it made me feel like getting up every morning was a positive, positive perseverance.

Greg’s self-reliance at home transformed once he realized that there was nothing stopping him from acting the same way at home as he did at the GED school. Greg said that he realized that if he could clean his desk and help clean the GED classroom at the GED school then he could do the same thing at his home; that he could put more effort into everything that he does for himself:

I’d say that positive perseverance because I was thinking if I wake up and I can go to school and I can handle my business at school, what’s stopping me from waking up morning and cleaning this house? And cleaning this, and cleaning that, and making sure that everything looks good, go in detail in my work, and make sure that everything that I do is 100%? Because, because I’m going to go 100% all out for myself.

Another inspiration for how Greg transformed was that he did not want to be an embarrassment
to his family. Greg feared being rejected by his family for not acting like a grown man- for not taking care of his responsibilities; this fear prompted Greg to change:

   Cause why…I’m a grown man; if I’m a grown man, I’m a grown man-I know how to handle my own. I know how to take care of my own, so I’m going to do something to make sure my kids and my family don’t have to worry about people saying: Well, oh well that’s not our family member we don’t care about him; we don’t call him one of us; he’s not with us, and I don’t want that to be the problem cause I figure everybody gets a chance.

Greg revealed how his change in autonomy came about after breaking away from his reliance on his grandmother to self-reliance where he would take responsibility for his own child. Greg figured that he managing the cleanliness of his environment was one part of being a parent. He described how he used to depend on his grandmother; then described how awful it was to him to think about his baby daughter laying under a dusty fan and allowing the dust to fall on his baby’s face because he neglected to clean the fan:

   Yeah, cause I mean, it’s like I’m a granny’s boy: I love my grandma, my grandma used to do everything for me, so when it comes time to clean the house, granny would clean the house, and I wouldn’t be sitting back in my room watching the basketball game, football game, playing a video game or something…in there right by myself, but it’s just like my grandmother is not there anymore…like she’s, she’s doing her own thing or whatever, but I have a child. I can’t go in the room, and see the ceiling fan dirty, and got my child laying right up under the ceiling fan because I don’t want no dust or nothing fall on her head and she get sick or something just cause of me neglecting to cleaning the house. That’s a
simple chore; that’s just like taking out the trash, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, simple basic stuff: If I neglect to do that then I might as well neglect to be alive.

Looking at his past behaviors with a new perspective, Harold began by describing how he experienced his transformation towards autonomy by questioning his past behaviors of getting in trouble and not caring. He asked himself why he did some of the things that he did in the past. Harold understood that he had grown up and that now he had a mature outlook on his behavior as he disclosed in the following narrative:

Now that I look back on me getting in trouble and stuff and not caring, it’s just like why did I do some of the things I did back then? It’s just; I guess I have a whole different outlook on a lot of stuff. It’s like….I guess I grew up…I got more mature. It’s just….I just didn’t feel like doing things that I did back then.

Harold said that after he dropped out of high school, he began to get into more trouble than when he was in high school. Harold described how he began to start thinking about his life after he entered the GED program and because he started thinking about his life, he wanted to do better:

I mean it’s like before….like before I dropped out of high school, I didn’t get in as much trouble as I did after I dropped out and for me, to be like, to go to the GED program, uh…It’s just like I guess I straightened up. I’m not sure: Umm, it’s just like I got to thinking after I entered the GED program. It’s just like I had to straighten up my life or something; I had to do better than I was.

Before the GED program, Harold described not having motivation to work. He said there was a time that he went from job to job. Harold recalled how he used to be indecisive about his future, but that he began to talk about college and his future after he came to the GED program. In his
interview, Harold mentioned a friend who he was starting a gaming company with, and how it was after the GED program and talking with his friend that he realized that he had the skills needed to build his own gaming company:

The, um…before I joined the GED program it’s just like I was going from job to job…I didn’t really didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I was just bouncing all over the place, but it’s like after, um…I guess it came after I did the GED program cause I started to talk more about college and stuff and stuff like that, and after me and him got to talking. I guess it’s like why go work for somebody else when we can have our own company and people work for us and since we know how to do this stuff and like to do this stuff we can just make a go of it and just do it.

During the focus group interview, Greg, Beth, and Emily discussed how they began to look at their responsibilities as part of their growth towards autonomy. Greg started the conversation by stating that being a student in the GED program made him look at his responsibilities and want to be more responsible, “Oh yeah, making me buckle down and look at responsibilities: Make me want to be more responsible.” Then Beth said how she learned how to be responsible, “I have learned responsibility.” Beth continued the dialog by stating that she felt more responsible for completing the GED program by attending every day as she prepared to take the series of GED tests:

I feel as if I’m more responsible now than I was because once again I’ve taken the time out my day to appreciate the value of the GED program; um, not taking it for granted as if I’m not coming…I’m showing up every day so that I can complete the program; I’m taking my time to learn the new things that I need to learn in
order to pass the tests.

At the focus group interview, Emily shared how she realized that she wouldn’t have had to go through the GED program in the first place if she would have been more responsible in high school. Emily’s regret for dropping out of high school and her experience in the GED program taught her to think more responsible as she described in the following:

Yeah, I feel that way to; it was good getting my GED, but just to know if I would have stayed in school and do what I had to do, I wouldn’t had to go through everything that I did have to go through and get my GED, so like it makes me think to be more like responsible and stuff.

In their individual interviews Allison, Beth, and Emily stated that they learned about responsibility. Allison noted that she learned responsibility, “I’ve learnt more responsibility.” Beth summarized her transformational experience towards autonomy by stating that she learned how to become an adult through learning how to manage her money, time, and learning responsibility, “I’ve experienced a lot of things as far as learning how to become an adult, and manage life as far as savings, and taking my time with things, and responsibility.” In addition, Beth revealed that part of her growth in autonomy involved learning how to persevere through difficult tasks:

Um, oh yeah as far as responsibility wise, and as far as, you know, having to do something knowing that if it don’t get done then there’s no way that I’m going to be able to be successful so I have to stick to my first thought of mine…sticking to something that I know needs to get done is the best thing for me. I’ve changed in that way because sometimes I would be like I know I need to do something and I would just delay, delay, delay, but now I’m at the point now where if I know I
need to conquer something important or if I know that something needs to be done I’m willing to stick to it even if it takes some time to get done. I know that in my mind it still needs to get done.

Emily obtained her first job through the GED program, and equated her work experience with growing into adulthood. Emily, who had a newborn baby at the time of the interview, gained a new understanding of growing into an autonomous adult by realizing that she had to take care of her responsibilities:

Like just where you have to make life decisions like getting a job, like they helped me get a job and stuff, and that was my first job. So, you know, you have to be responsible and everything that adults is like being responsible, taking care of responsibilities, and not just being a kid fooling around and wanting to party and stuff like that.

Calvin explained that he began to become more serious about working after he got his GED, “I was working, but not really as much I kind of got more serious after I got my GED,” and added that his new work ethic was because he began to think about his future, “Cause I was thinking about more future plans.” As he contrasted his work ethic before and after the GED school, Calvin described that it wasn’t until after he went to the GED program that he started the college enrollment process and began to work more regularly: He worked six days a week at a local restaurant, “Um, before I went to GED school, I really wasn’t working like that, but I was going to school, and after I got my GED, I’m enrolled to go to college and I work Monday through Saturday.” Calvin said that his new discipline came about because of how the GED school had a regular schedule, so he got used to having a schedule which caused him to want to continue having a regular schedule. Armed with his new habits, Calvin become a more disciplined
worker, “No, I had been working but not like that, and when like, you know what I’m saying, school was over and I still wanted a schedule, you know, a job while I’m waiting on college.” Calvin summarized his transformation in autonomy by explaining how the GED helped him transition into manhood:

But it changed me from basically being just a regular dude into being a man kind of…cause it kind of shifted me into manhood…took everything more serious cause I knew I was about to be getting into the real world, so the GED was actually a good program-it helped transition me over without pressuring me too much.

Like Calvin, Greg described how he became more enthusiastic about work. He described neglecting tasks and how his mindset changed about work. Greg experienced a change in his habits and his mindset on responsibility after he started going to the GED program because he became enthusiastic about work and was actually enjoying learning. Greg said that he began to change his habits, to do things he would not normally do, to want to do more, and to be better through the GED program:

Oh, I experienced change like of a lot of my old habits. A lot of things that I like put off or neglected to do just because I felt that they wasn’t right, but when I got to the GED school they changed my mind like working. When I got to the GED school I was enthusiastic about work so much that I wanted to have homework to take home, but we didn’t have any. So, it made me do things that I don’t normally do. It’s just the encouragement to want to do more, and want to better myself cause I was learning, and in the process of learning, I was actually having fun.

While their experiences were different, these eight participants commonly shared the concept of
autonomy: Growing independent, making their own decisions, becoming self-reliant, more responsible and self-directed as part of their transformational experiences in autonomy.

**Patience and Time**

For some of the participants, the subtheme of patience and time was experienced as part of their transformational experience in autonomy. In their descriptions, patience was described as an attitude change. Allison, Beth, Fantasia, and Harold described their need for change with patience and a gained understanding of the importance of time as part of their growth toward autonomy. Allison described a change in her attitude and patience, “My attitude changed; I have more patience.” Allison who had a newborn baby said that she was taught to be patient in the GED program and that she prayed for patience when she realized the need for patience for the sake of her new baby, “I transformed as a person; I’m a mom now, so with that you guys showed me how to be more patient cause I have a little baby and he needs a lot of patience, and so I had to learn, and I prayed on how to gain more patience.” Allison’s transformation with patience also involved realizing the importance of time; she realized that it takes time to do things and opportunities will not always be available. Allison revealed how she learned about the importance of time when the four years in high school slipped away from her, “I didn’t know those four years were going to go by so fast. Cause like four years ago, I was like: Oh, that’s a long time, but then as time flies…it’s not really a long time, so I learned my lesson about that.” Allison considered her change with patience as an attitude shift and compared how she used to be impatient in high school when she didn’t understand a lesson versus when she got in the GED program where she started gaining patience:

I’d say my attitude has changed, I learned how to be more patient cause before I wasn’t so patient, like, in a classroom, if I’m not getting it, I’m going to just give
up, put my head down, and stop doing my work. But, once I got into the GED program, I started asking questions, doing practice on my own when I got home…stuff like that…I wasn’t doing that stuff when I was in high school; I didn’t, I didn’t care about that because I felt like that was going to be there forever.

In Beth’s narrative, the concept of time and patience was mentioned frequently. Beth revealed that taking time and having patience were important factors that she needed to change in order to accomplish her goals. Beth spoke of how she used to be impatient before that GED program and credited the GED program for giving her patience in the following narrative:

I’m more of a…I can do everything that I put my mind up to type of person now that I completed it because I feel as if, if I can take the time out of my life for at least a month or a couple of months to sit down and learn something, it makes me patient, and before I started this program I was just impatient, so it just gave me a lot of patience with things.

Beth explained that she learned to take the time needed to learn new things because she said that before she did not slow down enough to comprehend what she was trying to learn then concluded that she learned the value of time and patience:

Um, as far as sitting down and taking my time with things, and not rushing through things, and actually wanting to sit down and pay attention cause it was once when I didn’t want to pay attention to anything: I just wanted to rush and read, and didn’t care, and didn’t take my time, and now that I learnt the value of time, and I just, I really just appreciate it. And I learned that time is everything; taken time, and having patience with stuff.
In addition to Beth’s explanation of how she didn’t take the time needed to comprehend what she was trying to learn in the past, she shared how patience led to persistence, “Um, I can actually say that taking my time to learn things step by step, over and over again, and never giving up: That is something that my parents would say.” Beth expressed a sense of feeling successful in taking her time to complete the GED program, “Having to take my time and learn over again so that I can finish the GED and actually take the test and even if I took it numerous times; I’ve still completed the program successfully.” Beth added how she learned that patience was the missing factor needed to conquer her goals, “I learnt to have self value of things and to appreciate things more and I’ve learnt that if you don’t take your time out with things, you just can’t conquer without patience because it takes time to accomplish the goals that you want to reach in life.” Beth reiterated that she was taking time for granted and explained that it was the GED instructors that helped her transform her patience:

Cause my teachers made me listen and take my time; to sit down and actually learn cause before, before when I wasn’t taking my time, and just rushing, it seems as if I wasn’t passing the tests cause it was something that I was missing, and I wasn’t taking the time out to actually understand it, or actually sit down and learn it over; instead, I was just taking my time for granted. Now that I’m sitting down, and I’m taking time out of my day to actually learn the things that I didn’t learn over, and when I take the tests again, I’m sure to pass it.

Finally, Beth disclosed that she used her transformed patience in the workplace, “Yes, I actually use time and patience in organizations in the workplace that I have now because where I work you have to have a lot of patience, and we have to listen and pay attention to everything that goes on so it takes you a long way in life especially in your workplace.”
Instead of focusing on transformed patience, Fantasia revealed a paradigm shift in the value she place on time. Fantasia explained that because the GED program manager and instructor pushed her towards completing her goals it helped her learn to value time:

So, and me being 18 now, and I already have my GED and having a life set, and having everything in mind that I want to do already, and having them force me, push me, not really force me, but push me to where I want to be, it just makes me want to strive and get there faster; not be like: Oh, I can just push this off. It’s just a, it’s not what you need to do it right now because if you don’t do it right now the time is going to slip away from you.

Fantasia continued her thoughts on time, “So, I have more time to become better like I have more time to work and I have more time to plan for my career, I have more time to do research of where I want to be, and how I want to be, and how I’m going to get there.”

Harold explained how he became more pragmatic about time as he went through the GED program. Harold explained how he used to get bored with other programs such as Job Corps, and that he chose the GED program because it was faster than regular school, “I’m just going to get bored of it, and since this was faster than school, and I decided to go there ‘cause it was…I mean I could get done with it and just get done with it and get on to the stuff that I wanted to actually do after I got my GED.” Harold used to be concerned with how long something took to complete and was unwilling to take the needed time to finish other programs, but after the GED program he became more willing to take the time needed to complete things:

Now it’s like; I mean it is to a certain extent…um…it’s like I know if it is something that can’t be done in within a set amount of time, I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s just like. Uh, now I look at the realism of it and whenever I finish it,
I finish it.

Harold summed up his transformation to an autonomous individual when he said, “Like I said going through the GED program I matured more, I guess you could say I matured more.”

The participants reflected on their changes with autonomy differently. Some of the participants described how they gained independence and took control over their own lives by becoming more responsible, more disciplined in work habits, or by shifting their priorities. For some, (Allison, Beth, Fantasia, and Harold), changes in patience and time became necessary components in their experience towards autonomous adults. These different aspects of autonomy were revealed by the participants as they provided a deeper insight into how they uniquely experienced transformations in autonomy through the GED program.

**Theme Three: Perspective of the GED Changed**

The third and final textural theme that emerged from the data was how the participants viewed the GED credential and the GED program. All of the participants demonstrated a perspective shift in their original thoughts concerning the GED, but the focus of their shift was expressed differently. For Allison and Harold, the view of the GED testing difficulty transformed. While Calvin, Dannaliah, Emily, and Fantasia it was a paradigm shift on the equivalency of the GED credential to the high school diploma, and transformed feelings of shame for earning a GED to feelings of pride. Greg and Fantasia both shifted their prior perspectives of what they thought the GED class experience would be like. Allison described how she thought the GED test was going to be hard, “I thought it was going to be hard; everyone kept telling me it was going to be hard: I wasn’t going to be able to do it, and it was easier than I thought.” While Allison shifted her view of the GED testing difficulty, Beth changed the value she placed on earning the GED, “I used to, I used to…didn’t…I really didn’t care about the value
of things as far as having the GED because the value of having it is something that I’m grateful for.” Beth emphasized her transformed value that she placed on the GED when she said.

“Umm…I’ve learnt to put class before anything, and I have learned that without a GED, you won’t find a job…” Calvin described going from not wanting to get a GED to becoming grateful for his GED; he described how satisfied he felt when he realized that he graduated ahead of some of his former high school peers:

Uh, at first, you know, I wasn’t too fond of getting my GED, but when they really explained how easy it was I actually loved getting my GED cause it helped me get ahead of people who I was just in class with now they see me and they already know I graduated now they just started graduating and stuff.

Calvin elaborated on how he started to look at the GED as equivalent to a high school diploma, and how it became the better option for him:

I mean; the GED to me is the same thing as a high school diploma. All it means is that, you know, instead of you trying to be that 21 year old man still in high school or be like the rest and go back, you know what I’m saying, you can take these 20 days and get ahead, and you’ll be right on, right back where you left off at except you got a diploma.

Instead of transforming her view of the difficulty or value of the GED, Dannaliah changed how she looked at the equivalency of the GED to a high school diploma once she earned her GED, “It means to me that I’m equivalent with a high school diploma graduate…even, even though some people don’t look at it that way that’s how I look at it now that I have it.” Dannaliah didn’t see the GED credential as equivalent to the high school diploma until she actually earned it. Like Dannaliah, Emily changed her perspective on the GED’s credential value. Emily described
entering the GED program with apprehension because she had a preconceived notion that people would think that she wasn’t intelligent or that she wouldn’t be able to go to college with her GED. Emily described how once she went through the program, she started hearing positive things, and her perspective changed on the value of the GED credential:

I have to say my experiences: I was really nervous taking the GED program like getting started and stuff; I wanted to take it, cause, I heard a lot of stuff about it. Like, people think you are dumb for taking it, and there’s not a lot of options afterwards like: no college is going to accept you, you’re not going to get a career cause you have it, so I was kind of nervous, but after going through the program and doing it, I feel more confident and I started actually hearing positive things about it. People will actually work with you, and like you hear the positives, so just before people that didn’t know about it, so actually learning about it I felt more confident and like: Oh, I can do this—I have a future with a GED.

Even though Emily still heard comments from extended family about her failure to graduate from high school, Emily’s viewpoint shifted when she realized that in spite of their disappointment, people were still proud of her for earning her GED:

Of course I get: That I wish you could of graduated but that’s still good that you got your GED; that’s great, you know—you are doing something with your life and stuff, and I was like: Oh, I didn’t know someone would be proud of me for getting my GED; I thought it would be like: Oh, you got your GED—you should of graduated and stuff, you know, so that was big.

In addition to getting a sense of approval for earning her GED credential, Emily felt a sense of relief when she realized that she could go to college with a GED, “I’m kind of happy cause I feel
like, like I said, I was hearing that, you know, four year colleges wouldn’t take you because of your GED and stuff, but I find out that is so not true, and I’m looking into to getting into a four year college now with the help of my teacher, so I’m happy.”

Growing up with an opinion that she gained from her childhood that people who have their GEDs are less intelligent than individuals who have their high school diploma, made Fantasia feel scared to get her GED. Fantasia revealed how her paradigm shifted of the GED credential’s value when she began to believe in the equivalency of the GED to a high school diploma, and that she was no different than a high school graduate as she shared in the following:

Oh…um…like every like, when I was growing up everyone talked down about having a GED; it was like it was best to have your high school diploma. I was scared; I felt like I wasn’t going to be as…I felt like I wasn’t as smart as kids that got their high school diplomas, but now with me having it; it’s just like I’m no different-I’m just like anybody else. It’s no difference, it’s just…

Fantasia repeated her view on how her new perspective of the equivalency of the GED credential to a high school diploma, “The GED is like…uh…another high school diploma for me.” “It’s nothing different; I don’t find that the different…I don’t find the differences.” In addition to changing her view on the value of the GED credential, Fantasia changed her original thoughts on what the GED class experience was going to be like; a preconception that there would be boredom and dominated by teacher talk when she shared the following:

Yeah like, I didn’t know what to expect; I thought it was going to be just like same ol’ thing with high school. I thought it was going to be like you sit in class and the teachers just talk just to hear their selves talk. (laughs) But it wasn’t that; it was either you want to be here or you don’t: We are not going to make you be
Harold originally thought that the GED test was going to be so hard that he wasn’t going to pass, but discovered that the GED test was easier than the thought:

It was easier than I thought it wasn’t as hard as most people said that it was going to be. Umm, it’s like coming into the program I thought like that I wasn’t going to do as well as I thought I was going to do, but after sitting down with the teacher or whatever and actually walking through some of the lessons and stuff it was actually pretty easy.

Besides changing his perspective on the difficulty of the GED test, Harold pointed out his thoughts on the equivalency of the GED credential to a high school diploma:

I mean in my eyes it’s the same equivalence to a high school diploma; it minuses out the same ‘cause you have the same opportunities as you would with a high school diploma as you do with the GED, so it is not like if I got my high school diploma I could go to college but if I got my GED I wouldn’t be able to go to college that is just it. But I mean, I could do the same thing with my high school diploma that I can do with my GED.

During the focus group interview, Emily and Calvin revealed how they shifted their perspective on the length of time needed to earn the GED. Emily pointed out that the GED class was not what she expected, “I expected…I really don’t know what I was expecting, but it was fast for me-go ahead and get it-it was quick.” Calvin revealed that he learned that earning the GED was not a long process for him at GED PREP [pseudonym]:

What I learned from getting my GED is that it’s the quickest step to actually obtaining a degree if you really aint got a long time or you don’t want to stay in
school, so getting a GED you actually only have to sit in there 20 days and they pay for you to go, so that’s always a plus, and they help you get into college so that is what the GED did for me.

Through the GED program, all of the participants shared the experience of a perspective shift in how they viewed the GED. Their perspective shift experiences were distinctive: Some of the participants transformed their original thought about the difficulty of the GED tests, while others changed the value they placed on the GED credential, or prior belief of the class experience. Through the GED program, these preconceived notions about the GED were transformed.

**Theme Four: The GED Program was the Best Option**

The fourth theme in the findings and the first structural theme was that the GED program was seen as the best option. As part of their genesis in their transformational experiences, all of the participants except one [Greg] described seeing the GED as their best option. Each participant shared a brief insight into why they turned to the GED program. The participants originally came to the GED program because of various dilemmas: (a) kicked out of high school; (b) aged out of high school; (c) other programs took too long to finish or were not compatible; (d) incarcerated; (e) no legal guardian-unable to get back into high school; (f) withdrew from school because of truancy issues; (g) unable to return to regular school; and, (h) experiencing the job market without a GED or high school diploma. Although the participants did not disclose that they were searching for a transformation, they disclosed that they saw the GED as their best option. The following dialog retrieved from the focus group interview provided an insight into how the participants viewed the GED. Beth, Emily, and Allison unveiled their thoughts on how the GED was viewed as their last option in the focus group interview. Beth started the conversation by saying, “Knowing that um, this is my last option that I have, and it was nothing
else left except my GED.” Beth continued, “I felt as if this is something I really needed to, but it was my last option because of my age.” Emily replied to Beth:

Um, that’s the same for me; getting my GED was my last option, like. I used to do so good in school; I actually liked to go to school and I got involved in, I just, I was moving around so much that I was just like; I started hanging out with the wrong crowd and stuff like that. So, I had to…uh…I got kicked out of the school that I was in for, um…for skipping so much, and then the other school because of that, because of that history…I, they wouldn’t accept me, so getting my GED was my last option.

Allison added to the conversation by recalling her past experiences with high school where she was skipping and getting to old to go to public school. After she realized that she couldn’t find any school program that was free, she felt that the GED program was her last option:

Same thing for me: School: Wasn’t going. I was skipping, and then I was getting too old, so they wasn’t going to be able to let me, they wasn’t going to able to let me come back, so the GED was my last option. I even tried looking up online schools to get my high school diploma. When I couldn’t find anything that you didn’t have to pay for: Everything you had to pay for…

Beth questioned Allison, “So, it was your last free option?” Then Allison replied, “Yeah, you know, so that’s really what was it: It was my last option.”

In the individual interview, Allison described how she ended up having to go to the GED school because the principal decided to drop her due to poor attendance and turned to the GED after realizing that she was no longer able to attend regular high school:
I was in high school, and during the time I was pregnant so I was missing classes, missing days of school; my attendance started to go bad with school so I was at the age that he could decide to drop me from his role of attendance, and the principal dropped me. But get the next best thing which is a GED, so that is what I did.

Beth recalled that she tried to re-enter high school then got sent to an adult education program, but find that the program was incompatible for her. Like Allison, she tried multiple options before reaching a point where she had no other free alternatives to get her high school diploma. Beth began to look to the GED as a catalyst towards moving forward with her post secondary goals:

Um, how I got into the GED program: I actually couldn’t go back to school, so that’s it…before I started the GED program, I was still trying to finish school, and I got to an age, and I stopped, and I tried to go back to high school, but got told that I wasn’t allowed back because of my age, so I actually joined one other before I was in GED PREP [sic], I joined adult education program, and the way their learning was set up, it was hard for me to learn there…it was too many people in the class, and the hours were too long, and I didn’t have enough patience, so I, after I withdrew from the school, I actually didn’t do anything for about a year, for about a year, and after that year went by, I actually made up my mind and I decided that I wanted to go back to school…to try to retrieve my GED cause I knew that if I retrieved my GED, that I would have a more chance of getting into a college or even a technical school so I can start a career.

Beth described the GED as being her last option because of her age, “Knowing that um…this is
my last option that I have, and it was nothing else left except my GED. I felt as if this is something I really needed to, but it was my last option because of my age.” Calvin disclosed that because he was incarcerated going back to regular school would have caused him to be unable to graduate on time, so he looked to the GED as a way to get back on track with his educational goals:

Um, circumstances of me being incarcerated, and me like if I went back to regular school, I would have been so far behind or it would have been so hard for me just to, just to be…just to graduate on time and having the option of a GED actually put me ahead so…That’s the circumstances, but actually you know, knowing what I know now, I would of, I wish I would of, I could have been out and got my GED at 17: I could have been in college.

Calvin shared how he looked to the GED as a way of getting back on track with his education after being in jail so long, “Like if I would have went back to regular school, like when I, you know, getting in trouble I would have been a semester behind cause I had been in jail so long so that’s why a lot of people get confused on what to do, so I just went and got my GED.” Being an 18 year old runaway without a guardian, Dannaliah revealed that she was having difficulty getting back into regular high school and the school from her home town would not accept her back in because she ran away from her former school; thus, the GED program became a viable option for her to complete her education:

The circumstance is that I had to move to _________, and I couldn’t get back into the actual high school here ‘cause I was 18, no guardian, and um…what else was it? And the school wouldn’t just accept me ‘cause I ran away from their school at one point before too, so I wasn’t allowed back.”
Emily revealed how she was behind in high school due to skipping and how her mom attempted to transfer her to another school, but the other school wouldn’t accept her because of her behavior history at her former school. After failing to get back into the traditional high school, Emily described how she turned to the GED program:

Because, it was a policy because I was skipping so many classes and stuff and I had fallen so far behind…um...I was just getting into too much trouble; my mom had to pull me out of the school and we were going to try to transfer me to another school, but that school wouldn’t take me because of my behavior at the other school, so I couldn’t go to that one cause they wouldn’t accept me and I couldn’t stay at this one cause I was so behind, and so the GED helped a lot.

In addition to not being accepted back into traditional high school, Emily also was pregnant. She described feeling nervous for being out of school for so long thinking she wouldn’t make it through the GED program. Emily expressed feeling hopeless for her future prospects with jobs and education. She described the GED as being her only option:

Cause I think like after dropping out of high school and stuff and being pregnant and all that, and like not being in school for so long and then finally going and getting my GED, I was so nervous, cause like…I felt stupid and I felt like I wasn’t going to pass, and I felt kind of hopeless in a sense like I’m going to just be jobless and education less and stuff and I was just like. It was a big thing for me because school was a big thing for me cause I loved going to school and learning and then I just came to a point in my life where that changed. Like, I just wanted, I wanted to be like all of the other wild kids I guess and stuff so I started skipping school, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and then the GED was my only
Similarly, Fantasia described having difficulty in the traditional high school setting; she recalled having fights and getting kicked out of school. After being out of high school, Fantasia came to the realization that she was going to have difficulty getting jobs. She started to look to the GED as an option to help her with her future, “…you can’t do anything without a GED or a high school diploma: Like, you can’t get a good job, you can’t make a set career, you always going to be bouncing from job, to job, to job, and with a GED it’s just like you can have a set career until you are ready to move up.”

During the focus group interview Emily, Beth, and Allison provided insight on how Georgia’s policy on skipping school was part of the reason Emily turned to the GED program. Emily shared with the other group members, “I didn’t know that the schools down here; if you skip too much down here your parents can get arrested.” Beth answered, “In Georgia, you can go to jail.” Emily explained the fear of her mom getting arrested due to truancy was why she withdrew from high school, “That’s why before she got arrested she took me out.” Allison added to the conversation by saying, “That’s what my mom did with my brother, but that’s because he…they kept suspending him.”

Harold stated that after he dropped out of high school, he tried going to the Job Corps before entering the GED program, but ended up getting into trouble at the Job Corps. After getting kicked out of the Job Corps, Harold disclosed that he chose to get his GED through GED PREP because of the fact that it was a shorter program versus the year long program at Job Corps and because he felt that he had to get his GED:

Umm, like after, I tried going to Job Corps and that didn’t work ‘cause like I said I was just like getting in trouble, and I got in trouble there, and it’s just like I got
in trouble with a bunch of people. And it was just like…umm….I didn’t finish the program because…it was just…I guess it wasn’t for me or whatever. It took too long. Like, like, I didn’t like school and school just wasn’t for me and just the simple fact that we have to do like a year in Job Corps. It’s just like…just to sit in school and do the same things that I could have done in high school. So, I guess some of the circumstance was like just the Job Corps circumstances, I guess that’s what made me want to do the GED program because I know anything else, I wasn’t going to finish so I guess I made this a plan to finish. I had to get my GED: like really.

The common theme for these participants was that they sought out the GED program after having obstacles in their prior educational encounters. Although each participant had different reasons for seeking out the GED program, all of them came to the GED program with a similar view: That the GED was their best option, and it was this view that brought them to the GED program which in turn brought them on the path towards transformation.

**Theme Five: Compared the GED School as More Positive Than High School**

The second theme of their structural experience of how they experienced transformation through the GED program was that the participants described the GED school as more positive than high school which helped them thrive and transform. The comparisons made in the participants’ descriptions included the following: (a) the GED 20 day class length compared to four years of high school, (b) the classroom size was smaller than their high school class size, (c) the GED lessons focused on the basics and real world learning, (d) the GED instructor was more caring than their high school teachers, (e) the classroom environment was perceived as more comfortable, (f) the GED instructor provided better instruction and classroom management, (g)
attendance of the GED was voluntary rather than compulsory, and (h) the GED test was a pass or fail rather than graded. Although differences in their experiences existed, there was a ubiquitous description of the GED school as more positive than high school found in the narratives.

One of the commonalities in the participants’ descriptions was the comparison of the length of the GED program. For example, Allison compared the GED school as more positive than high school because of the length of the GED program (20 days long), and added that the GED program was shorter and more focused. Allison painted her high school experience as one where she felt like she was learning subjects that she did not need later in life; whereas in the GED school she praised the brevity of the learning to prepare her for the GED tests:

Yeah, I didn’t know what the work was going to be like; I thought it was going to be like regular high school; doing the same thing in high school, but it was different: It was shorter, it’s more focused on what you actually need to know, so when you go to take the test; everything you take on the tests, you learned in the classroom. So it wasn’t no difference, except in high school you go through 12 years of high school, learn all these new subjects for no reason, then you take all these tests for no reason to determine if you are going to get your diploma or not. And then, the GED you just need to do everything to show that you are equivalent to a high school student, so basic reading, basic math, multiplication, division, some geometry, stuff like that, the simple stuff: the basics.

Like Allison, Calvin also credited the length of the program as something that helped him transform. He also appreciated the incentive bonus that he received for earning his GED credential. Although he did not vocalize it, Calvin revealed his understanding that his risk of recidivism was reduced as he revealed that the GED program helped him graduate and directed
him away from his past circumstances:

 Uh, that GED PREP is I think the only school that will offer a 20 day program to get your GED and help the students who graduate, you know, not leave back into, you know, their circumstances, but they actually leave with a little bit of money too, so that is always a bonus.

Calvin also attributed the classroom size and the fact that he was able to communicate with the teacher for his transformation, “Yeah, it’s more laid back, small classroom, so you get to communicate with the teacher better and it’s not really no pressure.” Calvin highlighted the lack of pressure aspect of the GED program and the small class size as circumstances for his transformation. Fantasia also spoke about the classroom size for helping her learn things that she was having difficulty learning when she was in the traditional high school; her exaggerated view of being in a classroom with a 1000 other students demonstrated how much she liked being in the small class size in the GED program, “Well high school wasn’t for me; I like to read ahead and I like to learn on my own and being in the classroom with a 1000 other students is just, it’s like everything was not getting to me like when I was in the GED school with just like maybe 15 or ten kids.”

In addition to the classroom size comparisons, several participants discussed how the real world instruction fostered their transformation. For instance, Emily talked about the real world instruction of the GED program as being what she needed for her real life, what she was going to need to get a career, and what she needed to obtain her GED credential, “So it was like a lot of stuff what you are going to be doing in real life, and what you want to be doing with a career and stuff, and it was helping us exactly what we needed to know to learn and pass, and, but also use in real life and stuff.” Emily recounted that becoming a GED student helped her
with her transformation because she felt like she was back in school, but in a smaller classroom that focused on exactly what she needed to learn. Emily recalled how in high school she felt that she was learning things that did not apply to her:

But being a GED student, it was normal; it felt like an everyday classroom. I was kind of happy; I felt like I was back in a classroom, and, but I liked it better because it was small, and it was more focusing on exactly what you needed to learn instead of a lot in school you are learning a whole bunch of stuff that you don’t really need.

Like Emily, Fantasia compared the real world learning experience of the GED school as more focused learning experience to that of the high school where she described being taught things that she didn’t need in the real world; she described being brought *around the world* in high school and being taught subjects that she didn’t feel applied to her real life; whereas, in the GED school, Fantasia felt that the content was focused on exactly what she needed to do in life.

Fantasia disclosed that this positive GED learning experience contributed to her transformational experience:

It was like if you didn’t understand, oh well, I’m going to say it or tell you this once or twice, and you have to go back on your own and try to figure it out. 

Versus in the GED school is what you need to know. They don’t take you around the world like at school it’s like half the stuff we really didn’t need to me-half the stuff we really didn’t need, no, and the GED school taught us what we really needed to go on in life.

Besides crediting the speed of the GED and the class size, Allison stated that the GED class environment was more comfortable than high school. Allison portrayed a bleak picture of a
typical crowded high school classroom where there were students disrupting the class, fighting, throwing things, arguing with the teacher, and unmotivated students. Then, Allison depicted a picture of the GED classroom, where she described not feeling worried about someone throwing something at her; where she felt that the environment was calm and comfortable. She described the GED classroom as a place that she felt safe and where students were being productive:

They were pretty small, content, it was opening, you know, it wasn’t bonded up and all scary; it was like, I just was comfortable. I didn’t have to worry about anybody talking about me or throwing stuff at me, or making noise, or disrupting the class, nothing like that, nobody getting kicked out of the class, nobody arguing with the teacher, so it was a totally different experience from being in high school and you sitting in the classroom with 23 other kids-26 other kids, and 12 of them making noise, and two of them asleep, and somebody throwing paper, somebody about to fight….somebody trying to fight the teacher or the teacher’s not there; there’s a substitute, we not doing any work…No, when I got into the GED program, it was straightforward; we worked every day, sometimes we had breaks, but most of the time we were working getting everything that we needed to get done: Get it done.

Like Allison, Emily also gave credence to the welcoming environment of the GED program. She described how even though there were other students; she felt that the teacher attended to her questions and that the other students were friendly:

And because it was small, like, it was kind of like: Yeah, there are other students, but like you felt like it was you and the teacher. So I liked that. And even like, other students if they asked a question and stuff it’s kind of like: If you are scared
to ask a question but then they go and ask it, and it’s like: Okay, I was kind of nervous to be around people and stuff, and, but everyone was friendly and you make friends so easily and stuff, and it was pretty good.

Besides comparisons made in the length of the program, the size of the classroom, and the real world learning, several participants mentioned feeling more care for by the GED instructor than when they were in high school. Fantasia perceived a difference in care from the GED instructor versus the high school teachers who she believed didn’t care whether she learned or not:

It’s like a say, it’s kind of like: Your school if you don’t do this, this, and this like (she emphasized each this by tapping on the table) like if you don’t get good grades or if you don’t come to class everyday you are going to fail versus the GED it was like: Well, we will help you, and during school if you didn’t understand it; it was like the teachers really didn’t care.

Fantasia elaborated on the lack of care she felt when she attended high school which caused her to not want to go to high school. She described the eight hours she spent during her high school career as eight hours of nothing:

Cause before the GED school when I was in high school I really didn’t want to go; like I really didn’t want to go to high school. Like, I actually thought it was eight hours of nothing. Eight hours of just sitting in class, listening to the teacher talk, not having one on one help, and just stuff that I…like…they were just telling me stuff because they were getting paid to, they didn’t really care.

Harold also described feeling more cared for by the GED instructor than when he was in high school. He shared that because of the lack of care he felt when he was in high schools, that it made him not care. Harold credited the care that he felt from the GED instructor as part of his
transformational experience process:

I met some nice people. Umm (laughs) and people that was there actually like Ms. Long; the people that were there they actually cared about the students that came in and stuff and most of the students; it was just like most of the schools that I went to the teachers didn’t care so that made me not care.

Harold added to his description of the care he felt from the GED program which gave him the inspiration to finish the program:

So knowing that I could go through the program and there was somebody there that actually cared whether I passed or not or finished or not is like…I guess it…it made my successability [sic] to go through easier because with them caring, it made me care. It made me want to finish, so I guess you could say it was a pretty good method.

In addition to the care that several participants felt, Fantasia also appreciated the fact that the entire school day was spent in the same classroom rather than having to transition from one classroom to the next as she had to do when she was a student in high school. Fantasia compared her high school experience with her experience in the GED program and concluded that it was a better experience:

Yeah, the setting was different, it’s just like, it’s more calming then school cause you sit in the same classroom for a couple of hours a day instead of having to transition-running to three different four, different classrooms from one building to another worrying about if you going to be late, and if you are you can’t come into the class and stuff like that, so it’s just, it’s different. It’s a very better; it’s a very well better experience.
During the focus group interview, Allison, Beth, and Emily discussed how the GED class experience was more comfortable for them than regular high school. Emily started the dialog when she said, “Um, I liked it; it was like regular class like in the school, but it was more…it was more hands on; like, she got to work with us individually and better and like everyone was helping each other. Allison added her perspective, “I don’t know; I think that it was somewhat a home based thing: It wasn’t like more secrets or nothing like that; it was secure.” Emily questioned Allison, “So, you felt like you were in home school?” Allison clarified her earlier statement, “No! Not like that; I mean as in not like in regular school and certain things that people talk about, you know; yeah, it was more comfortable.” Beth participated in the conversation, “Yeah, like in home school kind of.” Allison continued, “Yeah, like it was more down to earth, more family oriented.” Beth thought about it and approved: “Yeah.” Allison added how the staff played a role, “The staff there makes you feel at home.” Beth agreed, “Very welcome: If I could do it all over again, I would, but for the experience- I would.” Emily piped in to the conversation, “Not the GED specifically, but the class experience.”

Besides the GED class environment, several students felt the instruction received from the GED instructor was superior to when they were in high school. For instance, Allison recalled her reading experiences in high school. She described falling asleep during reading while in school; whereas, in the GED school she described taking turns reading, and credited the GED instructor’s method of reading instruction to her transformation in reading comprehension:

Yeah, it was during school; I would say like from the ending of middle school through high school, I would just read and I would fall asleep in the middle of the book, but once I got into the GED program, it was more interesting things. We weren’t just reading, reading, reading, reading; one person would read then stop;
the next person would go, and take turns, so everybody would help break it down; instead of just having one person having to read two to three pages by their selves then they fall asleep. And that is what I was doing, so after high school I got to the GED program…no I wasn’t falling asleep while I was reading.

Greg also credited the GED instructor as fostering his learning more effectively than when he was in high school. Greg recalled that the GED instructor could teach him something that he was struggling with in one day; whereas in high school he could spend hours of tutoring sessions with teachers after school and still not understand the topic. He described her teaching method as one where she spoke in everyday language and provided step-by-step instruction. Greg felt that the GED instructor was a great teacher that contributed to his transformation:

Ms. Long [pseudonym] basically…she provided my, she provided my learning: my learning development and she furthered it; she furthered it better than any other teacher that I ever had…like I’ve had plenty of teachers try to teach me in so different ways. Like when I was going through school there used to be teachers that could help me out with stuff and spend hours on hours on hours after school, before school trying to teach me to learn, but I could come in one day with Ms. Long [pseudonym], and by the end of that one day she already taught me everything- in one day. Just because of how she teaches; she teaches you to the point if you don’t get it, she’ll come back and help you understand, she’ll talk you through detail, she’ll make it in layman’s terms so you can understand it even better just in case you’re not familiar with how she’s teaching it, just in case you are not familiar with the formulas, just in case you are not familiar with anything…she’ll go into detail and show you step by step how the situations goes
or how the problem goes, how to solve it. I mean, she’s just a great teacher.

She’s a great teacher and it was a great experience. I’m happy about it.

In addition to the instruction and environment contributions, Fantasia also gave credit to the non compulsory attendance aspect of the GED program as part of her transformational experience. Fantasia described the GED school as a better experience for her than high school where she did not fear being punished for not attending. Fantasia felt that because she was able to function autonomously in her learning rather than being forced to learn was a better experience for her:

It’s not like at school where if you don’t come to class, you gonna, or you going to fail or you are going to get sent to ISS or something, and it was like either you come or you didn’t. It was like you had to want to do it nobody had to make you do it, so it was a better experience because it wasn’t, there wasn’t no one pushing me to do something that I didn’t want to do.

Fantasia, who appreciated not be pushed into learning, insightfully revealed that her transformational experience came about because she was allowed to self-motivate towards her own goals. Dannaliah’s only comparison to high school came through her description of feeling relief when she discovered that the GED test was a pass or fail rather than based on grades like in high school, “Surprisingly, I only made a 77 on one of my tests here, and I wasn’t hard on myself cause as long as it’s passing; yes, yes there’s a grade thing, but I say as long as you are over the passing thing you should be happy with it-don’t beat yourself up.”

In summary, most of the participants described the GED program as a more positive experience than they had in high school as how they experienced transformation. Most of the participants (except for Dannaliah) shared overlapping concepts as they compared their high school experiences with the GED program such as shorter length of the program, smaller class
size, the GED instructor, and the comfortable classroom environment. These participants’ portrayals of the GED program compared to their high school experience provided another layer as to how they experienced transformations through the GED program.

**Theme Six: Influence of Others to Transform**

The final structural theme that emerged was how the participants’ transformations involved the influence of others. Each participant uniquely described how an outside entity drove them towards transformation. For a couple of participants (Allison and Emily) it was their pending births as well as their moms that weighted in their decision towards change. Beth, Calvin, and Fantasia cited the GED program’s staff as a large part in their transformational experience. Dannaliah credited the agency that helped her when she was a runaway teen in transition from foster care to adulthood. Greg gave credence to his young daughter for sparking the desire in him to want to change; Greg also acknowledged the GED instructor as playing a role in his transformation. Harold referred to his mom as pushing him towards change. Though each participant experienced internal changes, each one recalled an extrinsic influence on their path towards change.

Reminded by her past behaviors that disappointed her mom, Allison recalled how the GED certificate serves as a tangible reminder of change. Simply looking at the GED certificate that she kept in a manila folder would sometimes make Allison cry as she became aware that she was no longer disappointing her mom; instead, she was making her mom happy and proud.

I had to take a picture of it, and send it to the school for them to get the proof that I have my GED. Look at it all the time; sometimes it actually brings tears to my eyes cause it makes my mom proud cause I use to disappoint her when I didn’t go to school, so now that I am finished she’s happy, and she
sees me going to college, and she’s more happy about that.

Allison recounted how she used to disappoint her mom because she would skip school, and when she would go to high school she wouldn’t do work or only go to school to eat lunch. Once she started going to the GED school, she began to attend regularly, and began to feel pride knowing that her mom noticed a change in her:

Oh, yeah, because when I was in high school, I didn’t go to school, I skipped my classes, I fell asleep in class, I didn’t do homework, I didn’t do nothing. I just skipped, went home, went back to eat lunch, and then went home, and I knew she wasn’t happy about that. So, when she saw me get into the GED program and going to school every day coming home when I was supposed to, she saw a difference in me, and it made her happy.

In addition to the influence of her mom, Allison stated that it was her unborn baby that caused her to want to change. Facing her circumstances of being pregnant and no longer welcome in the public school system, Allison began to think beyond herself:

As far as circumstances, I got kicked out of school, I was pregnant, and I needed to get off my feet and stop being lazy cause I had a child that I was bringing into the world, and it wasn’t about me anymore: It was about my baby. So I had to do something so I could provide for my baby.

Besides her mom and her baby, Allison gave credit to the GED program. Allison expressed a cavalier attitude towards her past school experience, but as she entered the GED program classroom she felt like she arrived to a class environment where she could function. She said that in the GED class it was more hands on and that there were less people in the class which helped her feel more comfortable:
School, I didn’t usually care about school; it didn’t bother me because certain subjects I was like: I’m not going to use this later in life, what do I need this for? Sometimes I wouldn’t pay attention; then I finally got somewhere where it was hands on with just one person; there wasn’t a lot of people in the class, so it was more…it was a different environment for me cause I’m not use to crowded classrooms and stuff. I’m more calm and collect with smaller groups. I do better with smaller groups, so it kind of helped me come out of my shell a little bit.

Like Allison, Beth gave credit to the GED program and the staff of the program for motivating her towards change. Beth had to push herself past the obstacle of not passing the entire series of GED tests back in 2013. It was the support and motivation that she felt from the GED program’s staff that helped her to not give up on herself:

I had to really push myself and keep myself focused because, if I didn’t, I was going to fall off and I was just not going to (clears throat) come back to the program but the team that’s here at GED PREP they support you and they push you and they tell you this is something that you need and in order for you to receive it you have to stay focused but they keep you motivated and I have to keep myself motivated in order to do what needs to get done to receive my GED.

Like Beth, Calvin pointed to the GED program staff for his change. Calvin recalled the exact length of time that it took him to obtain his GED (29 days) as he felt his education redeemed in spite of being incarcerated and having to leave high school. Once unraveled for having to go an adult prison at an early age, Calvin realized that he was no longer behind his former high school peers and felt back on track for to go college and get financial aid:

And, like they helping me get enrolled in college, and I’m actually a candidate for
financial aid, so that’s a plus too. And, it only took me 29 days to get my GED so that actually put me ahead of most people I was going to school; I ended up getting in trouble and instead of being a semester behind, I was, now…I’m a semester ahead.

Dannaliah explained that it was the runaway teen agency that helped her after leaving an adopted family who adopted her as an older teen out of the foster care system. Although she was an adult, she was still a ward of the state in the foster care system. At the time, Dannaliah who grew up in group homes submitted her authority to the teen agency who suggested that she seek out the GED. She described how uninvolved she was when the teen agency first brought her to enroll into the GED program:

They pretty much suggested that I look into it; I, um…I looked into it I went ahead and took I guess it’s a pre test. Um, and it pretty much stated at what grade level I was learning at; I believe that was it, and um…then…um..once I did that it was just paperwork after that and they pretty much handled most of it…um…I mean, they handled a lot; I didn’t come with a lot of stuff here at city, so they also did like helping me get clothes and whatnot, but…

After Dannaliah made it into college where she was at the time of this study, she was still relishing in how much she accumulated and how she appreciated the help she received from the teen agency after leaving foster care, “They have been a big help: They are still helping me ‘til this day.”

Like Allison, Emily’s mom was a big influence on her transformational experience. Emily recalled the time when her mom first received the news that she passed her first GED test, and how it made her feel to see her mom so happy. Emily described the scenario of getting
home from work and having a dialog of excitement with her mom. Emily who was surprised that she passed the GED test, described that as happy as she was for passing, it was seeing her mom’s expression of pride that meant more to her at that moment:

She answered the phone call from Ms. Long [pseudonym]: My teacher she had just got the information on whether I passed or not, and I passed. And my mom, she got that phone call, and my teacher is telling her that I passed, and I had came home from work and my mom, she looked so exited, and I was like: what? And she was like your teacher just called and she said you passed your…your first test. Then I was like oh my goodness, I did; I was expecting a call like cause she knows like after I came back from my test I was just like: Mom, I don’t think I passed. I was like I don’t feel confident at all; I don’t think I passed at all, and then she was like you passed! Your teacher just told me, and I was like; I was so happy, but I was more happy seeing my mom happy for me and stuff because it was big, big for her.

Rather than speaking of the influence of family members, Fantasia spoke about how the GED staff encouraged her not to be another statistic, and to do more with her life. At first, Fantasia slightly stumbled through her words but then confidently told me, a Caucasian female, that the GED staff (the program manager and GED instructor who are also African American) did not want her to be another African American dropout:

Um, but, it was only because they wanted to see me succeed; they didn’t want to see another high school dropout or another African American dropout, so it was really, I think it’s not that it had a lot to do with race; it was just that they wanted, they wanted me to know that I can be what I wanted to be in life.
Fantasia who felt defeated from her earlier experiences when she was in high school after returning from juvenile detention, described how the GED teachers influenced her toward change by providing her with the feeling of care and support to strive for her dreams:

Um, just that GED PREP is a great school and they have great teachers there that’s going to push you and help you strive for what you want to do and not just say: Oh, it’s whatever, it’s not just be like if you don’t do it, I don’t care: It’s you not me. It’s just a great feeling to have somebody support me.

Fantasia who came to the program as a seventeen year old after spending some time in juvenile detention, shared that she was made to feel like she was not going to be more than a high school dropout from some of her former high school teachers. As she realized that the GED staff only focused on her future, it helped Fantasia to begin to look at her future instead of focusing on her past as she noted:

All you going to be is going to be a high school dropout, and that’s the feeling, that’s the feeling that I got from them. It was just like you going to be a high school dropout, and that made me feel like what’s the point in going to school if they don’t care, if they aren’t going to try to help me, and…but when I went to GED PREP, it was just like we don’t care about your past, we just care about your future, and that was the feeling that I got from there.

When asked about the circumstances that influenced them to become GED students during the focus group interview, Allison, Beth, and Greg provided insight into the role of outside individuals in their transformational experiences. Allison simply replied that it was her mom: “My mom.” Beth added by stating that her children influenced her, “My kids were my motivation as well.” Allison repeated herself, “My mom was.” Then Greg disclosed that it was
his child, “Well, my kid my main motivation at all times.” Beth inquired of Greg, “Your kids?” Greg clarified his answer to Beth, “My kid, Um, but that’s it; that’s the motivation to want to have something better for her.” Greg, who saw his daughter as his salvation, described further the role that his daughter played in his transformation during his individual interview:

My daughter came at the worst time but made the best out of what I had, that, and that sounds so weird, but she came at the worst time but she made the best out of every situation, she made me strive to want to do better, she makes me strive to want to get this, and get that: I wouldn’t have nothing if it wasn’t for her.

Greg explained that he realized that he had to change so that it wouldn’t embarrass his daughter. As Greg entered into parenthood, Greg began to view his life as a father. He described how he realized that he had to change his behavior because of the repercussions that it could have on his daughter:

I had my daughter recently: She’s one year old now. I had her recently and it’s just ever since I had her it’s just like my whole demeanor has changed. Like I can’t do the same things I was doing because now it’s to the point where they’ll come; people will come and say: Look your dad was doing this, I caught your dad doing this, I seen your dad doing this, and I don’t want her to have to go anywhere and hear about her father doing something stupid or not even, not even using a brain.

Although Greg didn’t expand on what caused him to leave high school, he described a time in his life when he didn’t want to do anything including school. Greg spoke of having an epiphany when he looked at his life as a father; he envisioned his life as an older man with an adult daughter who had a father that she wasn’t proud of or had to take care of him. Seeing himself in
the future, shook Greg into wanting to transform his life so that he could be the kind of dad that would make his daughter proud:

Umm…circumstances…I don’t want to say me getting kicked out of school cause that really wasn’t the circumstances because after I got kicked out of school, I still neglected to want to go to school-I didn’t want to go to school, I didn’t want to have an education, I didn’t want to do anything. The positive influences that made me turn to those circumstances and made me want to get involved in GED PREP was I think me having my child. Me having my child made me have a big wakeup call because it, it’s just like but what is she going to look at in twenty years what is she going to look at, what is she going to be able to say is her dad, or what is she going to be proud of, she can’t be proud of somebody not doing anything. I don’t want to be a mope or a bum or anything like that; I don’t want to be anyone who my daughter is taking care of me: That sounds ridiculous. If I want her taking care of me, I must be 60 or 70 years old walking around the house with a cane: Can’t move can’t walk you know what I’m say. I don’t want that type of situation or anything, but I don’t think she should have to, she shouldn’t have to bare a burden because of me being half of a man that I should be. That’s just how I feel.

Instead of crediting his young child as his reason for wanting to transform, Harold spoke about his mom as a major influence to get him on the path towards transformation. Harold shared how his mom gave him an ultimatum to get a job or go to school while he was living in her home as an adult. Originally, he tried to fulfill her request by simply getting a job, but revealed that getting a job was not truly satisfactory to his mom: His mom wanted him to get an education.
His mom encouraged him to get into the Job Corps, but he found it to be a long process and it did not work out:

Umm, I don’t know…me and my mother we were talking, and she was like, uh, she was like that if I didn’t want to go to school or anything like that she was like I would have to either get a job or do something else, and I decided to get a job and, but she didn’t take to that too fondly. She was like, umm….she had enrolled me in Job Corps and it took me a while to actually get up and get motivated to go, but after that it’s like I was like: yeah, I’ll go to Job Corps, but it took so long to contact me back; it took like half a year to contact me back, so I was just like I don’t want to go anymore. So, I started looking for me another job and she still pushed me to go to Job Corps ‘cause she said that I could get my high school diploma and I could come out with a trade or even two or three trades if I wanted it, umm…but at least that one trade influenced me to go later on.

Harold said that his mom convinced him to enter the Job Corps in the first place because of the promise of getting trained in at least one trade, but after he failed to complete the Job Corps program Harold still felt an insistence from his mom to obtain a diploma. Again, Harold’s mom influenced him to enter another program-this time GED PREP. Harold knew that his sister finished the GED program in a short amount of time. Inspired by his sister’s success and the quickness of the GED program, Harold once again listened to his mom’s advice:

She’s like since my sister finished, she knew that I could finish and cause I was just one of those kids that, that’s just like if I don’t get finished in a set amount of time, then I’m not going to go there. I’m just going to get bored of it, and since this was faster than school, and I decided to go there ‘cause it was…I mean I
could get done with it and just get done with it and get on to the stuff that I wanted to actually do after I got my GED.

As each participant described how they experienced transformation through the GED program, the common thread was that there was an outside influence on their transformation. Every participant started their path with the help or the motivation of someone outside of themselves.

Summary

On an old street of a historical section in a coastal town of Georgia is a federally funded GED preparation school where the participants in this study came seeking out change. Each individual was a young adult with a defined barrier that came to the GED program armed with hope for something different in their life than they had before. Although all of the participants experienced transformation through the GED program, the process was unique to each individual. The push to change came from outside themselves such as from a parent, a child, or the GED instructor, or an entity.

With some amount of hope for the future, most of the participants came into GED PREP with little or no confidence in their selves, ability to accomplish goals, future possibilities, and education/job skills. It was through the GED program that they got the encouragement and experienced a learning environment they needed to transform their confidence. Many of the participants came into the GED program because it was seen as their best option: Some even called the GED program their last option, but it was really their last free option. The reasons they gave for leaving high school varied from getting kicked out of high school, dropping out on their own, or being incarcerated. Because they no longer felt welcome or felt that it was feasible to attend their former high schools, the GED program became their best option.

Originally coming to the GED program for different reasons, it was only through the
GED program and when they became GED students that they began to experience transformation. For one, they compared the GED program as more positive for them than their former high school experiences. They realized that the GED school had non compulsory attendance; it was a short 20 day program, smaller class size, and offered a real world curriculum. Secondly, they compared their former high school teachers with the GED instructor. The GED instructor was described as providing better instruction and classroom management than what they experienced when they were in high school. Moreover, the GED instructor was described as more caring which made them begin to care. Thirdly, the participants were informed that they were adults and were not forced to attend the GED program. For these participants, the GED program was a learning environment that made them feel comfortable to grow into adults without pressure.

Once they realized that their attendance in the GED program was voluntary, they embraced the concept of being an adult, and began to function autonomously. As they started functioning independently within the GED setting, the participants began to realize that if they could function independently at the GED school then they could function autonomously in their personal lives outside of school. As they began to mature into responsible autonomous individuals, they started to shift their outlook on themselves and began to change their behaviors by becoming more patient and dependable. The concept of time and patience became new virtues for some of the participants. As they began to experience transformation through the GED program, their outlooks of themselves and their outlooks on their future became more positive which in turn assisted them towards transformation.

The how and what of their transformational experiences through the GED program intermingled and was varied. For example, some of the participants may have had the desire to
change before they came to the GED program and looked to the GED program as a place that they hoped to experience transformation. While for other participants, there wasn’t a prior desire to change before entering the program, but still experienced transformation, and only really became aware of their transformation after they became part of this study. Whether their transformational experiences were intentional or not, the participants experienced transformation through this specific GED program in this specific location. It was through this GED program where the participants in this study felt encouraged and enabled to accomplish goals and look at their future possibilities. As their confidence transformed, they began to function autonomously taking control over their own lives by seeing themselves and their futures differently.

The outcomes of their transformations included becoming more confident, acting autonomously, and changing their perspective on the GED program and credential. Before the GED program, some of the participants perceived themselves as less than high school graduates for not graduating high school, but the sense of shame they described transformed into feelings of pride. Once they transformed their perception of the GED credential, they viewed it as an equivalent step to continue on their educational and career journeys. As they experienced transformations, they began to have different outlooks on themselves and believe in their future possibilities.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe how young adults experienced transformation through participation in a federally funded GED® program in the southeastern region of the state of Georgia. While GED programs have been empirically studied for other phenomena such as the health outcomes, employment, post secondary enrollment and attrition, crime referrals, and recidivism (Boudett et al., 2000; Caputo, 2005; Ikomi, 2010; Zajacova, 2012), I set out to describe how the GED program served as a transformational catalyst for these eight young adults who agreed to participate in this study. As a result of conducting this study, I became enabled to describe and create a composite of eight participants’ introspective views of their transformative experiences through the GED program.

After they shared their stories, common and unique themes were extracted and reduced to structural and textural themes then synthesized into an essence of transformation. It was through a phenomenological lens in this qualitative study that I channeled the insights of these eight participants’ understandings of their transformational experiences through the GED program.

Within this chapter, the following will be shared: (a) summary of the findings, (b) discussion, (c) implications, (d) limitations, and (f) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The summary of findings will be presented by briefly answering each of the four research questions that guided this study. The subsequent research questions were intended to look at the phenomenon of transformation from various views, circumstances, along with textural and structural descriptions to better describe and understand the participants’ transformational experiences through the GED program:
RQ1. How did young adults in a federally funded GED program understand transformation?

The one invariant constituent within the narratives for how the participants understood the phenomenon of transformation was the word change. As part of their change, the participants understood transformation as: (a) transformation happens in steps, (b) transformation is learned; (c) transformation is gradual: shifted and transitioned (e) transformation helps, (f) transformation is a big change, (g) transformations are made, (h) transformation comes as a domino effect, (i) transformation is becoming something different, and (j) transformation is a life turned around. Samples of the participants’ narratives highlight how they understood transformation. For example, Allison understood transformation as happening in steps:

My attitude changed; I have more patience. I had a baby. I was pregnant in the GED class. Then I end up finishing the GED class. Then I found a job. I had a job, so I was able to provide for my child so getting my GED helped me.

Beth understood transformation as something that is learned as she shared:

I can say I’ve changed because I’ve learnt to be more independent and I’ve learnt to not play around anymore. And I’ve learned that if you don’t have a GED then it’s not a good thing you won’t be able to get a job, and it will be something that you can be kind of comfortable with… I’ve learnt that umm, I’ve learnt that…umm I’ve changed in a way…

Transformation was understood as a change that happens gradually when Calvin used the words shifted and transitioned in the following:

But it changed me from basically being just a regular dude into being a man kind of…cause it kind of shifted me into manhood…took everything more serious cause I knew I was about to be getting into the real world, so the GED was
actually a good program—it helped transition me over…without pressuring me too much.

Transformation was understood as something that is helpful as Dannaliah expressed in the following, “I, um, it, self-confidence too it’s helped me with— not just with my confidence in my education: I have a ton of friends now.” Transformation was understood as a big change as Emily shared, “I’d have to say, the decision to go get my GED was the best decision and it’s opened up a lot of doors and changed me a lot!” Transformation was understood as a change that made them into something different as Fantasia shared, “I got pushed, it’s like, they made me into a stronger person…” Transformation was understood as a domino effect as Greg described it, “But it’s just one little change happened that just…that changed everything.”

Besides how Harold understood transformation as change, “I mean it’s like; I guess the program changed me,” Harold understood transformation as a life turned around, “Umm, I…guess I did a whole 180, I just turned my life around.”

**RQ2. How did participants describe their experience of transformation in a federally funded GED program?**

In the findings, the eight participants described their experiences of transformation by comparing the GED school as more positive than their experiences in high school. The comparisons of the GED program included: (a) the GED 20 day class length compared to four years of high school, (b) the classroom size was smaller than their high school class size, (c) the GED lessons focused on the basics and real world learning, (d) the GED instructor was perceived as more caring than their high school teachers, (e) the classroom environment was perceived as more comfortable, (f) the GED instructor was perceived to provide better instruction and classroom management, (g) attendance of the GED program was voluntary rather than
The participants described experiences in the GED program where the GED instructor forced them to function autonomously, encouraged them, and fostered their learning which in turn transformed them in multiple domains.

**RQ3.** What transformation(s) were described and perceived from the GED program?

In the findings, there were several transformational outcomes described and perceived by the participants: confidence, autonomy, and perspective. One of the transformations described and perceived by the participants was transformations in confidence. The subthemes of confidence included: (a) self confidence, (b) confidence in their abilities to accomplish goals, (c) confidence in the future possibilities, and (d) confidence in their job skills. Another finding was transformation into autonomous individuals including the subtheme of patience and value of time. Lastly, the participants described having a transformation in their perspective of the GED itself. There were a plethora of additional transformations that were perceived and described through the GED program in this study including the following: (a) confidence, (b) understanding how to balance life, (c) reintegration back into being a student, (d) work habits, (e) interpersonal skills, (f) appreciation, (g) attention span, (h) attitude, (i) curiosity, (j) patience, (k) self management, and (l) outlook. For example, Allison spoke of how she her attention span and her curiosity transformed through the GED program:

It helped me to pay attention; to go back and see what is really being said.

Sometimes I read something and I don’t understand what they are saying, and now if I read something, I can go back to it, and I look and understand what they are saying, what they are say…, what their meaning of the sentence is…what’s behind the sentence…basically reading between the lines.
The following narratives demonstrate some of the outcomes of transformation that occurred through the federally funded GED program. For example, Beth explained how her appreciation and interpersonal skill transformed, “I appreciate people more, and I’m willing to gain the trust of people, and you know just like valuing things more.” Fantasia pointed out how she learned to balance her life out as part of her transformation towards autonomy, “Yes, I learned how to balance my life better.” Greg shared how his viewpoint shifted, “My view about me as a person, but my view about me inside the world.” Likewise, Harold described his perspective shift, “Um, I don’t know I just started to look at a lot of things differently.” Beth summarized what transformed for her in the following narrative, “Um, the GED program has made me change in a way as far as responsibilities, having patience, wanting to do better for myself, and being more organized, and more willing to learn new things in order to conquer better opportunities.”

**RQ4.** What circumstances were involved with the experience of transformation?

The findings revealed in this study showed that the circumstance involved in the participants’ transformational experiences were that the GED was viewed as their best option and that their transformations were influenced by others. All eight of the participants left the traditional high school setting and came to the GED program because of various impasses such as: (a) kicked out of high school; (b) aged out of high school; (c) other programs took too long to finish or were not compatible; (d) incarcerated; (e) no legal guardian—unable to get back into high school; (f) withdrew from school because of truancy issues; (g) unable to return to regular school; and, (h) experienced the job market without a GED or high school diploma. In addition to viewing the GED program as their best option, and in some cases even their last option, the circumstances in the participants’ transformations involved the outside influence of others. The
circumstances leading to transformations included the influence of others such as their children, their moms, friends, family, the GED staff, and outside programs.

**Discussion**

Within this discussion section, the findings from the study will be compared to the empirical and theoretical literature from Chapter Two. The relationships between former studies and this study will be assessed and discussed for corroboration, divergence, and new contributions to literature on the GED and transformative learning theory. This discussion will be divided into two major sections: Empirical literature and the theoretical framework.

**Empirical Literature**

**How this study corroborated previous research.** Through this qualitative study, there were several findings that confirmed both previous qualitative and quantitative studies on similar topics; likewise, there were incidence of divergence and extension discovered when comparing the findings in this study to the review of literature. In this part of the discussion section, the insights provided by the participants will demonstrate corroboration to several prior studies such as the high school dropout issues and the outcomes from GED program participation (e.g., Bowers et al., 2013; Christle et al., 2007; Pagani et al., 2008). Although this study was small scale by design, the findings in this study confirmed several of the studies on high school dropout issues. For example, the study by Townsend et al. (2007) pointed out that there are a multitude of reasons why students leave traditional high school; this diversity of the high school dropout problem was corroborated when the participants shared their various reasons for leaving school before entering the GED program. Another finding that was supported was the propensity for high school dropouts to be more like classified as lower socioeconomic status. The factor of high school dropouts being more likely to be identified as lower socioeconomic
status was shown to be true from a smaller qualitative perspective found in this study as written by Christle et al. (2007). Because all of the participants for this study met low income eligibility requirements in order to participate in the GED preparation class for this particular WIA funded GED program it corroborated the predictive factor for leaving school (Christle et al., 2007), and substantiated the findings of Lee et al. (2011) who stated that a higher percent of dropouts were identified as having economic barriers. Looking at the costs on individuals who drop out of school such as the consequence of having difficulty finding jobs or moving forward in careers without credentials was corroborated in the participants’ narratives (Cameron & Heckman, 1993).

The concept that GED and adult education programs can be a catalyst for changing the outcomes for high school dropouts was confirmed by this present study (e.g., Mid-Plains, 2014; Neely & Griffin-Williams, 2013; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010) by showing that transformations occurred in habit and mind which led to different behaviors and outcomes. The outcomes were revealed from the inner thoughts of the participants and reflected through in the findings section of this study in the textural forms of the transformation including confidence, autonomy, and perspective shifts. Through the findings in this study, I was also able to confirm the concept of human gain impact for the GED credential to open doors to post secondary schools because many of the participants described their plans for post secondary education or were already participating in post secondary options such as college (Maralani, 2011). Although this study could not determine attrition rates from college, the findings from this study qualitatively corroborated the findings of the quantitative study by Murnane et al. (1997) that determined that GED recipients had a greater probability for entering post secondary options such as college:

Every participant in this study expressed a desire to further their education after the GED
program. Likewise, the findings in this study corroborated other studies that showed the propensity of GED earners to enter college (Maralani, 2011; Penner, 2011). The statement that the majority of colleges accept the GED as an admissions credential was confirmed by the participants’ narratives when they stated that they discovered that they were able to attend college and further their career goals using a GED credential (Mid-Plains, 2014).

When I compared the literature for the perception of the GED, the findings in this study confirmed Tuck’s (2012) study that stated that urban youth place a high value on earning their GED credential; I found an extension in the concept regarding urban youth’s perception of the GED (Schwartz, 2014). In my study, I found that the participants transformed their perception of the value of the GED from fear and shame to feelings of pride when they realized that the GED program provided them with a way to get back on track with their education and helped them reach their individual goals.

The concept of positive outcomes such as emancipatory learning and assisting marginalized adults to reintegrate back into society through GED programs was also confirmed through this study (Bridwell, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). Previous quantitative studies on the GED and prisoners were corroborated qualitatively through this study. For example, without an empirical way to prove that the GED lowered recidivism as shown by (Nuttall et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2000), there was a hint of lower risk of recidivism when Calvin revealed that the program did not leave him to go back into his circumstances and when Fantasia spoke about not looking to her past as a juvenile but only to her future as a productive adult. Additionally, the findings in this study were able to corroborate similar findings that GED preparation programs assist in positive changes such as improved family relationships, interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and setting goals for future aspirations (e.g. Illeris, 2014; Stevens-Long et al., 2012; Thomas,
2013; Tuck, 2012). The acquired skills described by the participants in this study confirmed Bridwell’s (2012) findings that determined participants learned how to research information and broadened their knowledge during the GED preparation class; the participants in this present study described acquiring new skills and perspectives that helped them manage their lives in new ways. Although, the words self-esteem were not explicitly spoken, the concept of entering adult programs such as GED programs with low self-esteem (confidence) as mentioned by Quigley (1997) was confirmed by this study through their descriptions of not having confidence until after they went through the program. In the study by Bingman and Ebert (2000), the findings of how individuals talked about having increased pride, confidence, feeling better about themselves, and increased interpersonal skills through a GED program was corroborated through this study.

Besides the high school problem and outcomes of the GED, the characteristics of an effective GED teacher as described by Wade (2011) was corroborated by the participants in this study who stated that the GED teacher, Ms. Long [pseudonym] in this study provided motivation, and gave them feelings of care and encouragement. The idea purported by Bingman, Ebert, & Smith (1999) that literacy skills learned from the GED program transferred to the workplace was also confirmed in this study when several of the participants mentioned how they used their new literacy skills to handle their lives differently and used their skills at their jobs.

How this study diverged from or extended previous research. While many of the findings from previous studies were corroborated through this qualitative study, there were several findings yielded from this study that diverged or extended previous studies. For example, the findings in this study did not support some of the constraint barriers for GED students in GED programs as noted by King (2012) including lack of family support, inadequate attendance, and lack of childcare. In contrast, the participants in this study revealed that their
family was supportive and influential, did not voice childcare as an issue, and described having good attendance in the GED class. Because this study was qualitative, I could not substantiate the studies on graduation rates (Bridgeland et al., 2009), nor could I confirm the costs that permanent high school dropouts have on society (e.g., D’Andrea, 2010; House, 2009; Stuit & Springer, 2010). Because of the qualitative design of this current study, the findings did not confirm the concept that high school dropouts are more likely to live in poverty over GED recipients as demonstrated by Boudett et al. (2000). Also, when comparing the literature for non economic benefits of the GED program, there was a divergent theme discovered. For instance, the study by Bingman and Ebert (2000) stated that adults in adult learning programs are already armed with confidence to perform in certain areas as Mager (1992) referred to as "success scenarios,” yet one theme that emerged in this study was that the participants’ confidence in different domains were transformed through the GED program-after they entered the GED program. Insight provided through the lived experiences of the participants in this study showed that instead of coming into the GED program with pre-existing confidence, the eight participants described having a transformational experience through their participation in the GED program; thus, the findings in this study differed from that aspect of Bingman and Ebert’s (2000) findings. Perhaps the difference between the former study and the study at hand was that the participants in Bingman and Ebert’s (2000) study were mature adults ages (30-76) whereas the participants in the present study were limited to young adults ages (18-24).

Because I did not follow these participants longitudinally, there was no data collected to confirm whether a difference exists or not for a college degree earned by a GED recipient as that of a high school graduate. I was unable to corroborate the quantitative findings that GED recipients were more likely to enter vocational schools over fours year schools therefore making
less money or that they had higher college attrition rates as stated by Cameron and Heckman (1993) because of the scope of this qualitative study.

**Novel contributions added to the literature.** After synthesizing the inner thoughts shared by the participants in this study, I was able to add several new contributions to the body of literature on the GED and transformative learning literature including: (a) how the participants understood transformation, (b) the non-economic outcomes of the GED, (c) how the participants compared a GED program classroom and a high school classroom, and (d) how they viewed the value of the GED.

Through this study, these eight participants provided a unique insight into how they understood the phenomenon of transformation through a federally funded GED program. Although processes and outcomes of transformative learning can be found in previous studies at multiple educational levels including the GED level (Bridwell, 2012) the participants expressed a deeper insight into how they understood transformation; therefore, adding to the body of literature. The reflection of the processes and outcomes of their transformation experiences provided by these young adults not only adds to the transformative learning literature but also provides a description of how these participants understand transformation (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Mezirow, 2000).

Although several economic and non-economic outcomes from the GED program have been empirically shown in previous studies (e.g., Cao et al., 1996; Caputo, 2005; Penner, 2011; Snider, 2010; Tuck, 2012) such as seeing themselves as better people and having improved interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bingman & Ebert, 2000; Thomas, 2013), this study yielded findings that added to the non-economic benefits of the GED that was not found in previous studies. For example, some of the transformations that these participants described through their
participation in the GED program were not shown in prior empirical studies such as: (a) their perspective shift of the GED, (b) their description of transformation into autonomous individuals, and (c) their new values placed on patience and time.

Another interesting finding that adds to the body of literature is how the participants compared a GED program classroom to their former high school classrooms. Most of the literature on the high school dropout problem focused on the reasons why students choose to drop out of school. Through this study the students who left high school for different reasons were able to provide a comparison between their experiences in high school and a GED classroom from a firsthand position. They voiced what didn’t work for them in high school as far as class size, classroom disruption, too broad of a curriculum, disengagement, and lack of empathy from their former high school teachers to that of the GED program’s smaller class size, better classroom management, focused curriculum, engaged learning environment, and a caring GED instructor. These students were young adults, aged 18-22, so their experiences with high school were not from extended past memories—they were more recent. As a former k-12 school teacher myself, I felt surprised to see a typical high school classroom through their eyes: In their eyes, the high school classroom was described as noisy, crowded, and non-conducive to learning, yet the GED classroom environment was described as calming, caring, and a place of learning.

Lastly, the perspective shift of the GED was another concept that I did not find in previous studies. I have found differences placed on the value of the GED credential in the body of empirical studies (Boudett et al., 2000; Cameron and Heckman, 1993; Thomas, 2013), but I did not found a perspective shift on the GED written about in previous GED or transformative learning theory literature. The participants in this study disclosed their perspectives on how they felt about the GED before and after their participation in the GED program. The research
questions probed for an understanding of what the GED meant to them. The design of this study and the specific interview questions revealed a shift in their perspective of what the GED class, GED test, and GED credential meant to them. Their insight into how GED students can change their opinion of the GED from negative ones to positive ones is a concept that can be added to the body of literature.

Furthermore, these novel findings resulted from a qualitative phenomenological study conducted in a specific region, a specific GED program, and a specific group of young adults who were identified as experiencing transformation through the GED program; the uniqueness of the combination of these factors add to the body of literature. Excluding the novelty of the design of the study, several outcomes from this study contribute new understanding to the body of literature on the GED and the transformative learning theory. The description provided by the participants in this study and amalgamated by myself that contribute to the literature such as: (a) their descriptions of how they understood transformation, (b) their documented outcomes of the GED, (c) their comparisons between a high school the GED program, and (d) their descriptions of how their perspective of the GED shifted through their participation in the GED program. In the next section, I will compare how the findings of this study compare to the transformative learning theory.

Theoretical Framework

I will continue with a description of what has been revealed from previous studies and potential discoveries that lay ahead from this study on transformation through participation in a GED program by comparing the findings with transformative learning theory. Forthcoming will be comparisons made for the constructs, terminology, processes, outcomes, and identification of transformative learning. Using this study to exam two contrasting views on the constructs of
transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx, 2012) provided confirmation to both viewpoints. For example, Mezirow (2000) described transformative learning as changing paradigms within adult learners was substantiated through the insights provided by the participants in this study who described changing their perspectives on certain issues, changing how they viewed themselves, and their outlook on the world. Likewise, the concept that transformative learning involves self-examination and involves a holistic change promoted by Dirkx (2012) was also corroborated as the participants described questioning former behaviors and the descriptions of complete transformations emerged in this study.

The concept of examining bias through reflection (Mezirow, 2000) was revealed by the participants shift in their perspective of the value of the GED: Most of them described having a former bias towards the GED before going through the GED program. The participants exhibited their journey towards becoming critical thinkers (Mezirow, 2000) by describing their former models of school, the GED, and themselves as learners, creating new perspectives, becoming more open-minded, and reflecting on their former preconceived notions during the interview process. The findings from this study elaborated on the constructs of transformation in transformative learning literature such as acquisition of new skills, enhanced autonomy, shifts in paradigms, and the ten phases of transformative learning (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Mezirow, 2000; Snyder, 2008; Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

Mezirow (2000) looked at shifting perspective of adult learners. The participants in this study described having a shift in their perspectives of themselves within the world, their outlook, and of the GED. The alternate view of transformative learning constructs (psychoanalytic, psycho-developmental, and social emancipator) promoted by Taylor (2000) was also supported by the findings. For example, Taylor’s (2000) definitions of transformative learning included
transformed confidence and a new appreciation for interpersonal relationships: These aspects of transformation emerged from the participants’ narratives. Another terminology that was identified in this study was the concept of self-formation which involves bringing out the inner qualities of the person. According to Dirkx (2012) self-formation includes an examination of past behaviors that were self-defeating, and where the goal of transformation is to reach for the authentic self. Many of the participants described looking at their past behaviors and attitudes, becoming aware that it was up to them to change, and reaching for goals that they wanted to accomplish for themselves.

According to Clark (1993) individuals that experience transformative learning become different enough that others can recognize the change: Clark’s (1993) idea that transformations can be seen by outsiders was supported because the participants for the study were referred by third party individuals who perceived their transformation as part of the participant selection process. The characteristic of transformative learning outcomes promoted by Yorks and Kasl (2006) that transformational outcomes result in a comprehensive changes of how the adult learner views and experiences the world and involves personal or interpersonal healing was substantiated through this study when the participants described looking at things completely different, making conscious decisions to change past behaviors, healing their family relationships, and having complete transformed lives (p. 46).

**Processes.** The processes of transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (2000) were exemplified by the transformational experiences described the participants in this study (table 3). Another transformative learning process that was shown to be true through this study was the progression of transformation that occur such as self-examination of former beliefs and an understanding for need to change (Dirkx, 2012). Many of the participants described examining
past attitudes, behaviors, and habits than making the decision to change their attitudes, behaviors, and habits to ones that shift them towards becoming better students, parents, and people. For instance, Greg described actually looking at himself in the mirror as he had a wakeup call on his past and how he became aware that he had to change his self-defeating behaviors and attitudes if he were to succeed in any school.

Table 4

*Ten Phases of Transformative Learning through the GED Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ten Transformative Learning Phases</th>
<th>Transformation processes through the GED</th>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Disorienting dilemma,</td>
<td>The participants left traditional high school either voluntarily or involuntarily: Got pregnant, fathered children, kicked out of school, incarcerated, or dropped out of school. Unable to proceed with their education or careers without high school diplomas. Difficulty finding employment. Feelings of insecurity and hopelessness prior to the GED program.</td>
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<td>Phase 2: Self-examination,</td>
<td>Began to look at self closer, and questioned former behaviors and attitudes. They expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of themselves. Examined self as a high school student versus a GED student. Examined past behaviors, work habits, and values. Did not want to embarrass family, did not want to let family down. View as a person and view of them as a person inside the world was examined.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Critical assessment of assumptions,</td>
<td>They described looking at things differently. Questioned former perspectives on the GED program and GED credential based on assumptions. Assumed the GED was harder, would be looked down upon, or not accepted. Began to make new judgments based on new insights. Assessed prior goals and made new ones. Thoughts changed on relationships with people. Opened their minds to future possibilities: Went from not caring to care about the future.</td>
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Phase 4: Recognition that one’s dissatisfaction and the process of transformation are shared, Interacted with other GED students. Recognized that they had similar experiences as other GED seeking students. Discourse with other students during the GED class was part of their transformation process towards increased interpersonal skills. Realization that other students in the GED program were also seeking a change.

Phase 5: Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, Explored what they could do with their GED credential. Researched college majors and new jobs. Looked at options for future decisions including when to start college, where to live, and how to become responsible for their own lives. Expressed wanting careers not jobs. Explored adopting new attitudes and behaviors.

Phase 6: Planning a course of action, Made action plans for future college and career goals. Either enrolled in college or trade school, scheduled ACT/SAT exams, applied for jobs, or made business plans.

Phase 7: Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, Acquired work readiness skills, resume writing, interviewing skills, research skills, interpersonal skills, work ethic, basic skills (math and reading), patience, and the value of time; learned how to balance and manage life. Increased their numeracy and literacy skills.

Phase 8: Trying new roles, Went from being non-students to students. Tried new roles as employees, entrepreneurs, and post secondary students. Became responsible for life decisions and started taking ownership over self and personal environment; participants with children took on their responsibilities as parents.

Phase 9: Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships, Confidence transformed: self-confidence, confidence in accomplishing goals, confidence in the future, and confidence and competence in educational and work skills. Transformed into autonomous individuals: Became independent, matured, increased patience and shifted attitudes and values. Started looking at
Phase 10: Reintegrating into life dictated by new perspectives.

The participants reintegrated into life with new confidence, autonomy, patience, attitudes, focus, and perspectives. They became self-reliant, more responsible, and more appreciative of opportunities. They were willing to take time to learn new things and accomplish goals. They shifted their priority from childish goals to mature ones. They became disciplined workers willing to persevere through difficult tasks. Appreciated people more and willing to trust people. They started doing things they would not normally do such as studying, cleaning home, working, and taking action steps towards reaching self-created goals.

**Outcomes.** Taking a look at specific outcomes of transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (2000) such as gaining autonomy and becoming more responsible adults was shown to be true through this study: One of the major themes that emerged as transformations experienced by the participants was their transformations into autonomous individuals. Other outcomes of transformative learning by Mezirow (2000) substantiated through this study was how the participants described assumptions, imagined alternate plans, and acquired interpersonal skills. Dirkx’s (2012) transformative learning outcome of adult learners becoming aware of their formed defense mechanisms that shaped their views and behaviors was also confirmed through this study when the participants described how they use to behave in the traditional school (e.g., laying head on desk, skipping, not paying attention). Perspective shifts as stated by Taylor and Cranton (2012) were expressed in different ways.

**Identification of transformative learning.** Besides comparing this study with the constructs, terminology of transformative learning, and processes and outcomes, I also compared
the findings of this study with the methods of identification of transformative learning in the review of literature. For example: (a) the participants transformation processes through the GED program were compared to Mezirow’s ten phases of transformative learning, (b) specific elements of transformative learning - e.g., Dirkx (2012) concept of self-formation, Gunnlaugson’s (2007) idea of presencing [sic] Taylor’s (2000) elements of confidence and increased interpersonal skills were demonstrated to be true; (c) shifts in attitudes and behaviors were described, (d) shifts towards more open minded individuals were revealed, (e) changes in attention and focus during learning were revealed, (f) transformed autonomy emerged, (g) acquisition of educational and work skills were described, (h) increased self-awareness was voiced, and (i) self-articulations of their own transformations took place on the initial surveys and during the interviews (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; Snyder, 2008).

**Novel additions to transformative learning literature.** Besides confirming and expanding past transformative learning theory literature, there were a few findings that may add to the body of transformative learning literature. The first addition is that because these individuals were young adults (ranging between ages 18-22) they did not come to the program with many job skills, educational skills, or life skills to begin with; therefore, the transformations they described were immense changes. Secondly, the specific GED program that these participants attended was only 20 days long; therefore, the transformations that were described by the participants happened in a relatively short time period (except for Beth who took more than 20 days to complete the program). In consequence, these young adults went through the transformative learning phases quickly and experienced major life changes transforming their confidence, autonomy, perspectives, and acquiring new skills. Many of the participants experienced having their first jobs through the GED program. Unlike other transformative
learning theory literature where adult learners come into learning environments armed with established jobs or some formal educational skills, the adult learners in this study came with very little to no job skills, educational skills, or life skills. The GED program served as a catalyst that produced multiple transformational outcomes: Self-confidence, confidence in accomplishing goals, confidence in future possibilities, confidence in job and educational skills, confidence in interpersonal skills, transformed autonomy (independence, responsibility, appreciation for people, value of patience and time) their perspective and outlook on life. Hence, the 20 day GED program used in this study produced major transformations for young adult learners quickly. The GED program may be used as a model of a learning environment conducive to transformative learning for other adult learners.

A third interesting finding that may add to transformative learning theory literature was how the interviews during the study played a role in the transformative learning process. While being interviewed, many of the participants began to reflect and experience the transformative learning concept of *presencing* shared by Gunnlaugson (2007). During the interviews, the participants shifted their schema from past ones to present ones. The participants reflected on their past behaviors, their past assumptions, and their new paradigms. There is no evidence that they didn’t experience reflections or schemata shifts before their individual interviews, but it was during their interviews where they voiced their inner thoughts and reflections: Some of the participants seemed to experience an awareness of how much they changed during the interview process itself. Examples of this notion were the interviews conducted with Dannaliah and Harold: They seemed to realize their present schema as they were asked to reflect on their experiences in the GED program during their interviews. For instance, Dannaliah looked around her dorm room at all of her belongings (she described only having a book bag worth of
belongings when she first started the GED program). As she looked around the room, it seemed as if she was transitioning towards her present schema during the interview itself—as if she didn’t know before the interview how much she had changed. Another example was when Harold answered the questions during the interview and reflected on his past and his present views and behaviors that he became aware of how his perspective changed. Thus, the interview in this phenomenological study became part of the reflection process of transformative learning.

**Implications**

The implications resulting from the findings of this study include: (a) a better understanding of the value and appreciation for the GED program as an alternate route for individuals who have withdrawn from high school, (b) an insight into problems that some students have with the traditional high school experience, (c) differences between this GED classroom and high school classrooms that were deemed effective for positive transformations for these participants, and (d) effective strategies used by this particular GED teacher and GED program that can inform other GED teachers, educators, and other educational programs.

**Better Understanding of Value of the GED Program**

Informing the public to the positive attributes of the GED program may lead to a greater number of GED recipients which can help offset the costs to society attributed to permanent high school dropouts such as: (a) increases with violent crime referrals, (b) correlations with health outcomes, and (c) cost to the economy (e.g., Alliance for Excellent Education, n.d.; Breslow, 2012; House, 2009; Ikomi, 2010; Rogers et al., 2010; U.S. Department of Education Institute, 2012). Also, having the participants equate the weight of the GED credential to a high school diploma can reduce the stigma of searching out the GED credential as a valid secondary option. The recommendation is that accurate information about GED programs and GED credential be
provided to students who withdraw from high school and their parents.

Furthermore, the information yielded from the findings in this study may specifically inform the funding agency as to transformative qualities of this particular GED program, and use that information to increase funding to serve more youth who withdrew from high school. This particular GED program may serve as a model for other GED programs for producing transformative learning outcomes for GED seekers.

**Insight into Problems with the Traditional High School Experience**

In addition to informing the public of the transformational effects of the GED program, the comparisons made between the participants high school experiences and their GED class room experiences can provide an insight into what is not working in traditional high schools. For instance, the participants were having difficulty achieving goals, lacking in confidence and skills, and learning basic math and reading skills during their time in high school; whereas, within a short amount of time (20 days) the same students experienced a learning environment that was conducive to learning, completion of goals, building of self-confidence, autonomy, and interpersonal skills. Many of the participants described being able to focus better because the GED classroom environment was calmer and comforting; whereas, they described former high school classrooms of fighting, people throwing things, and disengagement. Looking at why the same students could learn in the GED classroom, but experienced difficulty learning in the traditional high school should be looked at by the local school districts and by the Department of Education. The findings through this study not only revealed the transformative qualities of the GED program (a concept already considered by prisons and parole boards who send prisoners and paroles to earn their GED diplomas) but also highlighted the failures of the traditional high school systems, and provided additional reasons why students are leaving high school.
Differences between this GED Classroom and High School Classrooms

Another implication yielded from this study is how the participants shared their appreciation for the curriculum of the GED program including the non-compulsory aspect the GED program. The participants described an appreciation for how they were treated like adults which in turn became part of their transformational experience. For example, they described becoming more autonomous, responsible, and mature. They also liked how the GED school taught only the basics (math, reading, science, and social studies) rather than being forced to take electives. By being taught the basics along with work readiness skills as part of this GED program’s curriculum, the participants described feeling prepared for the real world and able to proceed on their next educational step. They also described a feeling of care from the GED staff which in turn made them care about their education. Because their attendance was voluntary and they felt respected, the participants began to assume autonomy for their own learning; these aspects of this specific GED program can be used in curriculum development in both traditional high schools and adult education programs. Perhaps, even in traditional schools, school should be voluntary past a certain age. Also, school districts could offer programs that offer shorter programs that focus only on the basics for students who choose that path. These participants described their high schools as boring, a waste of time with space filling activities. These same participants described the GED program as interesting and a placed where they were able to grow and learn. Another aspect brought up in the comparisons between traditional school and the GED program was how the GED class was held in one classroom which they described as a comfortable environment. The size of the GED classroom was also mentioned by the participants who described it as a better learning environment. Classroom size is a topic of
contention, but the findings in this study demonstrated the benefits of smaller classroom size ratios for some students.

**Effective Strategies used by this Particular GED Teacher and GED Program**

Another implication from the findings was how the participants described the GED instructor. The GED teacher was deemed to be an effective teacher by the participants who described having difficulty learning from teachers in their past. They appreciated how she kept them all on the same page regardless of what level they came into the GED program: By design this GED classroom is a non-differentiated classroom. Teaching all the students the identical lesson from the beginning to the end of the program was a strategy used by this specific GED instructor. Disallowing other students to go ahead of one another during the lessons allowed the students who needed to learn each lesson from the beginning without interruptions was described as an effective teaching strategy by the participants. The participants described an appreciation for being able to get through entire lessons and taking turns reading or practicing the math problems on the board without feeling like they were different from one another. Perhaps, the concept of differentiation needs to be reconsidered. These students described being able to learn more effectively in this non-differentiated GED classroom.

Even though the GED program is short (20 days), the students expressed getting to know the teacher, learning from her, and had the feeling that she wanted them to succeed in life. The impact of this specific GED teacher could inform the training of other GED instructors and traditional high school teachers by modeling her teaching strategies and her processes that resulted in positive outcomes. As the participants’ transformational experiences came about through a 20 day GED program designed to prepare students for a focused series of GED tests, the recommendation is to inform the public, parents, and students that the GED is a viable option
for students who withdraw from school (voluntarily or involuntarily) that has been shown through this study to produce positive transformational outcomes. Rather than being viewed as a negative secondary education option, the GED credential should be considered as a positive choice for some students. Besides informing the public to the transformational qualities of the GED, high schools can revise or offer alternate programs that simulate the GED program. These students did not flourish in the traditional high school setting: Many of them described boredom, lack of attention, disengagement, and withdrawal, yet the same participants were able to thrive and transform through this GED program.

**Limitations**

The inherent limitations that may impact the validity and reliability in this qualitative study were identified and reflected upon in the following section including: (a) researcher skills, (b) accurate descriptions of the phenomenon, (c) interview shortcomings, (d) researcher as data analysis instrument, (e) potential biases, and (f) identification of transformation. The validity of this study was dependent on my skills as a researcher to collect and analyze the data. The extent of how the findings represent an accurate description of transformation was limited by recollections of the participants’ experiences and by the representations of those experiences by my efforts during the study. Multiple interviews were conducted using qualitative interviewing strategies to overcome limitations during the interviewing process.

Because I was the instrument of data analysis, the themes that emerged were based on my personal understandings, perceptions, and potential biases. To transmit the findings accurately during data analysis, I utilized the phenomenology data analysis techniques recommended by Moustakas (1994) and the coding tips Bogden and Biklen (2007) shared by Dr. Milacci (personal conversation, January 27, 2015): Themes and subthemes were allowed to emerge after multiple
coding passes, imaginative variation, and the reduction process prescribed in phenomenological studies. The Epoche process was dependent on my ability to continuously set aside my biases throughout the duration of the study and the write-up. The surveys used for participants to self-attest to their transformations were researcher created and relied on self-reporting which may impact the validity and reliability.

In addition to the limitations on the validity, there were limitations on the reliability of the research findings in this study. The limitations that would impact the transferability of this study include: (a) the geographic location of the site, (b) the particular GED program and its curriculum, (c) the individuality of the participants, (d) the uniqueness of the GED instructor, (e) the participant selection process, and (f) the number of participants. Although the research plan can theoretically be replicated in future studies to study transformation in other federally funded GED programs, there are factors that may impact the ability to replicate the study including the specific regionalism and curriculum of the GED program, the uniqueness of the GED instructor, and the participant referral process.

The identification of the participants as experiencing the phenomenon was reliant on the third parties’ perceptions and definitions of transformation and the self-attest statements from the participants which may limit the validity and reliability of this study. The number of participants available for recruitment was limited by the number of valid referrals. The participants were referred by third party individuals (the GED program’s staff members) who witnessed or perceived the individuals transformations through the GED program. The method of participant selection was designed to reduce research bias and to validate the participants experience with the phenomenon of transformation through the GED program. A total of eleven potential participants were referred to the study over a four month period of time. Successful recruitment
of participants was dependent on having accurate contact information. Out of the eleven referred individuals, eight were successfully recruited and volunteered to participate in the study; three were not recruited because one moved, one changed their contact information, and one chose not to participate. The decision was made to collect in-depth data from the eight recruited participants as that number is within the range of recommended number of participants for phenomenological studies and it was in the range proposed in this approved research prior to beginning this study. According to Moustakas (1994) there are no definitive or restricted requirements for the number of participants in phenomenology. Past phenomenological researchers provided different recommendations for the range of the number of participants in phenomenological studies to reach an extensive exploration of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). To ensure the greatest degree of validity and reliability to the findings, several techniques were employed throughout the study including: triangulation, member checking, constant comparison, safekeeping research records, and writing the findings using thick, rich descriptions.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Several recommendations for future research are proposed after considering this study’s findings, limitations, and research boundaries. One recommendation would be to conduct a phenomenological study at a different GED program site to better understand whether similar GED students would experience transformations through different funded GED programs with different GED instructors. A second recommendation would be to change the participant selection process in a future phenomenological study because the participant selection process added an outsider’s perspective of the participants’ transformational experiences. For example, a similar phenomenological study could be designed in a way that recruited GED students who
identify themselves as having experienced transformation through self-attest statements.

To determine the lasting effects of transformational outcomes reported in this study, another recommendation would be to replicate this study with participants five years removed from the GED program experience. Other qualitative approaches could be used to determine more information about the transformative effect of the GED program. For example, a case study would be helpful to provide an in-depth description of an intact cohort of GED students, the GED instructor, and the GED program. A grounded theory approach could allow a theory to emerge about GED program’s processes that contribute to the participants’ transformative learning experiences.

Changing the purpose and research questions for future studies are other recommendations such as focusing on specific transformative outcomes that emerged in the finding through this study. For instance, the researcher could focus on how the participants experience change in their autonomy or confidence through their participation in the GED program. Another finding from this study that sparked my curiosity was the comparisons that the participants described between traditional high schools and this GED program. A future study could be designed to understand the differences between high schools and GED programs as the phenomenon to study. Differences that were described between high school experiences and experiences with the GED program are topics that should be explored further. Focusing on those differences in a future study may help understand why the participants, who did not succeed in the traditional school setting, described positive transformations through the GED program especially in light of the fact that Georgia was ranked 48th out 50 states for the number of high school graduates based on percentage of ninth graders who graduated on time (United Health Foundation, 2014). Learning about effective teaching strategies of the GED instructor in
this study could also serve as the focus of interest in a future case study to better understand the teaching strategies that were effective in these participants’ transformational experiences; this knowledge could help other GED instructors as well as traditional high school educators.

In addition to recommended future qualitative studies, several quantitative studies could be designed to quantitatively measure the transformative effects of the GED program. For example, future participants recruited from multiple GED programs could complete transformative scale instruments before and after their participation in GED programs to measure various factors of the GED program that affect transformation; likewise, specific elements of transformative learning could be measured. A quantitative correlational research could be designed to compare correlations between different aspects of GED programs that lead to transformational experiences by looking at different independent variables.

Additionally, a comparison could be made between GED programs that vary in the length of time in a future study. A research question could be devised to ask whether the length of time of a program impacts the transformative outcomes differently. The length of the GED program would be an interesting topic to explore as many of the participants stated that the length of time in this study’s GED program contributed to their transformational experience. The GED program’s curriculum also could be a topic of interest to measure whether there are differences between the transformative outcomes between different programs both federally funded and privately ran GED programs. Similarly, a comparative study could be designed to compare different GED teachers and measure for significance. These future research recommendations using different research methods and lenses could help describe and understand the transformative affect of GED programs. The strength of this study is that better understandings
were derived of transformational experiences through GED programs as they were voiced by participants who lived through the experiences.

Summary

When I first set out to conduct this study, I had a preconceived notion that GED seekers were experiencing transformations in hope through their participation in the GED program. After I carried out the study and systematically set aside my prior thoughts by instead listening to those who actually experienced the transformation, I was able to learn that these individuals were not transforming in hope: They already had hope for change when they entered the GED program. After seaming together their inside worlds and stories, I determined that with their view of the GED as their last option, their positive experiences with the GED program, and the influence of others that their confidence, autonomy, and perspectives were transformed.

Through this qualitative phenomenological study, I described how young adults experienced transformation through their participation in a federal funded GED program by gathering stories from eight participants who were referred and successfully recruited to participate in the study. The retellings of their lived experiences with the phenomenon were audio recorded, analyzed, synthesized, and re-storied by the researcher to create an essence of their experiences. In chapter one, the background of the problem was outlined, the purpose of the study was stated, research questions were formulated, the role of the researcher was defined, limitations and delimitations for the study were framed, the significance of the study was highlighted, and the theoretical framework for the study was presented. In chapter two, a review of literature on the topic including former studies on the GED and transformative learning theory literature were compared and contrasted to provide a basis for the research and to determine how the present research topic added to the existing body of literature. In chapter three, I explained
the research plan and made justifications for the: (a) research method, (b) design, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, and (e) ethical considerations planned for the study. In chapter four, I introduced the eight participants to the reader through brief vignettes then synthesized the textural and structural findings into themes that emerged out of the data analysis process. In chapter five, I shared the significance and implications of the findings, comparisons to the empirical and theoretical literature review, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the study. Stand out concepts yielded from this study included the transformative qualities of a 20 day federally funded GED program and the comparisons made between the GED program and high school classrooms which are implications for understanding what was not working in traditional high schools and what worked in this GED classroom. These participants described transformations in a learning environment described as calmer as more caring than their former high school experience. These participants described the GED program as a place that became a shelter for them to transform.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

GED Program Participant Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Participant:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions: Use the following scale in choosing your responses:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Neutral/No Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Somewhat Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Attest Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a result of attending the GED program:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have begun to think more about my life circumstances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that more options are available to me now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I started to set more goals and determine a plan for my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand new things that will help me achieve my goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have taken on new challenges or responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have more confidence in myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a different outlook on life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that I have changed personally.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B
Referral Form

Transformation of Participants in a GED Program

Please fill out this form to refer individuals that you perceive to have changed through the GED program:

1. Name and contact information for the referring individual:

Name: ______________________________________________

Address: ______________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

Phone: _______________________________  Alternative phone number: __________________
E-mail: ______________________________________________

2. Name and contact information for referral:

Name: ______________________________________________

Address: ______________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

Phone: _______________________________  Alternative phone number: __________________
E-mail: ______________________________________________

3. Relationship to the referral______________________________________.

4. How long have you known this person? _________________________.

5. How well do you know this individual? a. casually,  b. well, c. very well

6. Have you observed a change in this individual?_________________________.

7. Please briefly describe your observation of this individual before and after his or her transformation through the GED program. (e.g., what changes were observed?)

BEFORE: 

AFTER:

OTHER COMMENTS:
Appendix C

Participant Recruiting Script

Hello______________.

My name is Sherrie Mitchell and I am a doctoral student conducting research on transformational experiences that some young adults undergo through participation in the General Education Development (GED) program. I am inviting you to take part in my research study because you were referred by a staff member of the GED program who believes that you have transformed as a result of your participation in the GED program.

As part of the research, I would ask you to:

- Fill out a survey form which should take approximately 10 minutes.
- Be interviewed privately, which should take between 30 minutes to an hour at an agreed upon time and place, and the interview will be audio-recorded.
- About a month later, participate in an audio-recorded focus group interview with other participants in the study which should take between 30 to 90 minutes.
- Once your interview is written down, you will be given the opportunity to review your interview and double check the interpretation of your words; you can make changes or comments to your written interview using a red ink pen.

The focus of the survey and interviews will be questions that ask you to talk about how you think you have changed as a result of attending the GED program. Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary. Your information that you provide will be confidential: The data will be linked to your name through a coding system and I will use a pseudonym and not your real name in the dissertation paper.

If you would like to participate in my research, I would like to begin by scheduling a time for you to go over the consent form and complete the survey then later schedule a time for your individual interview. Please call me if you have any questions at (912) 223-4734 or email me at smitchell3@liberty.edu
Appendix D

Consent Form

Transformation through Participation in a General Education Development Program
A Qualitative Research Project
Sherrie L. Mitchell
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to take part voluntarily in a research study of Transformation through the General Education Development (GED) program. You were selected as a potential participant because someone who perceives that you have undergone a transformation through the GED program has referred you for this study. I ask that you read this consent form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Sherrie L. Mitchell, a doctoral student in the School of Education, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia (ED.D. student doctoral dissertation).

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is: to describe how young adults experience transformation through participation in a federally funded GED program from the perspective of the individuals who have experienced transformation. My hope is that through better understanding how the GED program may help some individuals undergo life changes, it may assist the participant on their own personal educational journeys, inform the public of the transformative experiences of GED students, and enhance the value of the GED program. This study can also add to the literature already known about the GED program.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: (a) give written informed consent to participate in the study; (b) complete a GED Participant Program Survey that should take approximately 10 minutes; (c) be interviewed via audio recording privately at a mutually agreed upon site for a period of up to one hour, answering questions concerning your experiences of transformation through the GED program; (d) at a later designated time, participate in a focus group interview with other participants at mutually agreed upon site for a period of up to one hour, answering questions concerning your shared experiences of transformation through the GED program with other volunteers; (e) review the written transcript of your interview to check for accuracy of the written interpretations and add your input to clarify any misunderstandings of your personal interview by making written comments or changes using a red ink pen, and (f) give your written approval of the accuracy for the transcribed interview using a red ink pen. Any comments or changes that you make on your written interview will be kept in my research journal.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

First, the risks of this research are no more than you would encounter in everyday life. Second, if the interview process were to produce an emotional disturbance to the point that you could not continue, your interview session will be terminated. An exception to absolute confidentiality would be disclosure by a participant about child abuse or neglect, elder abuse, or the intent to harm self or others. This disclosure would require that this information be reported to the proper authority to avoid risk to anyone involved.
There are no benefits to individual participants. Your participation will help gain a better understanding of the transformations that some individuals experience by participating in a GED program. The stories that you share about your transformational experiences through the GED can also help the GED program, GED instructors, perception of the GED program, and future GED students, which can benefit society.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Your personal identification will remain confidential and your privacy protected at all times; your privacy will be protected by not sharing information. Data will be stripped of personally identifiable information. The consent forms and data will be stored in a locked cabinet, passwords will be used on computer files, and a coding system will be created for pseudonyms and stored in a separate location. If the study is published, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. The written transcribed interviews and recorded interviews will be stored in the filing cabinet of the primary researcher for three years and then erased. You will be identified using a code and your identity will only be known by the primary researcher. If you decide to participate in a focus group interview, I cannot assure the same level of confidentiality and privacy as provided in the individual interviews.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. The following study is a non-mandatory portion of the GED program. If you decide not to participate in the study or decide to withdraw from the study, it will not affect your ability to remain in the GED program nor will it affect your relationship with the staff at the GED program site. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with GED Prep [pseudonym] or Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, I will delete your individual interview from the digital audio file and destroy any written transcripts or documents that pertain to you. If you withdraw from the focus group, I will digitally edit out your portion of the focus group interview.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Sherrie L. Mitchell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at smitchell3@liberty.edu or telephone: (912) 223-4734. Since Sherrie L. Mitchell is a student at Liberty University, you may also contact her Faculty Advisor, Dr. Gary Kuhne, at gwkuhne@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study. Since the study involves audio-recording, please indicate your consent to being audio-recorded by checking the box: [ ]

Signature: ____________________________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Investigator: _____________________________ Date: ________________
August 19, 2014

Sherrie Mitchell
IRB Approval 1922.081914: Phenomenology of Transformation through Participation in a General Education Development Program

Dear Sherrie,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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