RE-FRAMING ADULT STUDENT SUCCESS: UNDERSTANDING AND IDENTIFYING SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES FOR ADULT STUDENTS IN ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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This work is dedicated to the students. It is dedicated to the students who made me realize the urgency that is needed to create education systems that see a student for who they are and what they can be and not a measure of what they should be or cannot be. This is dedicated to the students who put their trust in education systems to support them in their journey in life.

I began my education career working at a school named after Dr. Maya Angelou. From my first day at that school, I changed the way I viewed education and the very purpose of education. I found myself working in a school where hope was created in a space that could be seen as hopeless. I felt as though magic was happening each day and together, the team of educators and staff that worked there, pushed hard for this special space to be created and for students to recognize their identities outside of a label and their true potential. When I was there, a quote from Dr. Angelou always guided me in my daily actions and continues to guide me today. Dr. Angelou said, “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

In education and in our everyday lives, we have the power to make people feel whole and to make people feel like the best version of themselves. This work is not only dedicated to all of the students who have impacted me by their strength, perseverance, and fortitude, but to also the educators I have worked with that have pushed against the traditional norms and paradigms of education to make students feel whole. It is hard work to constantly push against what is perceived as the way things should be, so here’s to the pushing that lies ahead and the continued positive outcomes that will be generated as students are made to feel whole.

To my former students, my current students, and my future students, do not stop fighting for your worth. To all the educators, never stop fighting for students’ worth and the desire to shift traditional notions inside of our education student to encompass and embrace all students’ worth and value.
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Thank you to all the professors I had the pleasure of learning from in my time at University of Pennsylvania. A special thank you to Dr. Michael Johanek for leading a program that embraces the mindset of the practitioner and creates a space where action can be reflected on. Thank you to Martha Williams for being the most amazing program coordinator and for answering all questions, emails, and inquiries any time of day. A big thank you to my cohort colleagues. I always tell people that my time in this program was shaped by learning from you and being able to sit around the table with each of you. Our weekends together helped me bring a new lens and perspective to what I was facing in my own work environment. I must give a special shout out to my Team e-Merge, you know who you are. Crystal, Nikole, Jeff, and Jerry – thank you. Our conversations have pushed me to think critically about the work we all do and the work in this study. Without the support and friendship, we have formed throughout these three years, I do not think the journey would have been quite the same. When there were moments throughout these
last few years that felt isolating, I knew I could turn to all of you and your energy and motivation would push me forward. Thank you! I look forward to the Team e-Merge journey ahead of us.

I also must say a big thank you to my family and friends. Thank you to my amazing mom, Joy, and dad, Harvey, for providing words of encouragement every step of the way. When I thought the task was too daunting or thought the future seemed too far away, my mom and dad always kept me focused on the present and reminded me that the end was in sight. Thank you for telling me to keep writing and to keep working. Mom and dad, your unyielding support of me and all I do is what keeps me going. Thank you to my siblings for their encouragement and belief in my work and my ideas. Courtney, Austin, Lindsey, Marney, and Ryan, thank you for always checking in and for providing that motivation and support that was so needed. Thank you to all my friends and the entire community of support for taking the steps on this journey and providing cheerleading when needed and words of wisdom to carry on. All of my friends have been part of this journey every step of the way, and I cannot say thank you enough. You know who you are, and the list is far too long to name everyone! But thank you to each of you. Your support and your energy are both part of this final study as well. The journey and process of this study has shown me that I have a truly phenomenal community of support and my friends are one of a kind.

Finally, I want to thank all the students and staff at the Inspire Center, those whose voices are heard in this study and those who are not. Thank you to everyone at the Inspire Center for allowing me to live out my idea and vision for the study in our special place that we call home each day. Thank you to the amazing Inspire Center team for the work you do each day and for the passion you bring to your job. Thank you to each Inspire Center student for being your unique self and for saying yes to returning to school and taking a chance on a new model and a new experience.

This study is the work of so many voices, ideas, experiences, and brainstorm sessions. Without every step along the way and every person that I interacted with; this study would not be complete. Thank you to my whole community of support, you were all heard and felt throughout
this process and journey. You are part of this final product and I am so grateful for the presence of each of you in my life. Thank you.
ABSTRACT

RE-FRAMING ADULT STUDENT SUCCESS: UNDERSTANDING AND IDENTIFYING SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES FOR ADULT STUDENTS IN ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Chelsea Kirk
Alexander Posecznick

There are many consequences that surface as a result of not having a high school diploma, and the U.S. is facing a drop out crisis which is disproportionately affecting African America, Latino, and Native American students. As such, many students from under-represented backgrounds thus find themselves reenrolling in school through adult education programs. Adult students who have faced significant educational inequality in their lives pose a unique student profile in the education system, which leads us to question the very model and structures that exist.

Adult education programs are created to serve a need in the community and promote adult student success. Yet, what is success for adult students? In the traditional education system, success typically means graduation, college and career readiness, or even gifted and talented programs. These are all orientations of success that define and mold school structure, school systems, and school policies to generate student success. However, because of their relationship to the educational system from other times in their lives, adult education programs should not simply assume that their students share one of these traditional orientations towards success. Understanding what success means for adult students with a particular history with education is essential to preventing drop out in the present. Thus, it is critical to understand what adult students seek to achieve through reenrolling in an adult education program to inform school structure. Additionally, it is necessary to understand what the staff who supports adult students understands as success for this student group, to also help shape school structure that finds successful outcomes.

This exploratory, qualitative study provided the space for students and staff in an adult education program to have a voice and share their experiences, stories, and opinions around
education and success orientations. Theories of social reproduction and deficit models were applied as a conceptual framework to examine how high school drop outs and adult students are perceived. Narrative inquiry and appreciative inquiry were drawn on to guide interviews and visual representation activities to gather qualitative data. The intent of this study was to provide a better understanding of the experience of adult students while also attempting to discover what success means for this student population that can help inform school structure to promote successful outcomes.

The study found that success is in fact different for adult students returning to a formal education program because they evaluate and find success in ways beyond that of traditional high school students. Therefore, success should be viewed through re-framed orientations as success feels and looks different for adult students. The unique experiences of adult students lead them to attach great emotion to success. In this study, adult students were able to find success in new and re-framed ways as the result of a foundational culture of safety and care at their school. The culture of safety and care set the context for how the adult students oriented success. Two orientations of success emerged from the adult students in this study: success as fulfillment and success as validation. The faculty and staff that worked alongside the students in the study, also viewed success from new and unique orientations, which supported the need to re-frame how success is viewed for adult students. The faculty and staff played a unique role in the lives of their students. Additionally, the faculty and staff embraced a culture of varied outcomes that created the very culture of success in their school. In this study, the faculty and staff oriented success in two ways as well: success as self-growth and success as agency.

Thus, by re-framing success, we can better understand what adult students seek when returning to a formal education program, which can inform school structure and policy for adult education programs. Additionally, by embracing new orientations of success, adult schools can work to engage, retain, empower, and further prepare their students while shifting the narrative of adult students. We know that adult students have not found success in the traditional ways in which success is defined. Therefore, if we want to serve adult students when they return to
school, we must ensure we are not failing them through repeated systemic failure and creating a space that promotes their assets and values their experiences.
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I am thankful for the opportunity to take on this study and I am grateful for the journey that lies ahead as I continue to learn, grow, and continue the work set forth in this study. There is great work ahead to shift the paradigm and mindset around how success is viewed and understood for all students and how this helps frame and guide school structures and policies to serve all students.
CHAPTER 1: Introduction, Rationale, and Context

The U.S. education system does not successfully support or graduate all of its students. There are different statistics and accounts that speak to the sobering reality of high school dropouts and emphasize the urgent need to focus on this issue. According to Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2016), “Unfortunately for the United States, almost one third of all public secondary students drop out of school each year” (p. 24). According to Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004), “Nationally, high school graduation rates are low for all students, with only an estimated 68% of those who enter 9th grade graduating with a regular diploma in 12th grade” (p. 2).

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) explain, “Each year, almost one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class” (p.i). Furthermore, even with these reported numbers of high school dropouts these statistics do not capture the full picture and often times there are large numbers of students who do not graduate from high school and do not get reported (Orfiled et. al, 2004). Therefore, this can lead to misleading and incorrect reports around how stark the high school dropout rate truly is.

Despite this crisis and despite the urgency of education reform, the high school dropout crisis has not improved (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison). In fact, according to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison, “The public has been almost entirely unaware of the severity of the dropout problem due to inaccurate data” (i). Orfield et. al. (2004) explain how graduation rate reports have little oversight and thus the full picture is not fully seen. Nevertheless, these statistics show a significant problem in our education system. Furthermore, the consequences that surface from not completing high school are devastating and generate questions pertaining to the equity in secondary education.

There are institutional, individual, internal, and external factors that play their part in students dropping out of school. Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2016) call the factors that contribute to high school dropout “push-out factors,” “pull-out factors,” and “fall-out factors” (p. 24). This
means that there is not one reason for the drop out crisis. Rather, there are many factors that work together to create the current crisis. There are specific school structures, policies, and factors that push students out of school. Additionally, there are student life factors such as family, children, friends, housing, and health that pull students out of school. Also, there are academic factors that cause students to fall out due to disengagement from school and education in general. Thus, there is not one single reason for student drop out, rather it is a complicated problem wrapped in many layers that is impacting students who already face significant social and economic barriers and less access to well-resourced institutions in the U.S (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Furthermore, when students do drop out of school they do not simply disappear and cease to exist in our society. These young people become adults without a high school diploma. They are citizens in our society who are disconnected from a formal education, which is necessary to thrive in our economy and also necessary to navigate the complicated systems and institutions that sustain our society. As a result, we are faced with a crisis: a large number of students with great potential but with limited access due to repetitive failing systematic and institutional barriers that exist (Balfanz, Bridgeland, & Moore, 2010; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

Consequently, as described by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) the United States is facing a drop out epidemic that has severe consequences for the students. According to Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, and Fox (2010), the startling reality is that there are more than 6 million students ages 16-24 years old who are high school drop outs in our society today. As students continue to age, they become adults over 24 years old without a high school diploma. Research shows that there are both dangerous and dire implications for youth and adults in society without a high school diploma and that both their lives and our society would benefit if they returned to school and reengaged in their education (Balfanz, Bridgeland, & Moore, 2010; Bridgeland et. al, 2006; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; McFardland, Stark, & Cui, 2016; Rumberger, 2011; Sum & Harrington, 2003). Those without a high school diploma face many hardships in a society where having a high school diploma is a minimum education credential. Survival in our
society requires the ability to navigate the institutions that exist, earn money to sustain, and develop a sound foundation to grow a future generation. Adults who do not have a high school diploma have trouble finding viable employment, sustaining an income, maintaining their health, being civically engaged, and staying out of the judicial system (Bridgeland et. al, 2006; Fears-Hackett, 2012; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Grossnickle, 1986; Titone, 1979). In fact, adults without a high school diploma have put themselves in a precarious position with limited access to positive opportunities.

As such, it is no surprise that adults facing such fewer opportunities as a result of not completing their formal education look for a chance to change their trajectory. There are several strong programs working to re-engage the 16-24-year-old population who are over-aged and under-credited, and these programs are having success in bringing students back to school through alternative school models (Balfanz et. al., 2010). Yet, still there are students that exceed the 24-year mark and are facing the harsh realities of life without a high school diploma while also caring for their children, family, personal finances, personal health, and also balancing a way to make ends meet. As Rose (2013) explains, “About 40 million Americans don't have a high school degree or GED certificate, and if we want to meet the goals championed by policy makers to equip more of our citizens with some kind of postsecondary education, then we will have to tap that 40 million” (p. 46). Yet, even more so than pushing ahead to postsecondary education, there are 40 million potential students who are seeking more opportunities to better trajectories in their lives.

According to Rose (2013) there are about 4,000 adult education programs in the US that range in focus, structure, and goals and offer education, enrichment, and job training programs. Fears-Hackett (2012) explains that many students who drop out of high school find their way back into an education program. There is not a great wealth of research on the number of adults who go into each of the adult education programs available and the outcomes of those students. As explained before and a large reason behind the need for a study like this and others, is this is an area in need of more research and especially long-term studies given the large number of adults
without a high school diploma. However, the most extensive statistics and research has been focused on adult learners and the GED. There has been a recent focus on understanding how successful recipients of the GED transition to postsecondary opportunities and completion that is being led by the American Council on Education over the course of three years (Patterson, Zhang, Song, and Guison-Dowdy, 2010). According to Patterson et. al. (2010), in 2003 there were 148,649 GED Test passers, which shows the large number of adults returning to earn a high school credential. The number of GED Test passers suggests that a large number of adult students are returning to an education program and are seeking a way to obtain their high school diploma.

These students who are returning to an adult education program are labeled as high school dropouts and they are looking to shed the label of “drop out.” Even though there are adult education programs available that vary state to state, it is hard to know what type of program will work to meet the goals and desires of this group of unique students (Fears-Hackett, 2012; Rose, 2013). Previous schools and education programs have not produced successful outcomes for this group of students, and in fact have repeatedly failed at doing so (Balfanz et. al., 2010; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Drakeford & Leone, 1999; Fears-Hackett, 2012; MacLeod, 2008). As such, this brings to question the very notion and tension of success and the purpose of schools in creating successful outcomes for all of its students. As we begin to deconstruct the drop out crisis in the U.S., we are now faced with analyzing the very tensions that surround this crisis. There are several layers of tension that have played their part in creating the larger problem. In order to ensure that adult students are given an opportunity to succeed in society through returning to school, it is imperative that we understand the inequalities they have faced and do not recreate structures and institutions that perpetuate the drop out epidemic.

In addition to the tension at play in the institutions themselves, there is also a great amount of personal tension within the adult students returning to high school. The students are returning to something they have once failed in obtaining that society holds as a critical non-negotiable for success. Adult students have harbored feelings and sentiments around being
someone without a high school diploma. As such, this has impacted their life story and has ultimately brought them back to school to add to their narrative. According to Bauer and Mott (1990) people are constantly experiencing phases of change and it is these changes that bring us back to finish a goal, and in this case, to finish an educational goal after some time away from it. Once students return to school, they continue to experience changes while building a new future. However, the past experiences do not disappear, and the student is left balancing the tension between life before enrolling back in school, life while in school, and the goals for life after school. This also adds to what adult students view, define, and frame success as. Thus, this study provides a space for students to find agency through their own narrative and choice to return to complete their high school journey. According to Whitty (2002), “Human beings are storytellers by nature and stories are a natural way to report experience” (p. 212). In this the students and staff, behold the most valuable information that can uncover answers to the questions this study poses.

Therefore, the overarching aim of this study was to better understand what adult students seek when they return to school and what they recognize and define as success. If we can understand what adult students want and give their voice a platform, then we can create adult education programs that strive to meet these specific needs and goals, and therefore create successful outcomes for this group of students. Adult students have faced repeated failure and to define their success by factors that generated past failure would not generate success at all. Thus, this study aims to grapple with the idea of success and look to re-define and re-frame what success is for adult students returning to school. Additionally, this study aims to look at how success is framed by teachers and staff that work with adult students to better understand what is at play in creating an environment, school, and ultimately a society where adults who once were without options, now have options and can be successful. If we want different outcomes for adult students, we must ensure we are creating a school structure that works to meet these outcomes. Furthermore, if we want adult students to find success, we must fully understand what success means, feels like, and looks like for a group of students that have never been successful by the traditional sense of the word. Thus, this study focuses on unpacking the way in which success is
viewed and understood to re-frame the way in which success is defined for adult students returning to high school.

Design of Study

This study took place inside an adult education program to better understand how various stakeholders in an adult education program define success and work to make that success a reality. Additionally, this study heard from the students and the staff that work in an adult high school to have a better understanding about their needs, stories, and actions. This study also empowered voices that are not typically head and provided a platform for school structure to be analyzed and deconstructed from a stance of appreciation. We know that there is a need for strong adult education programs in our society to engage adult learners, retain adult learners, and support adult learners into their next pathway.

With this study, there is now a way to approach adult education programs from the understanding of what success means to the students who are returning to school. The first step in creating strong adult education programs is understanding what it means for an adult student to be successful. The next step is understanding what staff who work in the adult education programs understand as success for their students. Then, together with an understanding about what success means for both students and staff who cohabitate in the school, there becomes a new way of identifying and orienting success that aligns with what the students are seeking. Furthermore, this then guides school structure and policy to align to the newly framed orientations of success that are unique to the adult students. Consequently, this generates successful outcomes that surpass traditional understandings of success for a group of students in dire need of finding success and moving into their next pathway.

This study took an in depth look at the Inspire Center, an adult charter high school in an urban city located in the Mid-Atlantic region. At the time of the study, The Inspire Center was in

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1 All names, including the name of the school, in the dissertation are pseudonyms. Adult education programs are typically given names around “second chances” or “hope.” I chose the pseudonym of The Inspire Center, as all individuals inside of an adult education program are working to be inspired and inspire the students it
its third year of operation and served over 360 adult students who have come back to high school and are on the path to earn their high school diploma. The Inspire Center is a unique adult education program because it is an adult charter high school where students earn a high school diploma and not a GED. Additionally, the Inspire Center does not have an age limit, and thus students of any age who are residents of the city where the school is located can apply and enroll. The school enrolls new students every eight weeks and operates on a unique term calendar to allow for more opportunities to earn credit, find success, and complete a full term. Additionally, as the school enrolls new students every eight weeks, it serves far more students each year than the 360 students who are enrolled each academic term. In the next section, I will provide more detail and context on the Inspire Center to better understand the school, the student population, and the staffing organization.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the different orientations toward student success in adult education?
   a. What do non-traditional, adult students seek to achieve through enrolling in adult education opportunities?
   b. How do teachers, staff, and leadership in adult education view student success?
   c. How do the different orientations toward success shape the experience in adult education?

The overarching question and focus of this study was centered on defining what it means for an adult student to be successful when returning back to high school. Additionally, the central question of this study was understanding how to re-frame or re-orient what it means to be successful for adult students. In any school system, the goal is to graduate. To graduate means on a very surface level that a student has found success in the system. However, we know this is not happening in the American school system with the large number of high school dropouts (Bridgeland et. al., 2010). In fact, these students who were not successful and did not meet the

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serves to continue their diploma journey and beyond. The Inspire Center is located in a city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the USA.
graduation goal are now enrolling in the adult education programs (Fears-Hackett, 2012). Adult students are looking to find success, but what does success mean for students who have not been successful?

Thus, this study found that success does look different for adult students and in by re-framing what success traditionally means and hearing from students and staff what success means from them, success can then take shape in adult schools. We want adult students to graduate, but this is a given. We want adult students to continue on in their journey not facing the same hardships that brought them back to the adult education program. Thus, for an adult education program to position itself to generate positive outcomes, it must align itself in structure, practice, and policy with the orientations of success for the very students they serve and not the traditional orientations of success in the US education system.

We know there is a drop out crisis in which students are pushed, pulled, and fall out of school (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela 2016). Furthermore, we know the education system as it stands works to promote certain students based on larger societal factors, and as a result some students get left out and left behind (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2003; Valencia, 1997). Now, as adults, these students are re-entering the education system. Yet, there is not much information or research on how these students feel about their current schools and programs and whether these adult education programs are supporting them to meet their goals and orientations of success. As a result, this study hoped to provide insight into adult education and help elevate the need for and understanding of adult education programs and their function in society while also questioning orientations of success. Again, we know there is a need for adult education programs. As such, this study hoped to inform adult education programs in the hopes of preventing an adult student drop out crisis or a second drop out crisis from within the adult education programs.

We must first better recognize the systematic structures that exist that caused students to drop out in the first place. Next, we must understand the structures and factors that surround alternative schools, which are created to keep students in and prevent drop out, but still are not
finding success for all students. Then, we must use the voices of students to inform school structure and shift the paradigm around traditional schools to help create schools for students still seeking an education to find success and provide a positive next step trajectory and pathway. If we can begin to comprehend and appreciate the function of adult education programs and their possibility of creating different outcomes for students, then we can create a society where more adult students have true next chance opportunities. Perhaps we can also begin to question our very values as a society around success and education.

There is an urgency around this study because the number of high school drop outs, though decreasing slightly, is still a reality that creates a large group of adults without a high school diploma (Balfanz & Bridgeland, 2010). If society wants to see more successful adults, then there is a need to focus on the 40 million potential students who do not have a high school diploma (Rose, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to create schools and programs that work to support adult students to gain better social and economic situations for themselves and their families (Sum & Harrington, 2003). Graduating from high school is both necessary and critical in society today. Thus, when students do return to school as an adult, it is critical that they stay engaged and not only graduate but find sustainable career and postsecondary pathways and opportunities. As a society, we must begin to understand how re-framing the way in which we define success can generate new outcomes for a large group of students that are looking to the very institution that failed them to support them in their next steps.

This exploratory, qualitative study also provided a space for students and staff to voice their stories, opinions, and experiences of life in an unknown space. Adult students have experiences and stories that shape their reentry to school and have yet to be heard by others. Additionally, staff who work in adult education programs behold stories that shape their own careers and lead them to adult education programs. According to Whitty (2002), “Human beings are storytellers by nature and stories are a natural way to report experience” (p. 212). Humans, and in this case specifically the students and staff at the Inspire Center, behold the most valuable information that can uncover the answers to my research questions. The stories and experiences
of students and staff at the Inspire Center provided insight that helped inform society about the needs and goals of adult education programs and also guided recommendations for adult education structure, practice, and policy.

Thus, this study was also a space for students and staff to envision what the best structure and model of an adult education program would be to align to their orientations of success. To do this, I employed the structure of Cooperrider and Srivastva's (1987) appreciative inquiry model that focuses on using stakeholders from within an organization to discover, dream, design, and envision a destiny for an organization. Appreciative inquiry was used as a way to guide all stakeholders through a process of both reflecting on and creating an ideal school (Ryan et. al., 1999). This allowed those, the stakeholders who are doing the reflecting and creating, to use their voice as a means of expression and ultimately as an agent of change. Thus, by creating a platform that empowers those within the school I was trying to better understand, I hoped to not only address my questions, but also engage in the process of reflection to understand what is taking place and what we can learn from those who are operating and working together amongst so many other factors in this context.

The American education system is a revolving cycle of change. Additionally, according to Rose, "Education is delivered in a complex social system; changes in one domain will have an effect on what happens in others" (p. 46). As the need for adult education programs continues, it is necessary that these programs are not compounding the current problems that face the system. Therefore, this study sought to learn from past and current structures, engage in dialogue and reflection, and inspire those within to determine what are necessary structures needed to help shift the current education landscape, and specifically ensure the adult education programs are meeting their goals. Labaree (2012) explains how schools are situated in a constant state of reform and continue to do well in credentialing and leaving some with and some without that. We need to move beyond this and come to a place where the schools that serve the most needed students, our adult students, are not simply a wheel of failed reform, but are creating better outcomes by supporting the students they serve and creating new pathways for their success.
We must learn from those working within the context of this situation and those the context serves, what is working, what is not working, and what frames the experience. We must also understand that success is different and that re-framing success and having different orientations of success does not lower the rigor or relevance of adult education programs, but rather focuses on the core needs, goals, and outcomes for the students and works with and their strengths them versus against them and holding them hostage to their perceived deficits.

Site of the Study

The site for this study was the Inspire Center. The Inspire Center is a tuition-free, adult charter high school in an urban city located in the Mid-Atlantic region. Students at the Inspire Center earn their high school diploma, not a GED, and industry recognized certifications. The Inspire Center opened its doors in August 2016 to 360 adult students through an open-enrollment process. Proof of residency in the city where the school is located in along with being at least 14 years old were the only entry criteria. When the school first opened, there were over 2000 applications. Once the school was filled, students went to on a wait list, which was then used during the other enrollment periods throughout the school year. Since the opening of the Inspire Center, the application is always open and there is a constant flow of applicants and enrollment. There is no age limit for a student at the Inspire Center. Every eight weeks, depending on the school’s roster size, students are moved from the wait list and enrolled in the school through an orientation process. Once the student is accepted, the student must then come to the school and provide residency documents to be officially enrolled in the school. Next, the student then attends a two-day orientation session. During the two-day orientation session, new students take a math and reading placement test and complete an intake session with the Academic Success Coaches. Additionally, students participate in a series of sessions and panels where they meet current and former students, meet the staff, and learn about the course offerings, services, and policies at the school. At the close of the second day of the orientation, the student is an official
Inspire Center student and returns at the start of the following week to pick up his or her schedule and begin classes for the academic term.

The Inspire Center is a unique high school diploma pathway for many reasons. First, it is a high school diploma pathway and not a GED. All students at the Inspire Center are earning their high school diploma through accelerated and often dual credit courses. All of the Humanities course are dual credit courses, which combine the history and English classes into one Humanities class for two credits. Students can bring their previous transcripts, and based on their grades and courses, credit will be transferred if it’s an accepted credit. Students can resume where they left off or they can choose to retake classes if they wish. The math and reading placement tests are part of the school model. This provides students the opportunity to take “refresher” and “foundational” courses before entering into full-credit courses. The foundations courses for both reading and math are elective credits and allow students to gain basic skills and get re-acclimated with critical skills that are the foundation of the next level courses. About 90% of students test into the math foundation courses and around 40% of the students test into the reading foundations courses. The Inspire Center uses a common-core aligned curriculum that is both rigorous and skill-based. Additionally, all Inspire Center students take five CTE credits as their final credits. These credits include both college preparation and job readiness courses. As part of the required 24 credits and part of the five CTE credits, students at the Inspire Center must complete an ACT preparation course, take the ACT, take a computer applications course, take a senior seminar course, and earn a career certification or earn a college credit through a partnered dual credit course.

Also, the Inspire Center has key services and staff members that are not typically available to adult students in other settings. The idea behind the Inspire Center was to address barriers that prevented students from graduating and provide services that minimize the same barriers from presenting again or taking their toll in the same way. As such, the school runs on an 8-week term schedule to allow for shorter terms with the ability to earn more credits in a full year. The Inspire Center has an Instructional Team that is split into a Humanities Team and a STEM
The Instructional Teams create the unique curriculum model aligned to Common Core Standards. The Inspire Center also has a Special Populations Team, which is responsible for the compliance, case management, and service delivery of students with IEPs and 504b Plans. The Special Populations Team also includes a School Psychologist who provides academic and behavioral services to students. Additionally, the school has an Academic Success Coaching team to provide wrap around support to students while on their educational journey. Each student is assigned an Academic Success Coach that helps work through barriers that might surface. The Academic Success Coach is the main point of contact for the student during his or her time at The Inspire Center. In addition to providing coaching to the student, the Academic Success Coach also creates the students’ schedule and supports the students on his or her graduation plan. Also, The Inspire Center has an Operations and Enrollment Team. This team oversees the logistics of the students’ enrollment and required documents that are required by state oversight. This team also works with students to track their pathway to graduation, and ensure all necessary transcripts and documents are in order. The school also has a College and Career Readiness Team. This team works with students when they are in their final CTE credits and leads the certification pathway and senior seminar courses. Additionally, the College and Career Readiness Team works to support students as they move into their postsecondary plans and then tracks students for six months out of their graduation. The school is managed by the Leadership Team. The Leadership Team is led by the School Director and is comprised of a lead from each of the five teams as well as a Manager of Student Support Services, a Data Performance Manager, and the Office Manager.

In addition to the unique staffing structure at the Inspire Center, the school also provides transportation assistance and on-site daycare to its students. Students at the Inspire Center are awarded transportation assistance dependent on their attendance. Students have the opportunity to sign up for and enroll in the on-site child daycare center dependent upon availability, and the daycare does keep an active wait list and has a drop-in process available as well. The Inspire Center offers flexible scheduling to its students, so that students can organize their schedule
around their other responsibilities while still attending school. The school hours are from 8:30-5:30pm Monday-Thursday and then 8:30-3:30pm on Fridays. Monday-Thursday are school days with instruction and courses. Fridays are used for staff meetings and student tutoring and support. Having a four-day school week also supports adult students with balancing their own work and responsibilities while also being able to maintain their school responsibilities. The Inspire Center responds to the fact that there are circumstances and barriers that may prevent someone from continuing their high school education and works to create opportunities to remove those barriers for its students.

The Inspire Center was selected as the site for this study because of its very reason for existing. It is a unique program that is attempting to respond to the needs of adult students and is utilizing a unique model in hopes to increase the outcomes of students. The Inspire Center was also selected because of its relevance to the study in that it is an adult education program that is working to graduate students who have not been successful in high school before. Ravitch and Carl (2016) emphasize the importance of site selection as it relates to the research questions that guide it. Consequently, the research questions for this study have a direct connection to the students the school serves and the very purpose and mission for the school’s existence. Also, the students at the Inspire Center have made the choice to return to school and have chosen to attend a high school diploma school, and not another adult education program option in the city.

As I explained earlier, the Inspire Center is currently in its third year of operation during the time of this study. As a result, the Inspire Center is still at the organizational point in which it is continuing to build, refine, and grow as a school. There is proof that the Inspire Center is finding success in outcomes in that it is graduating students the students who graduate are moving into postsecondary pathways. In its first year of operation, The Inspire Center graduated 15 students. In its second year, the school graduated 91 students, and in January 2019 the school graduated 46 students. The Inspire Center has two graduations each year and students complete their graduation requirements at various points in the year with the term schedule. Additionally, over 65% of the school’s graduates are either in a postsecondary education program, certification
program, or employed. The Inspire Center supports and monitors their graduates for six months once they graduate and work to help secure their next step placement either via a postsecondary option or through a job or career pathway.

The mission of The Inspire Center is to transform lives of students through the attainment of a high school diploma and industry certifications leading to sustainable, living wage careers. On staff, I noted that there is a College and Career Readiness Team. This team works with seniors to determine their postsecondary pathway, and then manages the six-month follow-up and alumni support. The school’s primary goal is graduation, but students at the Inspire Center are also pushed to create an action plan for after graduation and because of the courses they take that includes certifications and college readiness courses, they have been set up to enter the college or career pathway. Consequently, the Inspire Center has framed itself around multiple orientations of success. As such, this site is showing signs of grappling with the very tensions around orientations of success as it works to graduate and support its students.

Finally, I also chose this site for my study because I am the Director of the school and lead the Leadership Team. I joined the Inspire Center as the Lead Humanities Instructor when the school first opened and transitioned to School Director after two years as the Lead Humanities Teacher. When I first started this study, I was the Lead Humanities Teacher, but during the study I became the School Director. I will discuss more about my positionality in a later section. As the School Director, I have the opportunity to work alongside a phenomenal group of staff members who are proactive about ensuring we are providing the best educational services to our students. Rigor, relevance, and relationships are the grounding principles of our school model and we take these to heart. Additionally, as the School Director and even as the Lead Humanities Teacher when I started this study, I wanted to take the opportunity to study my own school and use the information to inform our practices and guide our actions. In the city where the Inspire Center is located there are over 60,000 adults without a high school diploma. Thus, creating a school that provides adult students to successfully earn their high school diploma and move forward into their next steps is critical in this landscape and environment. Since the school is new, we have grown
and expanded internally to evolve to the needs of our students and provide better services and generate better outcomes. But we have not stepped back and heard from our students who have both been successful and unsuccessful in the school. We also have not leveraged the voices of our own staff to better understand their perspectives and visions of success for our students. Consequently, this study allows for me to provide a platform for both student and staff voices to reflect and share experiences in their academic journey at The Inspire Center that shape their orientation of success. If we want to expand our school into a second site, we need to feel confident that our model is generating the outcomes we want and aligning to what success if for adult students beyond earning a credential. Thus, this study has significance for not only the current school, but for future schools to come, future adult students, and adult student outside the city where the Inspire Center is located in.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

To set the conceptual framework for this study, I will first critically explore the inequalities that exist in the U.S. education system and create a large group of adult students. There are many underlying tensions that exist and create a group of students who do not meet the goals of the education system. I believe it is necessary to understand how schools traditionally define success. For students who do not fit, meet, or align to this definition of success, they become high school drop outs. Consequently, there is a large group of students in the U.S. who seek an opportunity to re-enroll in high school and earn their diploma (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Fears-Hackett, 2012). I will draw on Bourdieu’s (2003) work on social reproduction theory and Valencia’s (2010) deficit model in particular to better understand how and why adult students find themselves positioned as they are. Both of these theories provide an entry point into understanding the social context of adult students as well as context to their experiences as it relates to the roles of schools.

Second, I will examine the various ways that “success” is thought about and enacted in educational settings. Schools orient themselves around specific definitions of success that guides their belief in what students will and should achieve (Conley, 2013). I will provide an explanation of different orientations of success that frame the U.S. education system. Additionally, I will explain how orientations of success are connected to school structure, policies, vision, and ultimately the student outcomes. This tension around what success means and how it is oriented in schools will then be expanded to consider what success means for adults in adult education programs. This is vital because adult students represent a group of students who have met school failure before and are returning to a place where they have experienced that failure (Fears-Hackett, 2012; Rose, 2011). Therefore, it is critical now that they find success in their education. Thus, adult education programs must provide appropriate supports, structures, and an overall better environment that best support the adult student from a strengths-based perspective.
on a pathway to better outcomes and success. But adult education programs must understand what their students want and need and reframe success for their adult students.

Next, I will take a step into setting the context for why adult students return to school and what research has shown motivates and pushes them back into formal education. I will provide a lens into the adult mindset that frames their why and their goals for returning to school. Additionally, I will shine a light on how different experiences shape and construct our narrative, and that returning to school is part of an adult’s narrative and an important point in that narrative. This is important because adult students returning to school bring with them a wealth of experience, emotions, and feelings that then shape their goals and orientations of success. If I am going to explore and question what an adult school should look like to serve its students, then it is critical that I understand what adult students are seeking to achieve and what motivates them and brings them back to school in the first place.

With a better understanding of the adult student situated within the traditional orientations of success, next, I will begin to look at different school structures that have attempted to support adult students on their pathway to an education. I will situate adult schools within the larger context of alternative education and alternative school structures. Alternative schools are not new to the U.S. education landscape and were created to serve students not being served by the more traditional schools (Conley, 2002; Kim & Taylor, 2008). There is a great amount of research on the history of alternative schools, and adult education programs can be seen as a form of an alternative school. Thus, alternative schools create a starting point for analyzing school structure, specific school needs for a targeted demographic, and orientation of success that can frame adult education programs. Alternative schools provide a perspective of re-framing traditional schools in a way that seems different or alternative and thus taking a step in the direction of looking at success with a new approach and anew lens.

Finally, I will consider how different methodological traditions and data collection techniques can be refined and adapted to the unique condition of adult education programs.
Inequality in U.S. Education

The education system exists to create an outcome that holds promises, hopes, and dreams. However, a great amount of research has emphasized that the U.S. is failing to create this outcome and make graduation a possibility for all its students (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela 2016; Hynes, 2016). In fact, scholars have come to call the high school dropout problem in the U.S. an epidemic (Bridgeland et. al., 2010). Research has found that almost one third of public high school students do not graduate (Bridgeland et. al., 2010). Additionally, according to Hynes (2016) studies show that almost 20% of ninth grade students do not graduate from high school on time or at all. Furthermore, there’s a great disparity in the race and demographic of the students who are not completing high school (Bridgeland et. al., 2010; Balfanz et. al., 2010; Fears-Hackett, 2012; Orfield et. al., 2004; Rumberger, 2011; Sum & Harrington, 2003). According to many studies and statistics, African American and Latino students are the largest race and demographic groups represented in the high school dropout category (Bridgeland et. al., 2010; Fears-Hackett, 2012; Orfield et. al., 2004; Rumberger, 2011). Therefore, the U.S. education system is inherently inadequate and unequal when there is a clear connection between who is graduating and who is not graduating.

As such, there has been a national outcry to reduce the dropout rate and this had led to the development of new federal, state, and local policies that create a more equal opportunity for everyone to reach graduation (DePaoli, Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2015; Rumberger, 2001; Rumberger, 2011). It has become unacceptable to leave any student without a high school diploma, and especially when there are trends in the groups of students who are left behind without meeting the graduation goal of schools. Yes, graduation rates have been increasing over the last few years (Balfanz et al., 2010; Bridgeland et. al., 2010; DePaoli et. al., 2015). However, even with new policies in place, “Still, too many students are failing to graduate or graduating unprepared for college and the demands of employment. Too many students are trapped in failing schools or in communities of intergenerational poverty with too few ways out” (DePaoli et.
al., 2015, p. 3). Even more so, African American and Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds are still graduating at a lower rate than White and middle-income and high-income students (DePaoli et al., 2015). Even with new adjustments in policies and laws, specific students are still not meeting the desired outcome of the U.S. education system. Therefore, despite the wealth of information known and the changes made, there still continues to be a systemic inequality in the system as it currently exists today. The proof is the high school dropout epidemic, and now the great need for adult education programs.

Now, there are many theories and frameworks that have been created to respond to why students do not graduate from school (Bourdieu, 2003; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela, 2016, Hynes, 2014; Valencia, 1997). Furthermore, Labaree (2012) explains that the U.S. system struggles inside a constant cycle of reform to understand why the current problems exist. These theories help us realize the tensions surrounding the inequalities that exist in the system and why some students are successful in these systems and others are not. The first theory that can help to expose and explain this tension of inequality is Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory. Bourdieu (2003) explains that the primary goal of the education system is to keep the upper class the dominant class and culture, and that furthermore the only students who can benefit and be successful in the education system are those from the dominant class. Bourdieu explains that social capital is what maintains social status and social structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2003). Families, schools, and other social structures have social capital. However, as Bourdieu suggests, some social capital allows for better outcomes than other social capital, and this is very much seen in the education system.

According to Bourdieu (2003), "The educational system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes (and sections of a class) in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture and that the mode of inculcation to which it has recourse is less removed from the mode of inculcation practiced by the family" (p. 71). Therefore, the education system is centered around the dominant culture. Giroux (1983) explains that schools serve as agents of social and cultural social reproduction, and thus
Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction posits schools as the transmitting mechanism. Thus, students with the dominant background and this culture have easier access and sustainability to do well in that very system that sustains their culture. On the other hand, students who are not part of the dominant culture, such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or a non-dominant race or ethnic group in American society such as African American and Latino students, have a skewed sense of access to the system and therefore have a harder time fitting into the model of the dominant culture’s education system. Therefore, according to Bourdieu (2003) and his social reproduction theory, the dominant culture, which in the U.S would be the white, upper and middle-class students, are more likely to graduate high school. Giroux (1983) explains that schooling can be seen as a form of social control and thus as the schools reproduce the dominant culture, they are promoting an exclusive form of social control. According to Azaola (2012), with Bourdieu, “Schools are responsible for the conservation and transmission of culture” (p. 84). Giroux (1983) also broadens Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction to emphasize that Bourdieu links power and culture, which can be a dangerous connection. However, Bourdieu’s connection to power, culture, and schooling is important here because it shows that the very system that was set up to help provide access and opportunity to its students is denying equal levels of access and opportunity by maintaining the dominant culture and status in the system.

Consequently, Bourdieu (2003) explains that the education system is set up intentionally to have some students find success while leaving other students behind to fail. Bourdieu (2003) further explains, “An educational system which puts into practice an implicit pedagogic action, requiring initial familiarity with the dominant culture, and which proceeds by imperceptible familiarization, offers information and training which can be received and acquired only subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is the condition for the success of the transmission of the inculcation of the culture” (p. 71). Therefore, according to Bourdieu (2003), the education system is established so that access is limited from the very beginning to the dominant culture, and as a result before any formal education takes place, privileged students from the dominant culture have advantages in achieving success or graduating that others do not
have. Bourdieu (2003) further explains that “linguistic and cultural competence” are necessary in navigating the education system, and these "can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture" (p. 71). Therefore, the education system is a structure that promotes this social reproduction, but also the transmission of this culture between generations and institutions and allows the dominant cultures and classes to prevail. Thus, inherently that means that those who are not part of the dominant culture are disadvantaged even before they enter the education system and during their time in the education system.

Labaree (1997) explains, "Schools, it seems, occupy an awkward position at the intersection between what we hope society will become and what we think it really is, between political ideals and economic reality" (p. 41). With social reproduction in mind and thinking about the notion of schools acting as an agent of social and cultural reproduction, it is hard to see any hope in the education system or in schools. This is because with social reproduction theory, the schools are exclusive entities that are set up for only some to succeed and many to fail. According to Labaree (1997), "Like other major institutions in American society, education has come to be defined as an arena that simultaneously promotes equality and adapts to inequality" (p. 41). This is true. Yes, schools exist to promote the notion that all have access to schooling and education, but the quality and sustainability create the very inequality that pushes out students and most of whom are in the non-dominant social classes. Education can then be seen as a type of commodity from a social mobility standpoint (Labaree, 1997). According to Serna and Woulfe (2017), education systems are exclusive systems where it is hard to obtain social currency that one did not initially have. Furthermore, Serna and Woulfe (2017) explain, “Taken at face value, social reproduction theory identifies schooling as a perpetrator of class division and power hierarchies created by a capitalistic culture, and serves only to maintain the values and ideals of wealth and a class-based society” (p. 4). Thus, high school dropouts are inevitable and so is the crisis of adults without a high school diploma who are suffering to survive in a society that is not made to provide an opportunity for them to maintain and survive.
Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory is not uplifting or in any way optimistic. Bourdieu (2003) is explicitly stating that education systems, which some might assume are entrusted to promote social and cultural transmission and mobility, are not actually designed to achieve this. Rather, schools and education systems are formed around the foundation that social mobility through the education system is unlikely and that furthermore, schools are established to ensure the dominant culture is reproduced to remain as the dominant culture. With this theory in mind, schools do not promote students in social mobility, rather they keep students within their own social status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Thus, schools are inherently made to be unequal. Therefore, there are limits on agency within the theory of social reproduction. Schools block and prevent any agency as a means of denying access. As a result, the education system is framed around generating only certain graduates and thus it is embedded with inherent inequality. Schools work on the promise and rhetoric of social mobility, but this is not true (Serna & Woulfe, 2017). Therefore, with limited opportunities to find social mobility through education, education can be seen more as a private good as opposed to a public good (Labaree, 1994). Furthermore, this then means that schooling and education can be seen as a form of social control (Giroux, 1983). Thus, schools are socially reproductive entities in society.

Although Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory is helpful for thinking through broader structural problems, it is also less clear how agency operates for marginalized people and thus suggests an inevitable barrier for mobility for students. But what, precisely, is agency? There are several ways that agency has been defined and framed. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), there are many tensions around the term agency and what it means grounded in the historical context of the word. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define human agency as, “the temporal-relational contexts of action-which through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (p. 970). I hold to this definition of human agency because it highlights individual choice, but also recognizes the structures that exist. Choices and consequences, in this definition, are grounded in the context.
It is important to highlight agency because social reproduction theory can leave little space for agency or choice, particularly for young people who are required by law, or compelled, to attend school. Even more so, students who do not successfully complete high school can be seen as having even less agency or choice because their options are even further constrained. Yet, adult students have chosen to go back to the school – they are no longer part of compulsory education. This aligns with Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) focus on moving away from the past and toward “how agentic processes give shape and direction to future processes” (p. 984). Thus, given that every student at the Inspire Center has made a choice about their education, and has a vision for the future, it is essential to think about how agency operates. But how might the staff and teachers in such spaces help bring that vision to fruition? How do students learn to identify their own agency and also utilize it when they return to school? Agency seems to be critical in understanding the social systems at play and the various factors contributing to inequity that has surrounded many students’ educational journey.

In addition to Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory, another idea that can be used to explain the inequalities in the education system is Valencia’s (1997) deficit model. There is the idea that schools and educators tend to think of students in terms of their insufficiencies, which preselects a group of students to find success in the education system. Valencia’s (1997) deficit model explains student failure in schools as a result of schools focusing on the deficiencies of students instead of their assets. Valencia uses the deficit model to explain why students of color and from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not as successful in meeting the outcomes of school and why there is a disproportionate number of these students who do not graduate (Valencia, 2010). Among low socioeconomic status students of color, Valencia explains that these students there are always positioned as deficient by their teachers, which counteracts their ability to do well in the education system (Valencia, 2010). Therefore, students become targets of educators’ deficit views and educators never look at themselves or the school as the problem, but just the student and his or her deficits (Garcia & Guerra, 2004).
According to Valencia (2004), “Deficit thinking refers to the idea that students, particularly of low-SES background and of color, fail in schools because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits that thwart the learning process” (p. 264). These deficiencies include, poverty, motivation, family structure, and minority status (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Valencia 1997; Valencia 2010). Educators who draw on a deficit framework do not put the onus of failing students on the school system or school structures, but rather it is the deficiencies that this subgroup of students brings with them to school that causes them to fail. Garcia and Guerra (2004) explain, “Because these educators do not view themselves as part of the problem, there is little willingness to look for solutions within the educational system itself” (p. 151). According to Valencia (1997), “Such deficits manifest, it is alleged, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior” (p. 2). Consequently, students who present such deficits, according to this way of thinking, will not reach graduation and furthermore, nothing the school system can do can counteract the deficits these students bring with them. Even more so, there is a desire to impose certain structures, programs, or curriculums on students with these said deficits as a way to address the issue without any accountability of the system itself. Most times the intended outcome is not produced by the suggested solutions and as a result the deficits of the students are further reinforced (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Consequently, deficit-based thinking is further promoting the fact that some students are not met or are not able to succeed in the education system. This provides another explanation for why the dropout crisis is what it is and why there is an urgent need to look at the strengths of students and the deficits of the systems in place.

Ladson-Billings (2007) argues, “If we can control the discourse, we can control the thinking” (p. 312). Ladson-Billings is arguing for a re-framing and a new approach to how we view the current state of education. According to Ladson-Billings (2007), “Achievement gap discourse keeps us locked in the deficit paradigm” (p. 316). Consequently, the idea that there is an achievement gap and that students who fall in this achievement gap are those students who have been provided an inequitable hand in the education system and seen through only a lens of their
deficits and unable to ever be part of the dominant class, is a way to see the larger negative impact of deficit-based thinking. Ladson-Billings (2007) is arguing for a shift from the achievement gap to “…what I have termed an ‘education debt’” (p. 321). She explains that by viewing the current state of education as a debt, it puts the accountability of the underachievement of certain students on everyone. Ladson-Billings (2007) explains, “It reminds us that we have accumulated this problem as a result of centuries of neglect and denial of education to entire groups of students” (p. 321). I bring forward Ladson-Billings here as a wider perspective of deficit-based thinking and an extension of Valencia’s theory to show yet another explanation for why we have a large number of high school dropouts and a need to provide new opportunities that move beyond deficit thinking for students who want to return.

Both Bourdieu (2003) and Valencia’s (1997) explanations for why some students graduate and others do not, position the education system in a self-selecting and self-serving frame that is unequal and unrelenting. Using both theories, the U.S. education system is engrossed in inequalities that create a dropout pipeline. Furthermore, the inequalities that frame dropouts are also connected to how society and the education system understands success. Success is graduating from school. We know success in graduation is not happening for every student and will not ever be possible for every student when using the frame of social reproduction theory and deficit-based thinking. Therefore, students who enter the education system layered in inequality are also facing an impossible battle against misaligned understandings of success.

Orientations of Success

Now that I have outlined the underlying tensions surrounding the inequalities in the US education system, I can say that there are obvious barriers for certain students to graduate and find success in a system that is not set up for them to be successful. Additionally, there appears to be certain type of success that is the goal of education systems according to Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, and this type of success is not available or accessible to all. Thus, first, it is
important to understand what success looks like in schools to understand why some students can find success and others cannot while also drawing on the existing inequalities. Also, it is important to understand how success is constructed and what success is framed around (Dean & Camp, 1998). Fassett (2001) explains how both student and school success can be an internal and external construction. By this, success is framed around the social context and the various tensions that exist when someone or something is successful (Fassett, 2001). I understand that success is part of a social construction, but I also believe there are various lenses that frame the way in which schools understand and enact structures to generate student outcomes of success. Therefore, I am interested in looking at how scholars have viewed and defined success in schools, and the education system at large, without necessarily having to use the word success. Consequently, throughout this study, I refer to the ways in which schools have come to define, understand, and promote success for their students as orientations of success. In this section, I frame the various and often competing orientations of success that exist in our education system. This is what drives schools to create an organization, structure, and model that works to push their students to reach this orientation of success. However, as understood from the first section of the literature review, not all students are given the equal opportunity to reach this orientation of success and therefore do not find success. Not finding success or not matching the school’s orientation of success will result in failure, which in this case means a high school dropout.

Perhaps the most clear and obvious orientation of success in the education system is the goal and outcome of graduation. Graduation is a metric that builds the foundations for many schools’ success. As discussed in the section above, there is a graduation crisis in the U.S. and certain students are not meeting this basic orientation of success. Graduation is an important measure of success because high school graduates have better job and employment opportunities, earn more money in their jobs, and have better overall mental and physical health (Bridgeland et. al., 2010; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016; Rumberger, 2001; Sum & Harrington, 2003). McFarland, Stark, and Cui (2016) highlight the difference in income of those students with a high school diploma and those without one. According to
McFarland, Stark, and Cui (2016), “The median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school was roughly $26,000 in 2013. By comparison, the median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who completed their education with at least a high school credential (i.e., a regular credential or an alternative high school credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate) was approximately $46,000” (p. 1). Similarly, “among adults in the labor force, the percentage of dropouts who are unemployed is higher than the percentage of high school credential earners who are unemployed” (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016, p. 1).

Therefore, graduation is an important orientation for success regarding life trajectory, employability, and financial stability. Additionally, high school graduates are less likely to be incarcerated and part of the nation’s institutionalized demographic (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016; Titone, 1979). Even more so, high school graduates are more likely to live longer and have better overall health (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Understanding the impacts of not graduating on students, further illuminates the idea that graduation is seen an orientation of success. This in turn helped to craft polices and laws such as No Child Left Behind, which focused on graduating all students. If a student was ‘left behind’ then that student did not meet the orientation of success that sets the baseline for all other orientations of success.

However, graduation has been questioned as the best measure of success in schools because even with a high school diploma, not all graduates are reaping the benefits that come with earning that high school diploma (Conley, 2013). According to Conley (2013), the skill level of students graduating with a high school diploma has not been sufficient to land students a career in the new economy filled with new jobs and occupations. This then suggests that graduation is a misaligned orientation of success in our school system. Or perhaps suggests that graduation is a short-term orientation of success without longer term benefits for all. Thus, now it is important to look at the next layer of the different orientations of success that assume graduation is inherently part of the orientation of success.

One orientation of success that is heavily focused on in today’s education system is the notion of college readiness. It is believed that going to college allows students to take advantage
of even more opportunities in society, which then yields better employment gains, financial power, and general life outcomes (Conley, 2013; Greene & Forster, 2003; Rothman, 2012). According to Rothman (2012), there is a need with the new economy for more students to gain access and successful completion of postsecondary education. Additionally, according to Hart (2005) student statistics show that simply graduating from high school does not correlate to being college ready. Rumberger (2011) questions the college for all mantra and push of the education system when many jobs do not require the skills garnered in a college education, But, Carnevale and Rose (2011) strongly argue the need for college educated workers and citizens in America’s society as it relates to economic growth. Bluntly put, “Economic growth is linked with educational attainment” (Carnevale & Rose, 2011, p. 11). According to Carnevale and Rose (2011), “Postsecondary education is in high demand among employers—and as the recovery takes hold and hiring resumes, it will continue to be in high demand. The undersupply of postsecondary-educated workers has led to two distinct problems: a problem with efficiency and a problem of equity” (p. 8).

Thus, despite the tension between the need for college and the push against it, these facts, ideas, and opinions create the foundation for the college readiness orientation of success by explaining why college is a vision of success and how schools are set up to align to this orientation. The college readiness orientation wants more college educated American students and believes that schools are successful if they are producing college bound students.

Therefore, being college ready, which is terminology used in many state, federal, local, and district laws and policies is at the center this orientation of success. According to Greene and Forster (2003) being college ready means not only graduating from high school, but also completing specific courses in high school that promote certain skills that are deemed college ready and having basic literacy skills. Being college ready focuses on students embarking on the pathway to a successful college graduation having the key academic skills to forego any remediation courses and feel comfortable with the academic challenge (Conley, 2007; Conley, 2013). Additionally, college readiness assumes that the high school student understands the expectations of college from an academic perspective, is motivated to go to college, and is
prepared for the college experience (Conley, 2007). According to Conley (2013), college readiness begins from early in the education system and is almost a mindset that the student develops. Therefore, the orientation of college readiness as success implies that the school is preparing students for college in a holistic nature. With this orientation of success, the schools are working to create and mold students who can and will achieve this outcome. If students meet this goal of college readiness, then they are successful by this orientation.

Like college readiness as an orientation of student success in schools, career readiness is another orientation of student success. According to Rumberger (2011), "Not all high school graduates want or should be expected to attend college, at least not immediately after high school. For those students, the knowledge and skills acquired in high school should adequately prepare them to enter the workforce and become responsible, productive citizens" (p. 20). Thus, as opposed to being college ready, the school system can set itself out to generating students who are career ready and still productive in society. Rumberger (2011) investigates the evolution of our public education system by unraveling how schools came to the current requirements for completing high school and what diploma requirements are. According to Rumberger (2011), there is a great amount of historical tension around a set credit type and outcome for a high school diploma. Thus, this brings to question the very orientations of success and what success looks like for students who might not be pursuing the same ultimate goal after graduation. Hence, the career readiness orientation is another way of framing and orienting success. Career readiness can be compared to what was once job training or vocational education (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Conley (2013) explains how career readiness evolved in the U.S. and how the U.S. has moved away from schools focused on entry-level job readiness. The career readiness orientation is centered around the attainment of a career, not a job, which assumes increased skill needs and capacities.

Thus, now, career readiness assumes a high school diploma that is not in a vocational school, but rather a traditional school, with added career readiness skills and needs (Conley, 2013). Conley (2012) explains that career readiness is framed around the completion of specific
courses that are aligned to an occupation or certificate. When discussing the difference in readiness for college or a career, Conley (2012) emphasizes, “And while the foundational content knowledge is similar in all cases, the precise skill profile associated with success in a career course pathway may be more focused than that required for a bachelor’s degree” (p. 4).

Therefore, schools that are oriented around career readiness success are focused on promoting student outcomes in specific career recognized industries and certification courses. This readiness is beyond basic work and job readiness. Rather, the career readiness orientation is focused on students being able to successfully enter a career pathway (Conley, 2013).

Additionally, career readiness implies that the student is also being prepared to enter the workforce and has learned and mastered certain soft skills that are needed for any workplace. According to Conley (2012), “These include ethical conduct, ownership of one’s behavior, initiative, resilience, collaborative teamwork, motivation, and self-regulation skills” (p. 4).

Consequently, the orientation of career readiness as success is framed around the student both having a high school diploma and skills in a specific career or industry.

Even though it is important to separate the distinct orientations of college and career readiness as success in schools, it is also important to understand that these two orientations of success can be and are viewed together to create another orientation of success: college and career readiness. Once before viewed as separate entities, in today’s education and workforce landscape it is believed that to be successful a student must be prepared to both enter the college and career world (Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Conley, 2012; Conley, 2013; Conley & McGaughy, 2012; Mishkind, 2014). Therefore, in the college and career readiness orientation, schools view success as preparing students for both pathways through similar skill acquisition, but also specialized courses and pathways. Conley (2013) explains how the U.S. economy is changing as is the nature of work, so therefore it is critical that students are prepared to enter a world where they have both college and career readiness skills. This also aligns with the findings of Carnevale and Rose (2011) that there is a great demand for more educated and skilled workers in our workforce. Therefore, the college and career readiness orientation of success
positions success so that students can navigate the 21st century work, which implies that college is the first step on the path towards a career, but success is situated in understanding this need and successfully going to college and obtaining a career. According to Mishkind (2014) who produced a report for the College and Career Readiness and Success Center, the definition of college and career readiness is bringing together what it means to be college ready in terms of knowledge and skills and what it means to be career ready in terms of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, in Mishkind’s (2014) overview of states that focus on the college and career readiness orientation she found key defining features. These features included a focus on academic knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving, social and emotional learning and collaboration and communication, grit, resilience, perseverance, and citizenship, and community involvement (Mishkind, 2014). Therefore, the college and career readiness orientation of success is broad and includes many layers.

However, it is critical within this orientation, to emphasize the multifaceted nature on behalf of the student as it relates to his or her future dreams, aspirations, and goals. According to Conley (2013) there is a need to increase students’ ability to connect their goals and dreams to what they are learning in school, which will allow the students to take ownership of their goals and be successful with this orientation. College and career readiness frames the future goals and pathways to the current time and context and allows for this orientation of success to take shape. Conley (2013) defines readiness for college and career readiness as, “…readiness for postsecondary study, where postsecondary refers to any formal setting in which students pursue additional instruction beyond high school. This is broader than college readiness and includes two-or four-year degree institutions, certificate or licensure programs, formal apprenticeship training programs, and the military” (p. 50). Thus, this orientation of success allows for a broader view and perhaps more pathways and options that define success. Moreover, Conley (2013) defines the overarching college and career readiness orientation as, “Students who are ready for college and career can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses leading to a baccalaureate degree, a certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs
without the need for remedial or developmental coursework. They can complete such entry-level, credit-bearing courses at a level that enables them to continue in the major or program of study they have chosen” (p. 51). What I like about using Conley’s definition of college and career readiness for this orientation is that he understands and emphasizes that success within this orientation is highly individualized and does not have the same level of proficiency for readiness for all students (Conley, 2013). Furthermore, using Conley’s definition to create the framework for the college and career readiness orientation of success, truly focuses on this dual readiness as the “ability [of a student] to continue to learn beyond high school, and particularly in postsecondary courses relevant to the students’ goals and interests, as represented by their choice of major or certificate program” (Conley, 2013, p. 51). Conley (2013) employs college and career readiness as the foundation of life readiness. Whatever students’ aspirations are, by using the college and career readiness orientation, they are set up to successful be ready for either and for life (Conley, 2013).

However, it is impossible to talk about college, career, and college and career readiness without bringing in the existence of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which are framed around college and career readiness. To successfully meet these orientations of readiness, schools employ and utilize standards, curriculum, and other tools that focus on achieving their orientation of success. In June 2010, the CCSS were released by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief Schools Officers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The Common Core State Standards Initiative, state on their website that, “The Common Core is informed by the highest, most effective standards from states across the United States and countries around the world. The standards define the knowledge and skills students should gain throughout their K-12 education in order to graduate high school prepared to succeed in entry-level careers, introductory academic college courses, and workforce training programs” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). Thus, the CCSS create a tool for schools to use to meet their orientation of success, and specifically college and career readiness. According to Rothman (2012), the development of the CCSS are framed around
college and career readiness standards which directly correlate to success in “entry-level, credit-bearing, academic college courses and in workforce training programs” (p. 12). Therefore, the standards guide schools and frame the ways in which college and career readiness can be met with success (Rothman, 2012). The Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) emphasizes the CCSS as a framework for what students should know and learn to be ready for college and career pathways.

Consequently, the development of CCSS and its alignment to the various orientations of success, creates even more tension in the orientations of success. It creates almost another orientation of success, which I am going to call standards success, and will define as the ability of a school to implement CCSS successfully and use them as a guiding framework. Many studies have been carried out to determine if the CCSS are working to create college and career readiness (Conley, Drummond, de Gonzalez, Rooseboom, & Stout, 2011; Rothman, 2012). Studies have found mixed reviews and found that the standards, when implemented in schools do generate more college and career readiness, but also have their limitations (Conley et. al., 2011). However, it is also important to recognize that embedded within the conversation around standards and overall readiness, there is the initial layer of inequality that exists in schools. Therefore, it must be mentioned that when schools organize themselves around the orientation of standards success, the school might not be serving all of its students equally under these standards. Additionally, with the orientation of success as standards success there is the inevitable need to mention high stakes testing, accountability, and measurement. Conley (2013) outlines the competing assessment measurements that were introduced with CCSS. However, there is much debate by scholars around what constitutes as measuring and showing success with CCSS and how different measurements must be used to garner and gauge success of this orientation (Conley, 2011; Conley, 2013). Therefore, I am not going to begin to deconstruct the assessment measures that exist alongside the orientations of success I have outlined because this study is not about what tools are used to measure success. Rather, this study is to better understand the various ways, frames, definitions, and orientations of success schools use to
produce successful students. Thus, orienting towards an alignment to standards as a form of success and showing a strong outcome of this is another way schools can orient success.

Lastly, moving away from readiness, I want to bring in one more orientation of success that is also heavily emphasized in today’s education system, which is the success as viewed from the orientation of giftedness. In this orientation of success, there is the opportunity of being labeled as and given access to gifted and talented programs. It is almost assumed that gifted and talented students prove to be more successful at obtaining college readiness (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). As I have outlined the inequalities surrounding education in general thus far, it is not a surprise that there is an underrepresentation of minority and lower socioeconomic status students in gifted education programs (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). However, it is important to separate out the idea away from the inequalities that exist around this orientation, that success is oriented around gifted and talented programs and making students into gifted and talented students. Additionally, one could argue that students who are gifted and schools that promote gifted and talented students and programs are doing so to meet the achievement of other orientations too, such as college and career readiness. According to Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008), it is necessary that schools create an environment around high achievement to increase the desire and motivation around being gifted and talented. Consequently, schools who orient their success toward giftedness can be viewed as increasing the structures in place to generate more opportunity for giftedness to surface. But, at the same time this brings into question who has access to such opportunities and who is deemed a fit for this orientation of success.

Adult Education Programs

As I have set up through the literature, the U.S. education system is framed around various orientations of success to produce and generate successful student outcomes. Additionally, the U.S. education system is surrounded within and around layers of inequalities, which then creates misalignments and brings forth questions of equity when we begin to think
about who can be successful in certain orientations of success and why. Furthermore, these inequalities are even more so evident when we view how schools are structured to meet varying orientations of success. As a result, both the inequalities and the different orientations of success, the U.S. finds itself facing a drop out crisis with many adults who did not meet success (Balfanz et. al., 2010; Bridgeland et. al., 2010; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela, 2016; Morgan, 2004; McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016; 2010; Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger, 2001; Sum & Harrington, 2003). Thus, rises the need for adult education programs to reengage adult students who want to return to school. Adult education programs are attempting to fill a gap, provide a second chance, and help adult students get back on track (Rose, 2013). At the same time the adult education programs do not get a lot of attention or notice in the larger spectrum of education (Rose, 2013). Additionally, adult education programs are navigating layers of inequity to provide an environment that can breed success for its students who are seeking to find hope, success, and a new pathway forward.

Fears-Hackett (2012) and Bridgeland and Milano (2012) explain that many students who drop out of high school find their way back into formal education through adult education programs. According to Comings, Sum, and Uvin (2000) there are many different reasons, including not having a high school diploma, why adults return to a formal education program and often times it is because they know they are lacking the skills necessary to meet the needs and requirements of employers and today’s economy and demands. In fact, according to Comings, Sum, and Uvin (2000), “Each year, tens of thousands of adults who want to improve their basic skills and want to learn to speak English come to the doors of ABE and adult education programs for help” (pp. 11-12). Adults who are struggling to meet the demands in society today and as a result are not maintaining adequately want to improve their outlook. Rose (2013) highlights that there are close to 4,000 adult education programs, but it is hard to determine the exact number of these programs. These programs exist because the numbers show that there is a need to serve adult students who are seeking education opportunities. Additionally, students who have not completed their high school diploma desire to return to school because they understand the
benefits of having a high school diploma today (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Therefore, with great numbers of adults who are looking to return to formal education, it is critical that we understand what these students are seeking to achieve and how these students view success so that we can better align the structure of adult education programs to support the needs, desires, and orientations of success of the adult students they serve. Adult students are a fragile type of student because they have already experienced failure in the education system (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Therefore, it is even more critical that educators understand the characteristics that define non-traditional adult students and then work to create structures that support, promote, and uplift the students on a pathway towards success. But, what does success mean for the adult student?

Much of the framing of adult education programs is modeled around the benefits of earning a high school diploma as well as the readiness of an adult student to engage in formal learning and meet the program goals. According to Grossman (2012), “Literature related to adults returning to school describes the psychological and social implications of the departure, as well as the return” (p. 15). The albeit harsh realities of a high school dropout stand alone as means to return to school. Bridgeland and Milano (2012) also found that students who dropped out took responsibility for doing so but are now also taking responsibility and ownership for returning and completing their education. Comings, Sum, and Uvin (2000) also see this correlation that there is a desire for lifelong learning in adults. Furthermore, the recognition that having a diploma presents better life outcomes can be a force of return. Knowles (1962) believes that as the adult matures, develops, and processes, the adult becomes ready to make the choice to return to school. According to Knowles (1962), “…as an individual matures, his need and capacity to be self-directing, to utilize his experience in learning, to identify his own readiness to learn, and to organize his learning and life problems, increases steadily” (p. 43). Knowles (1962) posits a theory that the adult learner undergoes a change in self-concept, brings the role of experience, has a readiness to learn, and embodies an orientation to learn through previous educational experiences and choices (Knowles, 1962). These explanations help to situate and better
understand how and why adult students return to a place they once dropped out of. However, it is important to dig deeper into adult motivation and adult experiences to better understand the motivation behind why adults return to their education, which ultimately shapes their orientation of success and continues to keep them on track to meeting this success. Also, this helps to inform how adult education programs should structure themselves to meet the needs of the students they serve.

Motivation is fundamental to achieve one’s goals and understand what one’s orientation of success even is. According to Titone (1979), “Motivation has been a critical factor in helping students to learn in school. It is so important and so complex that many educators continually search for, and integrate new teaching strategies that will create motivated individuals” (p. 24). There are both internal and external factors that motivate someone to learn and stay in school. With high school drop outs and adult students, there are many questions around what brings them back to school and motivates their return (Fears-Hackett, 2012). Yet, given the limited opportunities that exist without a high school diploma, it is obvious why a person would choose to return to school. Fears-Hackett (2012) explains, “Adult students are challenged with many obstacles that would cause most people to give up but they preserve beyond what is expected. These students have a resilient attitude and have the ability to overcome and cope with adversities” (p. 35). Perhaps the very factors to pushed and pulled students out of school in the first place turn around and become motivating. Also, according to Comings (2007), the fact that schooling for an adult is a choice as opposed to a legal requirement, supports an adult students’ motivation and frames an adult students’ choice to return to school. Comings (2007) explains, “Adults must make an active decision to participate in each class or tutoring session and often must overcome significant barriers to participate in educational services” (p. 23). Therefore, one could argue that the perseverance and resilience in adult students pushes them forward to further create their orientation of success based on this choice to return to school in the first place.

Furthermore, persistence in adults is essential to understand in order to fully grasp the forces behind adults returning to a formal education program. Comings (2007) discusses a study
of his on adult persistence that situates a force-field analysis to better understand adult persistence in completing their education goals. Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) believe persistence is a key motivating factor of adults. There are both positive and negatives factors and influences that take place in an adult’s decision to remain in school (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999). Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) applied a force-field analysis and looked at adult motivations to remain in school through the lens of balancing positive and negative forces, and how to make the positive forces take a top motivating position. According to Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999), “Programs must help students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence” and ultimately their ability to stay in school (p. 6). In this study, it was found that the most positive and strongest forces that motivated adult students to remain in school “was the support of people, particularly their families, friends, teacher, and fellow students, followed by self-efficacy, and personal goals” (p. 6-7). According to Comings (2007), students associated with four types of positive forces in this study: relationships, goals, teacher and fellow students, and self-determination (p. 34). Comings (2007) listed the three negative forces that adult students associated with as: life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination (p. 34). According to Comings (2007), “Students’ mention of specific positive and negative forces did not predict persistence, but these findings are valuable because they give practitioners input from adult students on what might be important” (p. 34). Thus, the positive forces must appear in adult education programs to generate more successful outcomes. Additionally, these positive forces align with what frames adult students’ orientation of success and helps support this definition of success. Furthermore, there is a balance between positive and negative force factors at bay with adults returning to school and thus it is critical that the positive forces outweigh the negative to keep persistence high.

There have been other studies focused on adults and their persistence and participation in education programs. Douglah (1970) analyzes adult participation in education programs. According to Douglah (1970), “One of the most widely used approaches is the familiar need satisfaction model” (p. 92). In this model, the adult participates in the education because “they
see it as having good chances of satisfying their need" (Dougla, 1970, p. 92). Therefore, if an adult is motivated by a need, the adult is more likely to participate in the education model. On the other hand, if the adult does not feel as though the participation is satisfying his or her need, the adult will more likely disengage and detach (Dougla, 1970, p. 92). Also, Deci and Ryan (2000) explore the psychology behind human needs and goals and the intrinsic and extrinsic needs that outline human motivation. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), who pose an argument of self-determination theory, human motivation is about understanding what intrinsically satisfies one’s psychological needs, but also varies dependent upon the goal that is set to satisfy one’s need. Additionally, Deci and Ryan (2000) explain that humans are balancing these needs and often times conforming external pressures into internal values to continue remaining self-determined towards one’s goals and ultimate needs satisfaction. Therefore, it is important to understand the need that drives adult students back to school and even more critical to understand how adult student orient their success so that they continue on the pathway towards their success.

Mott and Bauer (1990) studied adult students and their “psychological transitioning” when returning to a college environment (p. 555). Though returning to a college environment, I bring this study up as a way to see a similarity between adult students returning to high school similar in that it is a formal education environment where they did not successfully complete the outcomes. Mott and Bauer (1990) found that adults are constantly in a state of transition and change, and this is what pulls them back into the education world. However, at the same time, adults are still pulled by factors and “competing demands” that influence them away from their educational goals (Mott and Bauer, 1990, p. 555). Thus, by understanding what brings students back to enroll in an adult education program and how these students comprehend their motivation can help adult educators ensure the supports are in place to leverage student motivations and retain them on their pathway to graduation. Additionally, this also helps inform the way in which adult students are orienting their own success and pathway.

Lastly, along the same line of understanding adult motivations and their journey back to an education setting, it is also important to note the significance of the adult narrative and how it
is constructed and evolving. According to Rice and Pasupathi (2010), “The construction of a positive, clear, and stable self-concept is a developmental task” (p. 479). Therefore, adult students of various ages are in constant tension and development with believing in and understanding themselves and their own decisions and journeys. Rice and Pasupathi (2010) explain that age is a factor in wanting to both construct and sustain a positive self-concept. Rice and Pasupathi (2010) explain, “Self-acceptance or comfort with one’s existing self-concept clearly increases across adulthood” (p. 480). Thus, adults returning to school could be understood as having an increased understanding of their reasons for not completing high school and feel empowered by their choice to return and what this then means for their own self-concept. Rice and Pasupathi (2010) also describe the connection to narratives to self-concept and understanding the development over time of one’s own story through talking about life experiences and what events are talked about and how they are constructed.

Consequently, it is important to better understand why adult students are returning to school, their needs and motivations, and ultimately what they hope to achieve as a benchmark of success. Additionally, it is equally important to unravel what is behind adult students’ motivation and what positively supports adult students on the pathway to their goals. This in turn allows adult education programs to better support their students and ensure there are not institutional barriers to success in this new context of returning to school. Also, it helps ensure that adult schools are oriented around what success truly means for the adult student while also promoting the positive forces and motivations behind pulling an adult back to school. Therefore, the question that arises is, what should adult education programs look like and structure themselves as to meet the students’ needs? Furthermore, if we know the U.S. education system is streamlined and fueled with inequalities, what actions are being taken to prevent this in the new school context and avoid failure for these students? Finally, how do adult schools utilize what is known about adults and their reasons for returning to school to increase their persistence and keep them on the trajectory to finishing their education?
To help begin to address these questions, alternative education programs provide a good first step when attempting to better understand unique and different school structures that can inform adult education programs. There is a great amount of research and literature on alternative schools and the rise of alternative education programs to serve students who were traditionally not doing well in traditional school programs (Aron, 2006; Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Conley, 2002; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Alternative schools can be seen as an attempt to create a new orientation of success with an alternative model to generate successful student outcomes. According to Aron (2006), "Alternative education in its broadest sense covers all educational activities that fall outside of the traditional K-12 school system" (p. 3). One could argue that adult education programs are a form of alternative schools because they are not traditional, and they are serving non-traditional students who did not meet the goals of traditional school programs. According to Conley (2002), alternative schools respond to needs in the community to support students and keep them on the track towards graduation.

Furthermore, alternative schools have a history of serving minority and at-risk students who are not being served in the more traditional schools (Conley, 2002; Leone & Drakeford, 1999). The idea that students are not being served by the traditional school model lends itself to questioning the very structure of the traditional schools and who they are set up to serve. This in turn then circles back to Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory from earlier. According to Azaola (2012), "Alternative educational systems have been introduced throughout the world over the past 30 years with the aim of expanding access to education in the financially deprived areas, whilst theories of social reproduction have been dominant for the past 40 years in the disciplines of sociology, policy, economics, and education" (p. 81). Therefore, alternative education models are responding to the need that has been created by the reality of schools acting as agents of social reproduction and schools generating dropouts. Thus, alternative education models work with the students who were not initially successful in the education system as it is, which as we know are more likely to be minority students and question the very model that did not work and propose something different that will work. As such, alternative schools focus on the structure and
school model to generate different outcomes for their students, and not on the dropout or deficits that their students bring.

Additionally, alternative schools have key components that create high quality education programs. According to Aron (2006), the key components of high quality alternative education programs include: a focus on academic and engaging instruction, applied learning through relevant work opportunities, engaging curriculum, personalized student learning plans, skilled instructional staff that build relationships and have high expectations, ongoing professional development for all staff, clean learning facility, a strong sense of community, competent leadership, strong student supports and structures, and both flexible and structured environments (pp. 12-13). Additionally, Paglin and Fager (1997) include that successful alternative schools have a clear mission, clear and fair rules, opportunity for student voice, flexible schedules, and a focus on individual accountability (p. 7). Consequently, alternative education program features can inform adult programs about key characteristics needed to support the non-traditional adult learners, which can also be thought of as another form of alternative student.

Now, moving to the adult education landscape, there are several types of adult education programs to explore (Fears-Hackett, 2012; Rose, 2013). A GED program is one of the more well-known adult education programs. Rose (2013) explains how GED programs started to receive attention when the actual exam underwent an overhaul. Rose (2013) further explains how the GED developers determined that the exam, which was initially made during World War II and provided as an opportunity for military to earn their high school diploma, determined there was a need to change the exam. According to Rose (2013), “A big concern is to bring the test in line with what students will need to know to attend college, and thus reducing the number of remedial courses many students with GED certificates need to take, courses that jeopardize their chance of graduating” (p. 46). Thus, the primary orientation of success for a GED is college readiness. However, do students who are taking the GED agree with this orientation of success when going back to school and specifically going to a GED program? Rose (2013) highlights the tension between what some want from GED programs and what others want. Rose (2013) showcases a
college President who talks about how earning a GED can make a student ready for college and inspired. Whereas a student Rose (2013) highlighted, discussed the GED as a benchmark and an achievement for her next steps in life. According to Rose (2013), “By one estimate, only 10% of GED recipients earn a college diploma” (p. 47). Therefore, is the GED framed around the wrong orientation of success? Rose’s (2013) discussion of the GED and the tension around changing it highlights the questions surrounding adult education programs in general and what they intend to achieve as an outcome for success. Additionally, this shows that students and other stakeholders might view the orientations of success differently. Rose (2013) emphasizes that if achievement after a GED is the desired result, more than just a change in test is needed. This then brings to question the purpose of adult education and what is needed to reframe and truly provide a successful pathway. Even though my study is not focused in a GED program, I believe discussing Rose’s (2013) thoughts and questions around a GED program and the current reforms taking place now, shows the origin of the thinking around adult education in general, and provides a good example and entry point of discussion.

Considering all of this, adult education programs occupy a unique space in the education sector and overall system. Additionally, adult education programs are fighting tremendous inequalities to create better outcomes for a rare and exceptional group of students with very high stakes. Ultimately, the question becomes, what purpose are these adult education programs serving and how are they oriented to support student success? Therefore, we need to better understand how adult education programs are structured and what informs their structures and supports, so that adult students can find better and different outcomes than before in the education system. Even more so, it is critical to create high quality adult education programs so that there are no stigmas around schools serving adults and so adults are given high quality education. As a result, to better understand the needs for school structure, we first must understand what adult students want and what orientation of success they are bringing with them to school. Additionally, we must understand how the adult education programs are structuring their school framed around a specific orientation of success, and what this orientation is.
Inquiry into Adult Education

Finally, this brings me to how we can begin to synthesize and make sense of adult students and find a way to ensure they are best supported in their current education journey. This study will move inside the world of adult education programs and attempt to understand the inner workings of an adult education program and recognize how students and staff work together to promote student success, and how student success is oriented.

To do this, I will employ the use of two strategies, the narrative study approach and the appreciative inquiry framework. Both strategies allow for me to grapple with the tensions that exist surrounding adult education and adult students, but also frame the way in which we can understand the inner workings taking place through both stories and a protocol for reflecting and thinking about school structure. Humans are natural story tellers and it through stories that we relay important life events and explain experiences and outcomes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Whitty, 2002). Additionally, Bold (2011) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the power in a story and the power of sharing experiences through stories. Therefore, by getting students, teachers, and staff who work together in adult education programs to share their stories will provide a platform to explore shared and unique experiences that are both taking place inside the school and are individually brought into the school. Nieto (1994) and Knesting (2008) stress the need to bring forth student voices to better understand what is happening at the school level and explore the student experience. I hope to also provide a platform for teacher and staff voice using narrative study too. Thus, using the narrative approach where stories are the center of access to the lived experiences inside the adult school program.

In addition to utilizing narrative study to explore the stories, experiences, and orientations of success for students, teachers, and staff in adult schools I am going to implement Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry framework. This framework allows for the student, teacher, and staff to reflect on what is happening as it relates to the school structure and then envision a dream-like school structure through a 4-D protocol (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) Appreciative inquiry uses stakeholders from within an organize to better understand that very
organization by: discovery, dreaming, designing, and envisioning a destiny of that organization (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Ryan et. al. (1999) used the model of appreciative inquiry to better understand the function of schools and the role various stakeholders play in the organization. By using appreciative inquiry, all stakeholders have the power to be an agent of change and have the power to use their voice in a positively oriented way. Furthermore, appreciative inquiry provides a framework through which all stakeholders can view the same organization with their own perspective (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Ryan et. al., 1999).

By using both narrative study strategies and the appreciative inquiry framework, I can take a first step into engaging in dialogue about the experiences that take place while also engaging in reflection. Additionally, these two strategies allow me to deconstruct the various aspects of school structure and lived experience within school structure, while also being able to compare various stakeholder’s views, opinions, and values. These two strategies also allow me to sift through the tension that surrounds the spectrum of adult education and navigate it in a way that allows for personal inquiry, reflection, and action. This then empowers all of those involved in many ways and allows me to activate many voices and minds to answer my research questions and take a step into the adult education world.
CHAPTER 3: Research Design

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the different orientations toward student success in adult education?
   a. What do non-traditional, adult students seek to achieve through enrolling in adult education opportunities?
   b. How do teachers, staff, and leadership in adult education view student success?
   c. How do the different orientations toward success shape experiences in adult education?

To address the guiding questions, this study employed an exploratory, qualitative approach to engaging with students and staff at the Inspire Center to uncover their perspectives around success in the school and for the students. I utilized both the narrative study approach and the appreciative inquiry framework to guide my study. Much of this study is grounded in the idea that the voices and the stories from within the school, that of the students and staff, are paramount to answering the research questions.

The total number of participants in this study was 47 total participants, 38 student participants and 9 staff participants. The data collection for this study applied several methods that allowed for the narrative study and appreciative inquiry methodology to take place. The following methods were used in this study: interviews and visual representations. The goal of all methods was to unpack and uncover responses to the research questions and gain a better understanding about participants and their experiences and opinions from different angles and perspectives in this setting and context.

To answer the above questions, I interviewed a total of 38 students from the Inspire Center across three different age categories: 22-30 years old, 31-49 years old, and over 50 years old. The interviews included questions about the student participants’ life story and also an opportunity to create visual representations how they viewed support in terms of their success at the school. The interviews and the visual representation are important as they helped surface students’ stories and journeys back to school as well as uncovered what students are seeking to
achieve by enrolling in school. Additionally, the interviews addressed the question of success and how adult students perceive and view success. Thus, the interviews hoped to address and answer the overarching question around what adult students are seeking to achieve by returning to an adult education program and how they define and orient success as an adult student in an adult high school.

Also, I interviewed 9 staff members from the school. These staff members included teachers, leadership team members, administrative staff, and Academic Support Coaches. The goal was to provide a holistic representation of the staff at the Inspire Center. The purpose of the interviews was to gather staff member’s experience of working in this adult education program and better understand their view of student success, which is aligned to the overarching research question. As with the student participants, I also had the staff participants engage in a visual representation activity to gain some insight into how they view supports from the school as it relates to student success. Consequently, all of these methods with both student and staff participants were geared to help answer the central research question: What are the different orientations toward student success in adult education?

Methodological Frameworks

Stories are a natural part of our lives and every day we are constructing our reality. According to Whitty (2002), stories are our natural way of sharing experiences. The primary goal was to hear the experiences of adult students and staff at an adult education program through narrative inquiry. According to Bold (2001), “Narrative is central to human experience and existence, providing opportunity to share the nature and order of events at particular times in history. It helps to define self and personal identity” (pp. 17-18). As such, through the narrative and telling process, a lot of information can be shared. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain, “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Stories help address my research questions because they allow participants to share about their experience in this specific
adult education program and in other education experiences. These stories shape their view of success, and as such help to inform what they, both students and staff, believe should be part of the best practices for school structures and policies to meet this view of success. Therefore, stories provide the entry point to understanding what orientation of success the participant identifies with.

Furthermore, the use of narrative inquiry allowed for student and staff voices to take the lead as the primary source for the answers to the questions. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) propose many different methods around collecting data using the narrative inquiry method. All narrative inquiry methods allow for the students and staff at the Inspire Center to engage in an open dialogue and share their story. I wanted to hear these stories and understand the various views around success. Additionally, I intended to create a platform where each participants could share his or her day to day experiences inside of the same shared space, while also drawing on prior experiences and stories that might shape their current experience.

In addition to narrative inquiry, I utilized Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry model to guide my study. This study is also focused on understanding the structures that exist to support students and their success and the structures that might be missing and needed. To engage all stakeholders inside of the adult education program, they must be part of the process of reflection and solution-making. Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry model focuses on using stakeholders from within an organization to discover, dream, design, and envision a destiny for an organization. According to Ryan et. al. (1999), appreciative inquiry “is an ethnographic model for examining the life of an organization” (p. 164). Appreciative inquiry generates a way for everyone within the organization to arrive with common experiences, assumptions, and appreciation (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Cooperrider and Whitney (2011) explain that, “Appreciative inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them” (p. 3). Thus, appreciative inquiry looks at an organization from a point of inquiry and question and works to bring critical reflection to life (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).
Also, and most importantly, appreciative inquiry focuses on appreciating the very organization at question and centers around affirmation as opposed to criticism (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This in turn allows for participants to view an organization from an asset-based and not a deficit-based perspective and take steps to fully grapple with the very organization they are a part of and exist within. As such, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) set out a research methodology that is guided by principles, which are centered around affirmation. For appreciative inquiry to be effective, it must begin with viewing an organization from the best perspective possible as opposed to focusing on the problems (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Appreciative inquiry is focused on organizational reflection and analysis, and thus the inquiry must be applicable to that organization (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Also, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) press upon the provocative nature of appreciative inquiry, while also focusing on the collaborative nature of the inquiry process. According to Bushe and Kassam (2005), “…the inquiry should create knowledge, models, and images that are compelling to system members and provoke people to take action” (p. 167).

In addition to upholding a set of guiding principles, the appreciative inquiry model follows a 4-D model as a guiding framework to holistically engage with, view, and analyze an organization. There are four main stages of appreciative inquiry: discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). During the discovery stage, participants inquire about the entire organization through a positive lens to better understand the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). Also, during the discovery stage participants are inquiring about the what exits and what is possible within the organization (Bushe, 2011). Next, during the dream stage, participants create a vision for the organization that aligns to questions that surface during the discover stage (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). In the dream stage, participants imagine, or dream, of their organization at its very best and thus a vision is born (Bushe, 2011). This dream is then given life in the design stage. During the design stage, participants create structures and designs around the ideal organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). In this design stage, participants are creating a concrete proposal or design plan.
to enact the dream (Bushe, 2011). Finally, during the destiny stage, participants affirm the previous phases of inquiry by creating a plan to give the dream and design stages hope and reality (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2011). Bushe (2011) does mention that one critique of appreciative inquiry is with the destiny stage because often it is hard to implement the design that has just been created with great energy and appreciation. Yet, Cooperrider and Whitney (2011) explain that the destiny stage ensures that participants understand the power of the process and affirms that change is possible if it is given a destiny, which this process is given. For this study, appreciative inquiry guides the investigation and analysis into the school structure and policies as it relates and aligns to the different orientations of success.

In a school, those with the greatest knowledge of the organization are sometimes silenced or are the last heard. Yet, the students and staff within a school hold the greatest knowledge about the organization. Therefore, they are best situated to engage in appreciative inquiry. Ryan et. al. (1999) were the first to conduct a study on a school using the appreciative inquiry model. According to Ryan et. al. (1999), using appreciative inquiry at the school level “involves as many members of the school community as possible in a systematic inquiry into what is most enriching and life giving about that community” (p. 164). Ryan et. al. chose to use appreciative inquiry as the model for studying a school because it begins with appreciating the positives that exist, and not feeling consumed by the problems (Ryan et. al., 1999). My goal is to create a platform that empowers students and staff within the school to share their experiences, views, and opinions and provides insight that might not otherwise come to the surface. I hope that by applying this methodology, I can better understand what is taking place inside of the Inspire Center and inform future school policies, structures, and practices that promote a shared vision of success for this school and for future adult education programs.

Participants had several opportunities and methods in which to express their stories, goals, and views on orientations of success. I hoped to uncover a deeper understanding about the experiences of the participants inside the school, and the needs of the organization to best support those within it and to generate successful outcomes for the students the school serves as
it aligns to the various orientations of success at play in the school. Additionally, I hoped to have a better understanding about how students and staff view, either similarly or differently, success and what this means for the school model and structure. As mentioned in earlier sections, we know there is a high school dropout crisis that is then creating a large population of adult students. Therefore, adult education programs must be different to produce different outcomes for their students who have not successfully met the desired outcomes of previous schools and the system at large. Understanding what success means, how it looks, and what school structures align to creating a successful school model is key to creating a different outcome for adult students.

Participation Selection and Selection Criteria

There were two groups of participants in this study, student participants and staff participants. All participants were selected for this study using specific selection criteria and a purposeful sampling framework. Using Ravitch and Carl’s (2016) purposeful sampling framework, I ensured that each of these participants was purposefully selected for this study based on the needs of the study as it relates to the research questions. Additionally, the participants were selected based on the demographics of the Inspire Center.

All participants in this study participated as volunteers and were required to sign the Participant Consent Form, which is in Appendix B. When participants signed the consent form, they also assigned themselves a pseudonym, which was used throughout the entire study to maintain confidentiality. I wanted participants to select their own pseudonym to make it both personal and to create an identity for themselves that could be used to share their story. Even though their real name would not be used in the study, I wanted their pseudonym to be selected by them and have meaning to them and their story.

My goal was to have a representative sample of the school’s students and staff, while also ensuring enough room for comparison between age, experience, and background. Maxwell (2013) explains that purposeful sampling is about “achieving representativeness or typicality of
settings, individuals, or activities selected” (p. 98). As such, all participants were selected with the intention of achieving a representative participant group. The participants were also selected to provide grounds for comparison with one another. Maxell (2013) emphasizes the necessity and importance in drawing comparisons as part of purposeful sampling. The participants are different genders, ages, and academic and social capacities. Yet, they all have one commonality, which is they are enrolled at as a student or work at as a staff member at the Inspire Center. The other commonality is that I have interacted with each participant and have developed a relationship as a member of the staff and as the Director at The Inspire Center. Therefore, each participant has interacted with me in some capacity before becoming a participant in this study. Additionally, my proximity to the participants allows me to coordinate times that work with them to participate in the study. This point is also directed at my own positionality in this study, which again, I will further discuss in the validity and positionality section that follows.

**Student Selection**

The student participants were selected based on the school student demographics. At the time of this study, The Inspire Center was in the final months of its second of year of operation and had 360 students on their roster. The detailed demographic and age breakdown of The Inspire Center can be seen in Appendix A, which was pulled during the time of the study. Currently, in the third year of operation, the demographics around age and gender have slightly shifted from what is seen in Appendix A from year two. At the time of the study where the majority of the data collection took place, which was during the last term of the second school year, the majority of the students identified as Black and an overwhelming majority, 71%, identify as female. The average age of the Inspire Center student was 30.8 years old and the median age was 28 years old.

Given the nature of this study and its focus on adults enrolled in an adult education program, I chose to select student participants who were 22 years and older and equal number of male and female students in order to gain a range of participant perspectives. Age and gender diversity are guiding factors in the purposeful sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although their own
orientations were also clearly important, students under 18 are not yet adults, and thus not as central to the aim of this study. Additionally, students ages 18-21, though 16.7% of the student population at the Inspire Center, are still very much of traditional high school age and have the choice to enroll in traditional or alternative high schools and programs across the city. These students, ages 18-21, are still considered compulsory students who are required to be in school and thus do not technically have a choice to return to school. Also, students who are 22 years and older have more time and experience in and out of the education system, and thus broader life stories to share and present in this study. Thus, I chose to begin my participant selection with the 22-year-old students, even though this is not the starting age of the adult students at the Inspire Center.

Next, given the nature of this study and wanting to incorporate students from a broad spectrum of ages to understand the experiences and stories of adult students, I chose to break the ages into three different groups that represent three different life phases. One group of students in their 20s, ages 22-29, I call “early career.” Another group of students in their 30s and 40s, ages 30-49, I call “mid-career.” The final group of students in their 50s and older, ages 50 and up, I call “post-career.” These age bracket categories allow for me to separate the student groups by age in order to analyze similarities and differences in experience and story by age group. Also, for adults returning to school, it made sense to label them with these early, mid, and post career categories due to the time and place in their lives. Given that the largest age group was the 22-29-year-old group I wanted to keep this category as its own. Age impacts people’s experiences and stories as well as orientations towards success. As a result, it was important to have a diverse age span of participants in this study while also being representative of the school’s student population. In the spirit of narrative inquiry, I wanted to incorporate several stories from the student participants. Also, I wanted to incorporate a large number of student voices and specifically voices that are typically silenced and have not yet had the opportunity to be heard through a formal study. The student population at the Inspire Center can be transient, so it was also important to set out including more participants with the hopes of having more
stories, experiences, and responses in case some of the student participants were unable to continue with the study. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that each of the adult age groups were represented in order to present a holistic sampling of the adult student population at the Inspire Center.

**Staff Selection**

As mentioned in my description of the Inspire Center, the school is comprised of 8 specific teams, which all have all have a lead or a manager. In the spirit of appreciative inquiry, it was critical to incorporate all perspectives of staff in this study to understand their orientation of success in terms of school structure and point of view. I included leadership team members, teachers, coaches, front office staff, and special populations team members in the study. Each staff member at the Inspire Center has a unique perspective guiding his or her orientation of success and works with the students in a different capacity. Thus, each staff member brings a new lens to the questions pertaining to student success and school structure. Additionally, each staff member shares his or her own understanding of the school and its guiding principles as it relates to the students. Therefore, the staff participants include at least one member from each team: The Leadership Team, The Humanities Team, The STEM Team, The Academic Success Coaching Team, The Operations and Enrollment Team, The Student Discipline Team, and The Special Populations Team. It was important to me that a wide range of staff and teams were represented in this study as to have perspectives from staff with different interactions with students present in the study.

**Selection Criteria and Considerations**

Using the guiding principles of Mawell’s (2013) and Ravitch and Carl’s (2016) purposeful sampling, I set out specific selection criteria for the participants. Given the use of Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry to guide my research, it was necessary that all participants bring forth the experience of living together in the same organization and also having enough experience in that setting to be able to both appreciate the setting and also reflect on the setting. The selection criteria can be seen in Appendix C. All participants had to complete at least one
academic term (8-weeks) as a student or as a staff at The Inspire Center by the time of the study. Additionally, each student participant had to be currently enrolled as a student at the Inspire Center and each staff participant had to currently be employed as a member of the staff at the Inspire Center at the time of the study. The criteria of both students and staff of needing to have completed one full term at the Inspire Center was important because it means the participant has engaged in the school over a period and has come to understand the school structure and model. Furthermore, it was important that the participants have an understanding of the school’s structure and policies to be a part of this study and fully engage with the research questions. Additionally, it was necessary that all participants have experienced significant amount of time in the school to then share their experiences, stories, and ideas that inform the guiding research questions.

Next, I had to identify the student and staff participants. I retrieved the current roster from the time the study started of the students enrolled at the Inspire Center through the School Information System. I then categorized students by the identified age groups as well as the established criteria that they have been enrolled and completed at least one full 8-week term. I then selected 16 students from the following age group category I had set up: 22-29 years old, 30-49 years old, and 50 years old and older. Within each age group category, I then identified 8 students who identify as female and 8 students who identify as male to have a total of 16 possible participants for each age group category. Of the possible 16 students for each age group category, 12 were asked to partake in the voluntary study and reviewed and signed the Participant Consent Form. The others remained as backups in case a student chose not to join the study or chose to no longer be part of the study. Again, given the transient nature of the Inspire Center’s student population, it was important to have backup student participants identified. In the case of the 22-30-year-old age group, the early career student participants, there was an overwhelming response to participate and as such I allowed 14 participants. All in all, there are a total of 38 student participants, 14 early-career student participants, 12 mid-career student participants, and 12 late-career student participants.
Then, with the staff participants, a similar selection criterion guided the process. The Inspire Center has 31 staff members. There are nine total members on The Leadership Team. The Leadership Team includes me as the School Director, the Manager of Student Support Services, the Lead Humanities Teacher, the Lead STEM Teacher, the Manager of Special Populations, the Lead Academic Success Coach, the Manager of College and Career Readiness, the Data Performance Manager, and the Registrar Manager. Six of the Leadership Team members lead a team and have at least one team member. The Office Manager is not on the Leadership Team but serves a critical role and supports all of the teams. Excluding the lead or manager (who is a member of The Leadership Team), the breakdown of each team is as follows: The Humanities Team has five staff members, The STEM Team has six staff members, The Special Populations Team has four staff members, The Operations and Enrollment Team has two staff members, and The Academic Success Coaches Team has five staff members. Additionally, there is a child daycare center onsite and it is run by an outside contractor and has five total staff members. The child daycare center is not included in the total number of The Inspire Center Staff, but they do have a critical role in the school and their services are an important part of the school model. Thus, when identifying the staff participants, it was important that each team was represented in the participant pool. As with the student participants, the staff participants must have completed at least one full term (8-week academic term) as a staff member at The Inspire Center by the time of the study and must currently be employed by the Inspire Center at the time of the study. The staff participants were identified using the selection criteria outlined in the previous section. Each staff participant who was selected chose to voluntarily participate in the study and both reviewed and signed the Participant Consent Form. Initially, I had set out to have eight staff participants and I had identified one back up participant too. However, like with some of the student participants, there was an eagerness to participate in the study, and as such I permitted all nine identified staff participants to engage. Thus, there were a total of nine staff participants in the study. The staff participants included: The Manager of Student Supports, two
Academic Success Coaches, the Manager of Special Populations, two Humanities teachers, one Math teacher, the Office Manager, and the Registrar Manager.

Methods and Research Design

Data Collection

The data collection for this study utilized several methods that allowed for the appreciative inquiry and narrative study methodology to take place. The following methods were used in this study: 38 student interviews, 9 staff interviews, 47 visual representations, 3 student follow-up interviews, and 1 staff follow-up interview. The data collection process started in May 2018 and concluded in September 2018. The data collection process took place during Term 5 of the academic school year 2017-2018 and Term 1 of the academic school year 2018-2019.

Interviews

Interviews were a key source of and the first source of data collection method in this study. I interviewed all 38 students and 9 staff. The goal of the student interviews was to better understand students’ past and current educational experiences and stories and uncover what they hope to achieve by enrolling at the Inspire Center. Additionally, the interviews allowed students to both shape and share their view of success as it relates to orientations of success. All interviews provided insight into the main research question around student success and also created a space for both student and staff participants to share their orientation of success for students. The guiding protocol for both student and staff interviews can be found in Appendix D, but follow-up questions will be generated during the interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used a flexible interview approach to allow for interviews to take shape as they happened and gave room for follow-up questions based on what the participants’ responses were.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) discuss the importance of interviews that focus on the actual research questions. Thus, the interviews will allow for the participants to speak openly and freely around the topics that frame the research questions. Additionally, the interviews will allow for narrative inquiry through providing a platform for participants’ voice, story, and their narrative to
surface (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Additionally, the interviews will focus on the discovery piece of the 4-D model of Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry. The guiding interview protocol helped ensure that all participants were provided with the same entry points into sharing their narratives and also sharing their reflections on their school and their ideas around success.

Every participant had their interview in a closed, comfortable setting. These interviews were scheduled at least two weeks prior to the interview so that the participant could ensure the time fit with his or her schedule. I sent a follow-up email or text to the participant a week in advance reminding him or her of their interview time. I also made sure to remind all participants when I saw them in the school of their interview time and was flexible with adjusting the time or day if something came up and the schedule needed to be adjusted to meet the participants’ needs. Additionally, as shared above, the interviews followed a guided framework and protocol with pre-set questions, as seen in Appendix C, but did allow for leading questions and trail off responses (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). All interviews began with a review of the Participant Consent Form, and then a statement of the intention of the interview and the study. I asked all participants to select their pseudonym at the start of the interview and they wrote their chosen name on the consent form. I informed all participants that their real name would be used in the interview process, but later their chosen pseudonym would be used and replace their name. I informed all participants that their interviews would be recorded and asked for their permission to do so. All interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. I sent most of the interviews out to be transcribed through a transcription service and did transcribe some of the interviews on my own. Regardless, I will re-read all transcriptions while listening to all interviews to ensure clarity and accuracy and made edits where needed based on the audio interview. Ravitch and Carl (2016) note the necessity of transcribing the interviews verbatim so that they become the actual data as text and that becomes transformational and not just transactional.

The interview protocol, as seen in its draft form Appendix D, addresses all three research questions and is directed specifically at the personal experiences, view on orientations of
success, and opinion on school structure that frame the study’s research questions. Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasize the need to get “credible information” and to do so the interview must focus on events that the interviewee knows (p. 67). I planned the interviews to gather credible information and accordingly I used a framework of questions that are based on the foundation of what the participant knows and has experienced. This also allowed the narrative inquiry approach to be used as well as the appreciative inquiry model because they are both based on the very organization and experience that the participant knows.

After each interview, I wrote interview memos for my own knowledge and later as a further analysis tool. In used these memos to analyze my perception of the interview and any other thoughts or factors I want to include. I also completed an interview journal where I recorded notes, after thoughts, and also wrote shorter memos. In my interview journal I took notes from the interview and made sure to note of any body language observations or issues of concern during the interview. Additionally, during the interviews I took notes in my research journal about various questions, ideas, or observations that surfaced during the interview and that I did come back to during my analysis phase.

I took steps to ensure a validity check by having some participants partake in a second interview. One participant from each student age group category and one staff participant was chosen to have a second validity check interview for a total of 3 student follow-up interviews and 1 staff follow-up interview. I choose the participants for the validity check interview by reviewing interview notes and identifying 3 student participants (1 from each age group) and 1 staff participant that I believe share common themes of the groups. The reasoning for this was to ensure responses are in alignment to the questions and the questions garnered the responses that they sought to receive. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), validity ensures the participant responses are “faithful to participants’ experiences” (p. 186). Thus, the validity check interviews helped me to check in on the participant responses and both ensure and affirm that participant responses align with the research questions and there is rigor the interview questions that garners the type of response that aligns to the participant’s experience. I did not have a formal
protocol for this interview, but I asked questions pertaining to student and staff experiences at the Inspire Center as well as brought up questions regarding orientations of success and other questions I had from my interview journal. This validity check also checked in on the credibility and dependability of my interview protocol (Ravitch and Carl, 2016).

Visual Representation

In addition to the interviews, and also as part of the interview, I had each participant from both the student participants and staff participants create a visual representation to add to their process of understanding the Inspire Center. Creswell (2014) emphasizes the need to have multiple data collection procedures during qualitative research. Therefore, as a compliment to and part of the interview, I also gathered visual materials from the participants. This also provided participants with another way to think about and view their experiences at the Inspire Center. For this part of the interview, each participant was given a blank 8.5x11. Participants were then asked to answer the following question through a drawing or some type of image: How do you think The Inspire Center should be set up to best support its students to be successful? What does this success look like? Create an image that answers these questions. I told participants that there was no right or wrong answer and that after they created an image, they would then explain it to me when we continued the interview. Participants had as much time as they needed to complete the image.

The question for the visual representation activity is part of the interview protocol in Appendix D. The purpose of this visual representation activity was to further engage in the discovery stage of Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) 4-D model of appreciative inquiry while also providing another way for participants to explain their perspective around school structure and student success. Also, the visual representation activity was folded into the interview and included questions of reflection around the creation and also questions connecting to the earlier parts of the interview as well.

After participants completed the visual representation, I asked them to describe their image. I recorded all conversations as was part of the interview, and also took notes throughout
the conversation and when the participant was drawing in my interview journal. I followed-up with questions and asked participants to explain and provide an analysis of their visual.

I used this visual representation as part of the interview. This part took place at the end of the interview when the participant had already reflected on much of the school model, discussed what they appreciated about their school, spoke about their own education experiences, and explained their ideas around what success for themselves and students at the school means and looks like. I closed the interviews with questions probing into visual representations. This was another way to have participants share their thoughts, stories, and visions around success orientations and specifically school structure as a way of describing and showing how The Inspire Center supports its students towards success. Additionally, this visual representation is another way for me, the researcher, to collect a shared data experience between all participants and see similarities and differences between their representations and explanations.

While participants completed their visual representation, I recorded notes and observations in my research journal. I also included my observations, thoughts, and reflections during this activity in my interview memos. All visual representations were scanned into a secure data file and kept with interview transcripts and then coded during the data analysis.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis process was organizing the data. I started with the raw interview files and images to create a better understanding of the scope and amount of data I had collected. Maxwell (2013) explains that the first step in data analysis is looking at the transcript and that categorizing data is a form of coding. Thus, I started the process of data analysis sorting through and listening to the interviews and creating a data organization chart with all participant pseudonyms and demographic information. I then transcribed some of the interviews and sent the majority of interviews out to be transcribed through a transcription service. I read through each transcription with the audio file to ensure correct transcription was captured. During this process, I started my first steps into thinking about codes and understanding various themes that were beginning to develop.
Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014) speak about descriptive coding and assigning labels to the data. I developed categories and labels around the participants’ responses regarding their experiences, their goals, and their orientation of success as they emerge from the data. I used in vivo coding when looking at the transcripts, so I could code by using phrases that the participants said and keep the codes in their own language (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). It was important that the actual words of the participants were kept intact, as it is their experience, their story, and their inquiry.

First, I analyzed the transcripts from the interviews and visual representations and created codes around themes that emerge based on the research questions and listed them in a matrix (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). I created a coding matrix that was generated around the research questions, and which was also generated from the data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). While I coded the transcripts from the I used jottings to keep track of ideas and new codes I developed (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 1994). Additionally, I wrote and recorded memos after each coding session to remind myself about changes I made, or any new codes developed and the rationale behind that. My completed coding matrix can be seen in Appendix E, which includes the codes I used when finding excerpts from the data. I used a coding software to help organize and sort my data and codes and entered all of my codes into the software before coding my data for excerpts. The participants each had their own assigned participant code: staff participant, early career student participant, mid-career student participant, and late career student participant. Additionally, some of the codes, specifically in reference to codes pertaining to school policies were made just for staff transcripts and coding.

Next, I identified key quotes and excerpts from the interviews. I identified significant quotes that related to the research questions and highlight emerging themes and the various codes. Again, the quotes allow for the participant’s voice to stay intact and the coding software helped create a running list of participant quotes as they pertain to the participants lived experiences and inquiry. Rubin and Rubin (2012) call this “notable quotes” and I used notable quotes as key excerpts from the interviews to highlight important points in reference to the
research questions (p. 91). I then applied a code from the coding matrix to the notable quotes in order to expand and explore key themes and reoccurring statements (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The coding software assisted in ensuring I maintained my data organization and streamlined the process with the great amount of data and large variety of codes. Also, the coding software helped see overlapping themes and codes that then allowed for support in the reduction process.

I coded each transcript and image a minimum of two times in order to gain a better understanding of each interview and also check against my own coding process. I was able to see overlapping codes and similar themes, and this supported the reduction process as well. I combined some of the codes that seemed to overlap and point to the same theme and also saw which codes were insignificant as they were not used in great quantity.

Maxwell (2013) discusses the importance of keeping notes, memos, and journal logs with all coding. Therefore, with each coding session, I recorded my thoughts, processes, and questions in my researcher journal. I also wrote memos after each coding session intentionally, so I would keep a record of my thoughts and any changes I might make. Additionally, keeping notes, memos, and journal logs helped keep me to keep track in my coding process as it related to the sequencing of my research methods too.

Issues of Reliability and Validity

I have incorporated several methods to collect data as a way of ensuring triangulation in participant responses. I have two different sources of data: interviews and the visual representation activity. Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the need for multiple data points around the same questions to reduce the risk of bias. The interviews and visual representation activity are all asking similar questions and provoking ideas around the same themes, but through different mediums to bring forth new responses or a new frame of mind. I did not want to rely on one method to discover answers to my questions. I also wanted to provide multiple entry points for the participants around the various questions and allow for more opportunity to probe into their stories and ideas as well. I sequenced the methods with intention as not to overwhelm the
participants in this study, and to build off one another. This is why the visual representation activity falls within the interview, but at the end of the interview. I wanted to give participants the time and space they need to engage in the narrative and appreciative inquiry process, which is why they are given as much time as they would like in the interview process. I also conducted follow up interviews with select participants as a validity check.

My role as the researcher was to evaluate my methods for answers to my research questions. However, as the researcher who is interested in this topic, I might have subconsciously or consciously brought some validity threats into this study. The first of which is the researcher bias threat (Maxwell, 2013). While I analyzed the data, I made sure to explain my biases around the data through my memos and journal recordings. Maxwell (2013) explains how important it is to put all potential biases out on paper. I am bias to my participants because of my close positionality with them and the school and also my relationship with them and the topic of adult education and success orientations. Given that I have worked in this environment and in this school, I come to the research study with my own opinions as well. Even though this gives me a rare insider look, it is still a potential bias. I wanted my participants to elicit answers and responses to my questions and not feel forced or swayed into an answer or thought that aligned with my own views and opinions. However, there was the chance that the participants might reveal nothing special or significant. Additionally, there was the chance that there might not be any differences between the participants in what they responded with. Also, as the researcher, I was cognizant to not bring in any type of reactivity that would control the circumstances of my data (Maxwell, 2013).

I also used respondent validation after each interview ensure the participants felt as though their responses were theirs and only theirs. Maxwell (2013) suggests respondent validation or member checks as a strategy to check for bias. I asked participants about their views on the interviews and allowed them to bring any concerns to the surface. After each interview I recorded the participants’ thoughts, concerns, or lingering questions in my journal and
wrote memos to capture these ideas. I maintained a feedback log for participants as a member check process around validity in my researcher journal.

Additionally, I actively sought other opinions around the interpretation of my data using critical friends (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used this as another validity test. Maxwell (2013) calls this “searching for discrepant cases or negative cases” (p. 127). The coding process took place in my own mind as developed by the process of analyzing the transcripts. Therefore, when I had a data interpretation issue or question, I looked to the opinions of others to see if my interpretation was aligned with their thoughts on the interpretation or not. I utilized critical friends throughout several different times in the coding process. The critical friends I solicited had a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and relationships to the focus of the study. I had other researchers outside of myself, the critical friends, look at the coding matrix and my own analysis to see another perspective. I engaged in discussions with other researchers around my codes and themes to expand my own discussion and push my analysis. The use of critical friends helped alleviate an extreme misinterpretation, which could lead to invalid data and invalid data analysis.

Lastly, Maxwell (2013) discusses the need to focus on not over-generalizing the data. This is a serious validity threat because I am researching participants lived experiences and their personal stories and desires. I intended to be as detailed as possible in my analysis and use the notable quotes to keep the participants’ voice alive and intact. Ensuring that the participant’s voices are the focal point of the analysis and findings is paramount and key to this study. The purpose here is for the data to speak for itself and not to be generalized. But, I did make sure to keep the validity threat of generalization in the forefront of my mind and made sure to take note of this when I felt as though it was surfacing through memos and recordings in my journal.

Researcher Role and Positionality

My positionality as the researcher in this study is extremely important to state and explain. Both the student and staff participants know me very well as I work in the same building where they either go to school or are employed. Additionally, when I first set out on the journey of
this study, I was in a different role than the role I currently hold. Initially, I was on Leadership Team of the Inspire Center as the Lead Humanities Teacher. I held this role from the inception of the school’s existence starting in August 2016 up until March 2018. During the time the study was taking place, in March 2018, I transitioned from the Lead Humanities Teacher to the School Director role. I currently hold the School Director position now.

In both positions during this study, my positionality afforded me a more comfortable relationship to engage in deeper questions and discussions with both student and staff participants that might not surface if I was not the researcher. I saw and worked with the participants each day, and so I had a good foundational relationship with them, which made them more comfortable in the interview process. I believe that the participants were more forthcoming, honest, and genuine in their effort and responses to my questions because of my positionality and my relationship with them. I also had access to the participants due to working in the same space as them and working alongside of them. I believe that my positionality positively impacted the interactions between me, the researcher, and the participants during this study. Also, the participants and I shared a common understanding and language of the Inspire Center because we co-existed in the space that was the focus of the study. This also could be seen as a benefit in the outcomes of the interviews as well.

However, I also do realize my positionality could have had some negative drawbacks as well. I can see how my positionality as both the Lead Humanities Teacher and as the School Director could cause the participants to try and make me happy by saying what they think I want to hear or not being completely open and honest due to my positionality as well. Additionally, in my role as School Director, where I directly oversee the Leadership Team and indirectly all of the staff, manage student concerns and discipline, and also manage the school building my positionality could be a concern for both student and staff participants who might think they have to watch what they say or hold back on their true thoughts, feelings, or ideas around the school and their stories. Also, for some staff participants who I complete evaluations for, they could be fearful of my positionality and hold back when opening up about their own story or their true
thoughts and feelings around the school structures and policies. Where I recognize the reality of this, I am hopeful that this did not become a reality in the data collection process. Also, I hope instead that my positionality was more of a positive and a benefit because of the reasons explained above.

Also, I believe that my positionality in the School Director role and also before as the Lead Humanities Teacher role could be beneficial as both student and staff participants could see their ideas as having real agency with me being able to enact some changes based on their thoughts and proposals. At the beginning of each interview, I made sure to explain the confidential nature of the interviews and also the use of pseudonyms for both the participants and the school as another layers of confidentiality. I also made sure to explain the rationale for this study as being outside of my scope of work as the School Director or as the Lead Humanities Teacher when I first started the study. Additionally, I made sure all participants knew that participating in the study was voluntary and they could remove themselves from the study at any time.

As mentioned in the validity checks earlier, I continually checked in with the participants on their thoughts, feelings, and stability throughout the interview process. This helped me navigate through my own positionality during the interviews and track the participants' responses and emotions. I also clearly outlined the expectations of the study and the intention behind each of the methods.

Also, I do want to mention that as the School Director, my positionality could have impacted because this study could be viewed by both student and staff participants to gather student and staff information. However, this was not the case. I wanted all participants to be able to share their stories, opinions, and views in a safe environment and provide a platform for their voices to be the focal point. As such, I made it very clear to review the participant consent forms at the beginning of each interview, which outlined the goals and purpose of the study. I also made sure to let participants ask any questions they had before, during, or after the interviews. Throughout the interviews I did not have any participants raise concerns about my positionality as
the School Director or Lead Humanities Teacher. Nonetheless, I do believe it was important to both state it here my positionality here, and make sure I acknowledged it at the beginning of my interviews with all participants.

Additionally, my positionality as a white female also must be noted. I am someone who looks different and comes from a different background than most of the students and most of the staff I work alongside. I bring this point to the surface when talking about my positionality because race plays a part in my research and in grounding theories. I am someone who has benefitted from the theories that I have framed as part of the explanation for why high school drop outs exist and why there is a need for adult education programs. Therefore, I must explicitly state my race and acknowledge the role it plays in my own positionality and also in the larger context of this study. I did not foresee this having an impact on my research, but I believe it was necessary to bring up and make known to the readers.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) emphasize the need to use positionality memos to record thoughts around positionality throughout the research and development of the study. I followed this process and consistently wrote positionality memos to track my ideas and notions around my own positionality and how it might have posed a validity threat at any point. I recorded memos more frequently during my transition to the School Director role to ensure I could look back and reflect on how this played a role in the data collection process. These memos helped guide my first steps into my own analysis and served as an informal timeline too. The majority of the student interviews were completed when I was the Lead Humanities Teacher. However, the interviews and data collection process continued as I took on the role of School Director. All staff interviews were completed in my first few months as the School Director.

Timelines

The data collection process took place over five months. I intended to collect all data during the 2017-2018 school year but needed more time and decided to collect all student data in the fifth and final term of the 2017-2018 school year, which was between May-July 2018. Then, I
collected all staff data before summer break in July and when staff returned for the 2018-2019 school year in August and early September, which is the first term of the current school year. The Inspire Center runs on a longer than usual school year calendar with its five, eight-week academic terms. As such, this provided a great benefit in allowing for more data collection time with the students before graduation and summer break.

However, during the summer months when school is still in session in our fifth term of the year, student attendance wanes due to outside factors and having their own children out of school. Thus, I wanted to take on the research as early as possible to gain participant buy in and ensure their presence in the school. Additionally, the school has its larger and final graduation of the year at the end of the fifth term in July, before the non-Leadership team staff go on a three-week summer break. Thus, given that many of the student participants were set to graduate in the July graduation, it was important that the student participant data collection wrap up at the end of the fifth term and not go into the summer months or the new school year. Even though many of the student participants were slated to return for the new school year and continue on their education journey, there is also no promise that all students will return as summer engagement and re-engagement is always hard with adult students, even if it is just having four weeks out of school. Thus, I intentionally chose to focus on the student interviews first and work to have all student data collected before the close of the 2017-2018 school year.

I had informed the staff participants of the research study and all staff had agreed to be in the study and several even offered to come in during the summer break for their interviews. Staff members who are not on the Leadership Team have three weeks off between the school years before everyone is back for new student orientation. The Leadership Team remains on site but does have the option to take off at certain times that do not overlap. As such, I created a timeline where I collected some of the staff data in the week before the summer break, some of the data with just the Leadership Team on site, and the remainder of the data at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year. All data was collected by the close of September 2018. This timeline allowed for ample time for coding, analysis, and all validly tests. The timeline did shift based on
the ebb and flow of the school operations, but I was able to meet the goals of my timeline for the data collection process with the student and staff interviews.
CHAPTER 4: Student Orientations Towards Success

A large part of this study was to gain a better understanding about what adult students who did not complete high school seek to achieve through enrolling in adult education opportunities. To answer this question, as explained in Chapter 3, I turned to 38 adult students attending the Inspire Center and categorized them into three different age groups.

Each participant engaged in a one on one interview with me, which they scheduled around their school schedule and personal life schedule. Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to over an hour. As explained in more depth in Chapter 3, the goal of the interviews was to gain an understanding around how students define and orient success as well as understand why students returned to school and what they appreciate about their current school. The student interviews took place in Term 5, the final term, of the academic year and began in May 2018 and were completed in July 2018. During the time of the interviews, the school was preparing for its largest graduation to date of 66 students. Several of the student participants were members of the July 2018 graduating class and the energy for graduation was most definitely felt.

Throughout the interviews several themes emerged about what adult students seek to achieve by enrolling in adult education opportunities, which also suggests how students see success around school. There is a great amount of research on using student voice to empower students and inform school decisions (Knesting, 2008; Nieto, 1994). I hoped to build agency and self-esteem in my students by having them share their stories, while also providing a safe space to listen to their stories. According to Knesting (2008), students, “…just needed someone to listen to them” (p. 7). Thus, this opportunity was a chance for students to feel listened to and also be heard. Additionally, the goal with the student interviews was to learn more about the students’ experiences and their own education journeys. By using narrative inquiry and approaching the interviews from the perspective of sharing narratives, students’ lives could come to the surface and students could be vulnerable (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), “…people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” and this is where we uncover the true experiences of individuals (p. 2). The student stories and narratives
show great similarities between what students’ lived experiences were and also how they orient success as an adult student by what they are seeking to achieve. Initially, I thought that there would be great disparity and difference among the age groups in how they orient success and what they hope to achieve, but rather it was quite the opposite in that most of the findings were similar across all of the student participant age groups. However, there were a few points of distinction between the age groups, which I will explain later in this chapter, that aligns to where students are in their current lived experience and what they are seeking to gain by returning to school.

As explained and explored in the literature review, traditional education orients success and outcomes through traditional pathways such as graduation, college, career, and exceptional learning ability. Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory posits that education systems maintain these orientations of success to ensure that only certain people promote through society and that the dominant culture remains dominant and in the pipeline of success. For adult students returning to high school after not meeting the outcomes of a traditional orientation of success, the risk of failure in returning to school is high. Adult students have seen first-hand the inequities of the education system and feel the push, pull, or fall out influences and factors from not completing high school originally (Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela, 2016). Also, knowing that Valencia’s (1997) deficit model is used to explain student failure in the school system as a result of their own deficiencies and not the inadequacies of the system. As such, this sets a negative tone for examining adult students who have been seen in light of their deficiencies and not for their strengths or assets.

However, there was not any tone or sense of failure or in the student interviews. Instead, there were clear moments of recognition and acknowledgement of the past, and an astute focus on the present. Here I am going to provide an overview of some of the overarching themes from the students before going into more detail. Additionally, there was not any harboring of ill will towards the systems that have failed them. Rather, there was an understanding and an affirmation that the past educational experiences did not work and their current education setting
at the Inspire Center was working to generate success in their life. There was a great awareness that their current education experience was different and this elicited feelings of validation, empowerment, and affirmation. There was also a great acknowledgement of their past experiences that lead to this moment to return to school and prompted this new choice and phase in their life story with an eagerness to learn (Bridgeland and Milano, 2012; Knowles, 1962). Additionally, there was a great amount of positive self-talk and excitement in the construction of their current narrative, which shows growth and adult hood narrative construction (Rice and Pasupathi, 2010). There was a sense that the students are in a state of transition and they are constantly balancing both positive and negatives forces and choices and various demands to maintain their status and goals of returning to school (Douglah, 1970; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Mott and Bauer, 1990). Furthermore, there was a great sense of resilience, perseverance, and self-determination around the student's motivation to find success and frame success in ways that they have not experienced before and ways that are generating tremendous outcomes (Comings, 2007; Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999). Consequently, there were several larger themes that were found across the student participants about their orientations of success and both their feelings of and goals for being back in school.

The adult students at the Inspire Center whose stories are shared in this chapter show that there is not a one size fits all story for all students who are enrolled at the Inspire Center. Furthermore, there is not a single story that encapsulates or defines what an adult student looks like. But the interviews brought to the surface a recognition that success is defined through self-actualization and the need to complete a goal, redeem or validate what was supposed to happen long ago, and set oneself up for a better life. Contrary to my initial beliefs, the age categorization of the student participants did not have as much difference as I thought in terms of how success is oriented. There is one orientation of success where Post Career students held a strong alignment and presence, and my thought is it has to do with having more time to witness life and seek an opportunity to redeem oneself from that which one does not have.
Based on the interviews and moving from the larger overview above to now the more narrowed and specific themes, I found three ways in which adult students at the Inspire Center orient success. By understanding what students hoped to achieve, I was able to derive the following orientations of success and will explore and unpack each in more detail below: success as personal fulfillment and success as validation. Although these categories are overlapping and interpenetrating, it is helpful to separate out the various qualities that define each orientation of success to better understand how students perceive and feel success. Additionally, each orientation of success provides a lens into the eye of the student to better understand their own story and narrative and how they feel about being back in school and what they are seeking to achieve. These orientations of success aligned to these themes allow the starting point for further analysis and deeper understanding about the students themselves.

However, before I move into unpacking the two orientations of success I found for the students, I must first acknowledge that there is a foundational need or rather prerequisite that must be present at the school level for the orientations of success to surface. Though not an orientation of success, the idea of having a safe and caring environment was one that many students emphasized in their interviews. When thinking about what fosters success and what shapes the orientations of success in this chapter, I had to include the culture of safety and care as a foundational aspect of the Inspire Center school culture and entity that promoted the new and re-framed orientations of success for the students. Thus, before moving into the analysis of the two success orientations, I am first going to explain what a culture of safety and care looks like at the Inspire Center and how students talked about feeling safe, cared for and comfortable, which ultimately brought forth feelings of success and the new orientations of success in this chapter.

Culture of Safety and Care

From all age groups, there was an overwhelming sense of student participants feeling successful at the Inspire Center because they felt supported by a staff that genuinely cared and
did not judge them. As a result, because students felt safe and cared for, they felt comfortable and this is a culture they have not experienced before in the school setting. A culture of safety and care aligns with students feeling cared for and supported and both mentally and physically safe in the school environment. Again, these feelings are attached with the later described success orientations in the Inspire Center and are not feelings associated with any other school environment that the students describe. To lay the framework for what a culture of safety and care looks like, I will share the stories and excerpts from eight Inspire Center student participants that span across all age groups. Many of these students’ stories will come up in the future sections of their chapter as well and therefore, I will not go into detail about every student and his or her story as that is reserved for the next section with the analysis of the orientations of success. To paint a picture of what a culture of safety and care looks like and feels like at the Inspire Center, I will share the stories and excerpts of the following students: Jasmine, Duane, Chandra, Mary Lane, Charmice, Sophie, Reesie, and Denise.

Jasmine was an African American, Early Career student, and a July 2019 graduate. Jasmine was outgoing and someone who made an effort to advocate for herself and for others. Jasmine’s story will come up in the success as personal fulfillment section. She talked about how the environment at the Inspire Center supported her and other students. This environment yielded a feeling of safety and comfort and ultimately this allowed her to find success. When I asked Jasmine about the school and how she felt, she talked about the staff and the feeling of support. Jasmine said, “They [staff] don’t look at the students as outcasts, they don’t make them feel like they’re nothing or dropouts. They make them feel like this school is our second home.” What Jasmine showed is that the feeling of having found another home or a place to feel safe and comfortable is empowering. This lends itself to thinking about the very structure of the Inspire Center and unpacking how the school goes about creating this environment. If students feel safe and comfortable, then they are more likely to learn, stay engaged, and remain on their pathway to graduation and beyond. Jasmine talked about how the staff did not see her or other students as
outcasts or dropouts and rather it seems they accepted her and other students and this created that feeling of safety and comfort and the foundation for finding a new home.

Additionally, what Jasmine said brings up the idea that like her, many other students have not felt this sense of safety and comfort in a school setting before or in their lives in some time, and thus by feeling this at school, somewhere they might not have associated these feelings with, they see themselves in a new light and also are able to stay focused on their goals with that feeling and sense of support around them. Given that Jasmine said she felt the support of staff at the Inspire Center, this leads me to believe she has felt the opposite at other schools in her past experiences. Before she might have felt like an outcast or labeled as a drop out. Those feelings did not allow her to find success or continue in her own potential towards success. For adult students who bring forth the societal shame and the stigmas associated with labels, it is critical that they do not feel this way in the school space. Bridgeland and Milano (2012) and talk in great depth about the feelings associated with returning to school for students who have been labeled a drop out and how they bring those often negative feelings back to school with them, which traditionally has not been a place associated with positive emotions. Unlike the Inspire Center, this is not an environment of safety and care. Instead, the Inspire Center does the opposite and creates a space where students are welcomed, accepted, and looked at as individuals. This caring and safe environment allows the students to grow, expand, and remain enrolled and focused on the future.

Additionally, Duane, also an Early Career student, African American male, and a July 2019 graduate, talked about the idea of safety and comfort. Duane was a student of few words, but when he did speak his words had power. His story will come up more in the success as personal fulfillment section. Duane talked about how he felt as though the staff at the Inspire Center were a significant part of the school. Jasmine spoke and elaborated in great detail about how the staff did not judge or stereotype any student. That lent itself to wanting to dig more into the hiring process and looking at the staff backgrounds to find out what might comprise an ideal staff for a school that serves adult students. However, like Jasmine, Duane also brought forth a
feeling of being safe and comfortable from a perspective of not being judged. This in turn allowed him to be successful. Duane said, “I really appreciate some of my teachers because they see my potential. And they don’t judge me and stuff like that.” Duane appreciated the fact that his school has the supportive teachers. From an appreciative inquiry standpoint, he was acknowledging what he associated with the positive features of the school first (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Duane felt as though the fact that the caring teachers see his potential and that there is an environment that is judgement free, he is therefore able to be successful. This was a new feeling for Duane and is something that has set apart his experience here at the Inspire Center and allowed him to move forward. Jasmine and Duane both explained that feeling uplifted and being present in a space of warmth, care, and support can in turn create success in a space that has not felt that way before. That then created an opportunity for new and different success orientations to develop.

This acknowledgement of safety and care was not just one felt by the Early Career students. Mary Lane, a Mid-Career student also spoke about the culture of safety and comfort. Mary Lane was an African American student in her late forties. Mary Lane graduated in July 2018 and continued to come back to the Inspire Center to provide support to current students and also work with the college and career readiness team in finding a career path. When asked what she appreciated most about the school, she also like Duane and several other students, went into talking about the staff. Mary Lane said, “I appreciate the teachers, and I like the help you all give us. And you all make everyone feel that they’re special and our goals, and you all help us see through them.” From a perspective of appreciation, Mary Lane’s acknowledgement of the supportive teachers show how the school and the staff are creating a place of safety and comfort. In turn, like other students, Mary Lane felt successful because she felt safe and cared for. As a result, it is with this feeling that she could continue on her journey. Additionally, the passion, care, and love from the teachers and staff produced an environment that brought forth safety and care and allowed for Mary Lane and other students to feel successful.
Also, Charmice, another Mid-Career student, and a July 2018 graduate, talked about the need for a culture of safety and care. Charmice was a woman in her early forties who came to the area from Jamaica and preserved with a series of hurdles and personal obstacles in finding her way in a new environment. Charmice’s story will come up in more detail in the success as personal fulfillment section. Charmice spoke openly about her past and all that has defined her up until this moment and her journey here at the Inspire Center. During the interview Charmice spent a great amount of time talking about the staff and her appreciation for them. She acknowledged the support of the staff at the Inspire Center that pushed her forward each day. Charmice said,

The staff is amazing. I didn’t know I could do it, and my past has messed me up mentally. I was ashamed. I struggled a little bit with remembering things. But the staff overlooked that and I look forward to the staff every day. They keep me focused. They remind me that I’m here. I can do this. I want to say the staff really pulled me through this.

Charmice’s experience with the staff at the school created an environment where she felt safe and comfortable and this was the context she needed to keep focused and move beyond her past. Like other students who said the staff did not identify the students as outcasts or dropouts or hold judgement, Charmice too aligned with this. This then provided a culture of mental and emotional safety. She explained how the staff pulled her though her tough times and allowed her to be successful back in school. Her feeling of emotional safety set the foundation for her success. All of the students examined thus far show the creation of space where safety and comfort are felt. The staff and the words of encouragement and belief make these students feel safe and transformed. As a result, success can then be created when students feel safe and cared for.

In addition to the Early Career and Mid-Career students, some of the Post Career students also brought up the idea of a culture of safety and comfort. This was something that was seen throughout all of the age groups. Sophie was a Post Career student who came to the area from Jamaica several years ago. Sophie’s Jamaican accent was thick, and this was a feature that identified her in the halls. She was extremely focused on her education and pursuing her education after her time at the Inspire Center. Sophie spent time with some of her fellow Post Career students and helped a great amount in the computer lab with students as they learned to
work computers for the first time and type many of their projects. Sophie was quiet but fierce at the same time and everyone saw her determination. During our interview, Sophie talked a great amount about the staff and her appreciation for them. She said, “No matter where you’re from or what background, they [teachers and staff] treat you all as one.” As with other students, Sophie felt a sense of comfort and safety from the treatment she receives each day and in turn this creates an environment of strong community where she can be successful. Additionally, Sophie explained a sense that there is no judgment and all students were accepted as they were when she said all staff treat you as once. The notion of the staff not judging students was a common theme throughout the student interviews and one that is fostered by an environment of safety and care. Thus, in this way, the staff created an environment that was safe for all students and showed great care and when students felt the warmth of the environment, they were able to feel successful by being themselves and being themselves in that very space. Sophie’s statement and that of many other students earlier in this section, showed that the feeling of acceptance and genuine warmth created a safe and caring environment where students could learn.

Another Post Career student, Reesie, who I will talk about in greater detail in the success as validation section, also brought up the culture of safety and care. In her interview, Reesie spoke about the school and how she appreciated what it had to offer students. Reesie said,

> Overall it’s a good school, it’s an excellent school, and like I said, especially for older people. Because if they would just come in, and after a couple of days of being here, I guarantee you they would be comfortable to the point where they would stay and complete the program and get their diplomas. Because they’re comfortable.

Reesie’s statement and explanation here, showed that the school is truly building a sense of comfort in its building and this is what is fostering a feeling of community and ultimately breeding success for its students. Success is something that students felt and as emphasized and highlighted by Reesie and the other students in this section, success was feeling a sense of safety and comfort and that is what promotes more success. From all of the students in this section who acknowledged the need for a culture of success as safety and comfort it was clear that being in a space that welcomes everyone as equals regardless of a past story, experience, or background creates comfort. In turn, comfort is what promoted success. The entire notion of
comfort aligned to an overall feeling of safety. Additionally, from all of the students in this section, it is clear that the students at the Inspire Center appreciated and acknowledged this feeling of safety and comfort and these emotions and feelings promote growth and more success, and also are something unique to this environment where they spend their time in school.

Lastly, another Post Career student, Denise, also brought forth the idea of needing a culture of safety and comfort orientation of success and represented it in her image. Denise was an African American woman in her late fifties. She was quiet and reserved and often hesitant of her own skills and capabilities. During her time at the Inspire Center she opened up more to staff and her coach and was seen as a great listener. She spent a lot of her time with her fellow Post Career students, but when someone would ask for her support, she lent it. Additionally, in her time at the Inspire Center, Denise pushed through personal obstacles of grief and losing close relatives and friends. She sought support in her classmates and the staff. Denise had a quiet fierceness about her, she was determined, and this showed each day she walked into the school. She had a no-nonsense type of demeanor but was also kind and gentle. When asked to draw an image about how she believes students were supported at the Inspire Center to be successful, she drew Figure 1. Figure 1 can be seen below.
In this image, Denise portrayed the support at the Inspire Center as a family and a supportive family that will remain forever. She said, “Whenever you feel like you can’t go on, the support is always there.” This image aligned to the culture of safety and care orientation because it showed the perspective of a student and how she viewed the support structures that exist as a way for her to be successful.

Thus, the feeling of family and the feeling of care, love, and trust that come out of the environment at the Inspire Center allow for students to be successful and know they are supported, which brings more success and allows for the success orientations to emerge. As adults, the students at the Inspire Center had faced many of life’s challenges and new that they did not have every advantage – and given that education had not worked for them before, they knew that there were structural barriers to their success. This can be overwhelming. A meaningful culture of safety and care is one that recognizes students’ assets and does not only chastise them for their deficits. As such, a culture of this sort challenges the deficit model of education more broadly. Therefore, when students at the Inspire Center felt safe and when they felt cared
for, they then felt successful. Thus, this created the foundation for all of the orientations of success to come.

Success as Personal Fulfillment

With an understanding that a culture of safety and care is a prerequisite to the orientations of success, I will now move into analyzing the two orientations of success that surfaced from the student interviews. Both orientations of success are heavily seeped in the culture of safety and care that exists at the Inspire Center. Throughout the student interviews, there was an overwhelming sense of success spoken of and oriented as personal fulfillment. This means students associated success as something they set their minds on and achieved and something, they feel a personal sense of accomplishment with. Additionally, success as personal fulfillment is aligned to emotions that students did not know they had before. By looking at success this way, it shows how finding personal fulfillment through goal personal goal attainment is an orientation of success. Adult students are motivated by fulfilling their needs and satisfying a series of external and internal needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Douglah, 1970). Thus, through their own resilience of overcoming past failures and hardship, adults orient success as a moment of truly feeling fulfilled and having their own needs satisfied that have not yet been in so long. Adult students are able to recognize and feel this success when they are at the Inspire Center and this is something that keeps them moving forward.

Students talked about their past educational experiences and described what did not work for them in their past schools and past lives. As Bridgeland and Milano (2012) and Fears-Hackett point out, adult students who did not find success in schools traditionally, do find their way back to a formal education. Furthermore, as Comings, Sum, and Uvin (2000) explain, adult students seek to return to school to increase their opportunities and know they are not in a place where they should or can be. Even more so, the adult students interviewed here can identify what did not work in their previous schools and previous experiences when they were younger. The adult students felt a sense of urgency around finding and sustaining this personal fulfillment of
being back in school and feeling successful because they have found success at the Inspire Center.

For many students, success has been something unimagined and intangible. The very thought of achieving something and being successful, for many students was a far-fetched thought. With all of the adult students, they were able to explain where they were in life and overview some of their past choices, experiences, and decision that ultimately led them back to school. There was a great sense of self and knowing that there is an opportunity that lies ahead of them. This can be seen as the beginnings of agency and understanding one’s own agency and the power of choice and one’s future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Additionally, while the students spoke about their feelings around success and what it means to feel fulfilled, there was some hesitancy in knowing if success would ever surface. Grossman (2012) explains the fragility with adult students and how the return to an adult program is also a fragile one. This fragility was felt throughout some of the interviews, but as the students continued to share their story and define success, especially those who identified with success as personal fulfillment, there was a disconnect from that very fragility and a feeling of power in the success as personal fulfillment. This did not differ across ages or genders, and rather was very similar across the students whose stories and excerpts I will share below. In this orientation of success as personal fulfillment, I will share the stories and excerpts from ten Inspire Center student participants that range across the age groups and genders. The ten students illuminate the theme of success as personal fulfillment and bring this theme to life. I will share the stories of the following students to paint the broader picture of this theme: John, Chandra, Piano Man, LL, Jeff, Beth, Charmice, Duane, Jasmine, and Renee.

Before moving into highlighting students who aligned to the theme of success as personal fulfillment, I want to provide you with a table to guide your reading. Table is titled, Student Participants in Chapter 4 and Notable Quotes Aligned to Success as Personal Fulfillment. Table 1, which can be seen below, includes the participants who will show up in this section who aligned to the theme of success as personal fulfillment. My intention is to provide you
an overview of the participants in the section to follow before going into detail about each of the participants.

Table 1

*Student Participants in Chapter 4 and Notable Quotes Aligned to Success as Personal Fulfillment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Quotes aligned to success as personal fulfillment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Mid-Career</td>
<td>“Success, for me, means to me is basically accomplishing something I never accomplished in my life. And this would be the first time I will ever accomplish anything in my life to getting a high school diploma.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piano Man</td>
<td>Post Career</td>
<td>“I have always made up in my mind to start something, but then it got tedious I would quit or the challenges get rough. Even in some of the subjects I said, ‘I can't do this,’ and I would get frustrated. But, being here and meeting some of my new classmates and friends, they would help me out and then I would get the hang of it and I said, ‘No, I'm not. I refuse to quit.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL</td>
<td>Post Career</td>
<td>“Success, I mean, to me, it’s like finishing what I started.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>Early Career</td>
<td>“Coaches pushes you from step to step across different obstacles on your way to success. You can do it yourself, but they can give you that motivation you need to get to your success point.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Mid-Career</td>
<td>“I do want you all to know that you all hold a special place in my heart and I mean it because it’s not many genuine people out here like the staff at the Inspire Center who really care, who want to see me do well and mean it. I can self-sabotage and I have in the past out of fear. Since being at the Inspire Center, I learned it's okay to fail as long as you don’t quit. Being here is me learning that success is on the other side of fear.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charmice</td>
<td>Mid-Career</td>
<td>“This is the first time in 43 years I’ve ever done anything for me and I’ve done a lot for everyone I know and don’t know. This program gives me an opportunity to do something for myself that no one can do for me. Whatever I do, I do it with pride. Knowledge is power, I’ll take control.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Duane Early Career  “Success to me is accomplishing something that you got to set out for yourself. Anything.”

Jasmine Early Career  “I made it. I survived. So, I proved that to myself that I’m capable of doing a lot more than I put myself out to do.”

Renee Early Career  “My thing is being above average. I don’t like being mediocre so success for me is having my goal and going above and beyond that goal.”

*Note:* The student participants in this table aligned to the theme of success as personal fulfillment. These stories appear throughout the section of this chapter to follow.

Table 1

John, a Mid-Career student in his late thirties, came to the Inspire Center after spending several years incarcerated and deciding he needed to make a change and commit to that change. John is an African American male who is quiet, humble, and initially comes off shy. During his interview, John said, "Some people just come to school because they’re court-ordered or it’s like a hangout spot. And I once upon a time used to be like that until I got my life together and realized that a high school diploma is more important than wasting my life.” In his time at the Inspire Center, John celebrated many life achievements, including but not limited to: owing his first car, having his first girlfriend who became his fiancé, and being off probation successfully for the first time in his life, or as he explained, the first time off any types of papers. John shared his firsts with at first a sense of fragility, but as he continued, he was excited and determined to have more firsts. He even talked about how he would soon be the first to attend college in his family and his firsts are not stopping here at the school. When asked what he planned to do after graduation he said, "My next goal is to go to college to get my business management degree, take up a trade, and start my own firm.” He started at the Inspire Center in Reading Foundations and Math Lab, our foundations level courses and will graduate with honors in January 2019. He grew to be a leader, a mentor, and someone who cared greatly about his community and making sure each person in the community has a voice. He even started a mentoring group at the school
where he mentored younger males and asked if he could come back to the school when he graduates to continue his mentoring and tutoring support.

When talking to John he always had a sense of disbelief that the life he was living now was real and was in fact his real life. He mentioned that he felt like he was living in a dream. He was so proud of himself and what he had committed to, but at times he explained how it did not yet feel real yet because this was what he always hoped for. Through our conversation, I learned about how much he had sacrificed to stay focused on the changes he is making. He talked about his past life and about the hardships he faced but made sure to explain that without them he would not be here today. He also talked about how much he always liked school, but never really had the time for it. John is a man of integrity and accountability. He was also someone who deeply cared for others around him and wanted others to have the same opportunity to re-start their life like he did. John said, “Success, for me, means to me is basically accomplishing something I never accomplished nothing in my life. And this would be the first time I will ever accomplish anything in my life to getting a high school diploma.” For John, the first time accomplishing each of his firsts and now the ultimate first of earning his diploma was personally fulfilling to him. He was fueled by this and his success was pushing past all failures, disbeliefs, and negativity to find this new journey. Additionally, feeling personally fulfilled and living with all of these firsts had John motivated to continue finding that fulfillment.

John continued to expand on what he meant by not accomplishing anything in his life before. John said, “What I mean by never accomplishing anything in my life, I had my opportunities in my life where I got close to the door, where I received something that could change my whole life around, and I backed out or I got scared and said, f it. And at this point in my life I’m just curious if I accomplish something in my life, what will my life be like or how would I truly feel about it?” John’s sense of curiosity and inquiry about what it would feel like to be personally fulfilled is success to him and this keeps him going and keeps him motivated. John, like many of the other Inspire Center students you will hear from, have experienced great personal failure in their lives and personal stagnation. When talking about the Inspire Center,
John said, “[The Inspire Center], it gives me encouragement to move forward like that. It shows me that I accomplished something so I can continue with my goals and dreams.” Consequently, success as personal fulfillment is clearly seen in John as his personal fulfillment of accomplishing his goal of earning a high school diploma spurs further success. Additionally, John had come to realize his underlying desire to satisfy a need he had and sacrificed the ways of the past to find that personal fulfillment. For John, this was success. When asked about what the student must give to achieve success at the Inspire Center, John said, “They really want a high school diploma no matter what, they have to keep pushing because in life, there’s always going to be hurdles, storms .and you have to just always push yourself even when it’s times when there’s no one there to help you.” For someone who talked about his failures and having not accomplished anything before to then explaining how motivated and inspired he was by his own growth and accomplishments, John highlights the orientation of success as personal fulfillment.

The sentiment with John was that success for adult students returning to school is wrapped up in achieving one of many firsts and not giving up when one would have given up in the past. That is personal fulfillment and that is success for adult students returning to school. The feelings attached to this were feelings of joy and disbelief mixed with pride. Like John, Chandra, an Early Career, African American woman who just turned thirty, felt similarly to John about success. At the time of the interview, Chandra was set to graduate in January 2019, and she did in fact graduate as a member of the class of 2019. She was a fierce and direct woman who has been balancing school and her home life with her three children. When asked why she came back to school, she said, “If I expect my kids to have a high school diploma, mommy has to have it under her belt too.” She was an advocate for what she wanted in life and in her community and also an advocate for her fellow peers in school. Chandra was steadfast in her beliefs and determined to meet her goals. She battled some health concerns in her final term at the Inspire Center and preserved to make sure her goal was met. She did have to stay on for an extra term than she had thought but did not stray from her goal of graduation. Despite her usual direct and animated nature, in the interview Chandra was more reserved and showed a side of being a more
reflective thinker about how her life has changed and how she has been on a different path since coming to the Inspire Center. In a quiet voice, which again was unlike the firmer voice she usually used in the school hallways and classrooms, she said that success is, “Ambition. Prosperity. Serenity. Gratitude.” These emotions attach to great sense of personal fulfillment and the notion that any next step is possible. She described success as finding a connection to these feelings and emotions. Also, these emotions encapsulate and form a definition of success. To be ambitious, prosperous, serene, and have gratitude, one is personally fulfilled.

When Chandra talked about her time at the Inspire Center, she said, “I tell my mom every day this is my peace of mind. My time at school, it’s a breath of fresh air.” When asked what she appreciated most about the school, she said, “That I understand that ya’ll give me a chance to express myself and ya’ll understand me. I’m an emotional person.” In Figure 2, when asked to create a visual that shows how she feels about the way the Inspire Center supports its students to be successful, Chandra drew an image of a flower blooming.

Figure 2- Chandra's Visual Representation

and emotions. Also, these emotions encapsulate and form a definition of success. To be ambitious, prosperous, serene, and have gratitude, one is personally fulfilled.

When Chandra talked about her time at the Inspire Center, she said, “I tell my mom every day this is my peace of mind. My time at school, it’s a breath of fresh air.” When asked what she appreciated most about the school, she said, “That I understand that ya’ll give me a chance to express myself and ya’ll understand me. I’m an emotional person.” In Figure 2, when asked to create a visual that shows how she feels about the way the Inspire Center supports its students to be successful, Chandra drew an image of a flower blooming.
This symbolic image represented both feeling of safety and care, which could have been included in the culture of safety and care from before, and ultimately personal fulfillment and success. Chandra’s image shows personal fulfillment because the flower is under the right circumstances to bloom and grow and thus is thriving. Chandra explained that the students are the roots and that by coming back to school and entering the Inspire Center they grow and bloom. She said that the coaches and the teachers provided that support, energy, food, and fuel for her and other students to bloom, gain experiences, and grow into their own self. Additionally, this image showed great optimism because given the right components and the necessary positive energy, positive support system, and positive environment the flower, or again Chandra and other students, had the opportunity to grow in this environment and this is success. But, to reach this orientation of success and to be personal fulfilled, the right context and environment and also the right support structure must be in place. If students do not feel that they have the right factors that generate personal fulfillment, then they will not bloom, and success will not be reached. This then brings to question what those critical factors are and how students at the Inspire Center are given the foundation from their own roots to blossom and feel personally fulfilled and thus successful.

When I asked Chandra about her image, she said, “It’s showing excelling, blossoming, blooming.” Furthermore, when I asked her what the students’ job at the school is, she said, “Students job is to grow and excel.” Thus, when provided an environment that meets the basic needs for students, the students can find success and can grow to find personal fulfillment. When students are feeling personally fulfilled and see their own growth, they are successful.

Along the same lines of both John and Chandra, Piano Man, a Post Career student and an African American male in his early fifties, also shared similar sentiments and beliefs around what success meant to him. Piano Man was a student with great leadership at the Inspire Center. He was a preacher in the community by trade and many students called him Rev or Preacher in the hallways and in the classrooms. He was always found mentoring the younger students throughout the day. During lunch you could find him eating with fellow Post Career students or eating with some of the Early Career and Mid-Career students. He was jovial, outgoing, and
extremely charismatic and passionate about creating a better community. He often stayed late after his classes to support staff and tutor students where he could can lend a hand. He also took up every opportunity that was afforded to him as a student by attending extra tutoring sessions, college and job fairs, new student orientation panels, and extracurricular activities. Piano Man was someone who moved around the hallways with grace, humility, and also a great force. He embodied strength. He had also been fighting through his own personal health battles to maintain his presence at school and stay on track to graduate in January 2019. He was open in talking about his own personal health battles and described his own personal journey as one of triumph. He often talked about the power of education and the role education had played in his life and how his dream was to now walk across the stage. Despite serious health concerns that had him in treatment cycles throughout the last two terms of his journey at the Inspire Center, Piano Man did walk across the stage in January 2019 and had a large crowd in the audience cheering for him.

I once was talking to him and asked him about why he chose to come back to school being that he was so established in the community. He explained to me that he could no continue preaching about the need to continue one’s education when he himself did not have his. One might say he has found great success in his life, but he would argue that he has not yet found his pinnacle of success yet. Piano Man also said, “This was impressed upon my heart to finish school because I put my children through school and always stayed on them to do the right thing and they finished school.” Piano Man spent many years coaching his sons through their education and sports careers and his oldest two sons recently graduated from college on a basketball scholarship. Piano Man’s focus on himself was admirable and despite personal obstacles and other life stresses, he continued to stay focused on his goal of earning his diploma and continuing his education into college. He found a sense of personal fulfillment by returning to school and that frames the way in which he orients success. When talking about success and what it means to him, Piano Man said, “Success means for me to achieve my goals, to finish what I started, and
not quit.” He added to his initial thoughts by describing how his time now, returning to the Inspire Center, would be different. He said:

I have always made up in my mind to start something, but then when it got tedious I would quit or the challenges get rough. Even in some of the subjects I said, ‘I can’t do this,’ and I would get frustrated. But, being here and meeting some of my new classmates and friends, they would help me out and then I would get the hang of it and I said, ‘No, I’m not. I refuse to quit.’

When Piano Man made the choice not to quit this time, he set forth on the path towards personal fulfillment and there are no words to describe this choice and feelings associated with this. His refusal to quit and to stay committed to his goals fueled his march forward and his feeling of accomplishment and self-growth while returning to school fulfilled Piano Man and as such he saw success through an orientation of personal fulfillment and overcoming so much to feel fulfilled.

When asked about the Inspire Center program, Piano Man said, “I believe in the program as a whole. It has enlightened and changed my life tremendously.” Piano man talked about how coming back to school fueled him and transformed him and his success was in feeling this personal fulfillment. Piano Man shows an alignment to success as personal fulfillment because he feel both transformed and fulfilled by his decision to return to school at the Inspire Center. Despite choices he made in the past and fueled by a desire to return to school, he made the decision and is fulfilling that choice and feels a personal sense of growth and achievement. This is success. This is what keeps Piano Man and so many other students motivated to continue finding success.

Similarly, to Piano Man, LL, also a Post Career student, resonated with the idea that success is defined by not giving up. LL was an African American male in his late fifties who had a great sense of humor and a natural wit about him. He was playful and most described him as carefree and even silly. But he also had a serious side to him and could be stern at times too. LL walked with a cane and since day one at the school he refused to use the elevator and insisted on using the stairs. Thus, he was stubborn as can be, but that was simply his determination surfacing. He had a big heart and an even bigger personality. LL liked to mentor the younger students at the Inspire Center and was typically found chatting with some of the younger students in the hallways or in between classes. LL often talked about how the choice to drop out of school
was not the wisest choice he made, but one he had to make for the situation he was in. When I asked him what he used to do in school, he laughed and talked about how he used to run the halls and how he was so wild, and so now at this school he tried to tell the young generation here to stay in school and take the opportunity they have. LL always had a calm ease about him, and he was genuinely proud of himself and the commitment he has made to coming back to school and staying in school. He was never afraid of asking for help and for many of his classes that required typing or using a computer, he would seek support and be very transparent about his fear of computers. In many conversations, he often talked about how much better he had gotten with using those computers and that learning to finally use a computer was a great accomplishment of his. LL also talked about the dreams he had for his community and how he wished everyone he knew who was not currently in school but needed to be would follow his lead and go back. He spoke on many of the new student orientation panels and made clear the necessity of education and the importance of education to the new students. LL graduated in the July 2018 class and walked across the stage without his cane.

When asked what success meant to him, LL said, "Success, I mean, to me, it's like finishing what I started." This showed the idea of success tied to a personal desire to finish a goal as it relates to feeling proud of this achievement and goal. This is what personal fulfillment is and success is about not only committing to and completing a goal, but truly feeling proud of that goal, feeling fulfilled by it, and recognizing the fact that the goal was accomplished. When asked about what he planned to do next and if the school helped him see a future beyond a diploma, LL said, "Oh, yeah. It moved beyond diplomas because now I had the mindset and the skills if I want to go to college, or get a career, and I know I can do it because they gave me the skills." Here, LL showed a connection to personal fulfillment because he was fulfilled by his experience of returning to school and finding that success that it pushed him to think beyond his current state and what was next. He continued when he talked about how the Inspire Center prepared him for what was next. LL said, "Because they are preparing me because really I didn't want to do nothing once I graduated high school. But ya'll gave me that I can do, you gave me the tools to
go, that I can go to college, get a career, and I can basically do anything after this.” LL was not the only student who spoke about the next steps after graduation and the shift in mindset about the next steps. Feeling personally fulfilled and feeling that success allowed students like LL to see a bigger future despite age. When success is seen as personal fulfillment, the opportunity for broad pathways and future goals is much more tangible and clearer. Success then becomes finding what personally fulfills you and how to find the next step that will be personally fulfilling.

Furthermore, Piano Man, LL, and John all show the central characteristic of persistence. It was their persistence that has allowed them to find success and they see success as personal fulfillment because they have not given up on a goal of theirs and a commitment they made. Like Comings (2007) explains, the positive forces and the will to persist have outweighed the negative forces. As such, persisting and finding that personal fulfillment is success. This moment in time and this orientation of success is unlike any other they have found or felt in their life. Even more so, persisting and having a positive outcome as a result of showing such persistence creates a desire to find more times where success is felt.

Additionally, throughout the interviews, student participants had many moments of self-realization and self-actualization that tied to personal fulfillment. In fact, personal fulfillment was felt when a student realized the impact of their current choices and how they felt. During these moments, students reflected on the importance and significance of the community and the opportunity at the Inspire Center. It was in these moments that students also explained their orientations of success and there was a deeper understanding about what success truly looks like and feels like. The feeling of being proud and continuing to persist despite the various factors at play was fulfilling and ultimately was success (Comings, 2007; Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999, Fears-Hackett, 2012).

Like the other students I have shared so far who align to the orientation of success as personal fulfillment, Jeff, is another student who also shared these beliefs. Jeff was an Early Career student in his early twenties. He was often quiet, but throughout his time at the Inspire Center became much more outgoing and charismatic. Jeff was a man of few words, but when you
were able to get him talking, he could not stop. He had stories to tell of his life before when he
was in school and how he felt like school was not for him, but that did not mean he was not smart
or did not get what was going on. He talked about how he always liked school, but he never
wanted to be there. He also reminisced on the times in his life where he said he made bad
decisions, which let to not a lot of great options. He talked about how he watched younger
cousins of his graduate and this was something that made him realize it was his time now to
graduate and go back to high school. Jeff also knew he wanted to make his father proud and earn
his high school diploma. When he talked about coming back to school, Jeff said,

At first, I hadn’t had plans on coming back to school period. But I had things to prove to
my friends and most of all, prove to myself. So I wanted to get back in school so I could
further my education. And I’ve also promised my father that passed last yea

Jeff was a natural student, but at first did not want others to see that side of him. He was present
almost every day of school in his time at the Inspire Center and earned many school-wide awards
and recognitions for his hard work, attendance, focus, and determination. Jeff also earned honor
roll every term he was at the Inspire Center, which was a great feat. He became a peer mentor
and leader. He also became more vocal in the school and started to let his leadership shine.
Towards the end of his journey at the Inspire Center he was found tutoring and providing
guidance to newer students, and this was something that Jeff would not have done when he
initially started at the school. Jeff had a great amount of self-doubt and as his journey continued
at the Inspire Center, the self-doubt started to peel away, and Jeff grew more confidence, and this
was evident to himself and others around him.

Jeff graduated in July 2018 with a desire to continue his education and find a career in
the energy utilities field. When asked to create a visual image about how he felt the Inspire
Center supported students to be successful, Jeff drew the image in Figure 3, which shows a
student climbing from the bottom of a staircase to reach the top point, which he labeled as
“success.”
In this image, Jeff created a staircase where the student is starting at the bottom and sees the great distance before him. What is interesting about this image is the linear nature of the journey to success. Often success can be viewed as a bumpy road of ups and downs, but here Jeff drew an image which shows a direct staircase to success. The student at the bottom sees where he has to go to reach the top of the staircase, which is success. At the bottom, the student has the support of the coaches and staff and is being pushed along the way towards the top.
When I asked Jeff to describe this image, he said, “Coaches pushes you from step to step and across different obstacles on your way to success. You can do it yourself, but they can give you that motivation you need to get to your success point.” Thus, with the support of the coaches at the school, Jeff and other students were able to obtain and reach that success point. This image aligned with the orientation of success as personal fulfillment because by climbing the steep stairs that were drawn here, the student eventually reaches that moment of success and feels satisfied, accomplished, and fulfilled. The energy and the excitement at the top of the staircase is high and the student has reached that goal with the support of the school structures that exist, but also with his or her own individual grit, fortitude, and choice to not give up. Perhaps, the image is shown as success being linear because the past experiences of the student have been anything but linear. Thus, now, at the time of enrolling back in school, the student has the support needed and the opportunity to climb the staircase, and hopefully without bumps along the way, to reach success. By continuing to climb and not stop, which often creates the non-linear version of success, the student reaches a moment of personal fulfillment, which is success, and then leads to the next staircase in life. Therefore, this image portrays success as personal validation because it is the journey and the process with the support of the team at the Inspire Center below and the personal fortitude of the student that generates success and the ultimate feeling of completion and fulfillment.

Additionally, Jeff described feeling like he wanted more after finding success at the Inspire Center. He said, “When I started to come here, and I want to say I had a different mindset at the time, where’s it would change my mind when I came here longer. Coming here made me want more. I’m hungry for more.” Jeff was personally fulfilled by the goals he accomplished at the Inspire Center and this success pushed him for more. When I asked Jeff about moments in time that stood out to him, he said, “Getting awards and stuff.” When I pushed him as to why these were important moments, he said, “Because at my old school I wasn’t getting many awards.” Physical awards added to Jeff’s view of success because these personally fulfilled him and
allowed him to showcase his success. Therefore, Jeff is pushed to continue finding success as he continues to find ways that personally fulfill him.

Like the other students and stories shared thus far, Beth was also a student who aligned with the orientation of success as personal fulfillment. An African American woman in her mid-thirties, Beth was a mid-career student participant. Beth was a nurturer and someone who was constantly tutoring and mentoring her fellow students and peers at the school. Beth offered a hand to many students and would stay after her classes to support her peers in classes she had already taken and passed. Additionally, Beth was one to check in with staff and provide them with feedback about what can make the environment better for all students. Beth was an advocate for those around her and herself. Beth also was a student who aimed for high grades and desired perfection. Beth sought feedback from those around her and would ask what she could be doing better. She wanted feedback on her school work from many different staff members and made sure to implement the feedback she received right away. Beth was extremely conscientious and focused on the details. Beth was always conscious about her grades and was determined to finish at the top of her class when she graduated. She was the mother of two children and was usually talking about her children as her purpose and how they motivate her to continue on her journey. Beth talked about how she made sure her children stay on track in their own school and how she is now better able to help them with their work since she has been back in school. Beth graduated in January 2019 with honors and at the top of her class. When talking about the Inspire Center, Beth said,

I do want you all to know that you all hold a special place in my heart and I mean it because it’s not many genuine people out here like the staff at the Inspire Center who really care, who want to see me do well and mean it. I can self-sabotage and I have in the past out of fear. Since being at the Inspire Center, I learned it’s okay to fail as long as you don’t quit. Being here is me learning that success is on the other side of fear.

This shows and embodies a true sense of personal fulfillment.

In her time at the Inspire Center, Beth was able to grapple with her own journey and story. In doing so, she saw the impact of the school and felt success given her own growth and fulfillment. This acknowledgement and feeling of fulfillment were also now part of her own
narrative and how she constructed her story. Also, when talking about what she appreciated about the Inspire Center, Beth talked about the opportunity to take advantage of the resources at the school. She said,

The resources that you all have in place, as far as this, when I say resources, this is, for me, my safe haven. Being able to come in and be pure, raw, don't have to hide anything. Don't have to worry about judgment. Don't have to worry about you all putting me out or anything like that.

This narrative further shows how Beth was transitioning in how she viewed herself and her own story through her time at the Inspire Center and this transition defined her orientation of success, which is something that Mott and Bauer (1990) explain in their studies and research. During this transitioning phase, Beth had a new way of thinking about herself and in turn has a new feeling about herself and her own story. She was in a state of transition and this state was not going to change or stop (Mott & Bauer, 1990). She had been balancing many competing demands in her life but stayed on track to graduate and meet her own goals (Mott & Bauer, 1990). This feeling of fulfillment was success and will continue to carry her onward as she worked to find more success.

Additionally, when talking about the Inspire Center, Beth emphasized how the school changed her view and transformed her. Beth said,

It's so many things I love about the Inspire Center. The time that the staff put in us, how genuine everyone is, the push that they give us and succeeding in everything that we do. It's so much. It's a lot. I love that they, that you all invest in us. You all want us to be successful. You all let us know that it's a life outside of after the Inspire Center. And that's all we want to know, that you all care. You all love us and most of the time you all love us more than we love ourselves, so it's a good experience for me and that's what I love about the Inspire Center.

Beth's love of the Inspire Center showed the need to have an environment that is safe and comfortable and founded in care. This in turn allowed Beth to find success in a way that she could be personally fulfilled. Without the nurturing environment and the push of the staff at the Inspire Center, Beth would not have been able to find her success. Therefore, the feeling of personal fulfillment is heavily connected to success as safety and comfort.

Also, like other students, Beth showed evidence of persistence and now seeing, understanding, and feeling the result of that persistence as well. This had also yielded great personal fulfillment and framed her view of success. Fears-Hackett (2012) explains how adult
students have become used to preserving and being resilient with all of the phases in their life and their experiences. Yet, with Beth and many other student participants it was the feeling of fulfillment from continuing to push through and move past simply understanding why an adult student is currently in his or her situation (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Beth and many of the other students in this chapter connected her persistence and her ability to continue moving forward and continue along her journey to the community at the Inspire Center. As a result of her persistence and the community that supported her persistence, Beth found personal fulfillment and to her that was success. Before finding this fulfillment and success, Beth was operating out of fear and perhaps fear was the mask of failure. For students who have met failure many times in their life, this failure can turn into fear. As such, when returning to school, a space where they have felt failure before, that can in turn create fear. But, as Beth explained, she felt the support to push beyond the fear and created an acknowledgement that failure was okay as long as one persists and does not give up. This also connected to Jeff’s image in Figure 1, which showed the staff and coaches helping motivate and push the students up the stairs in front of them and along their journey. One of the students here might have stayed put at the bottom of that staircase or stuck in fear, but here at the Inspire Center, the students are able to climb, grow, and feel that success that they can reach for and feel fulfilled by. The community at the Inspire Center provided Beth and the other students here in this chapter with the tools to continue and see that persistence can translate into success, but that even with persistence moments of failure can happen. But failure does not have to be fear because fear is paralyzing and prevents one from persisting. Beth showed just how powerful the community at the Inspire Center is and how orienting success with self-fulfillment shows the association with true pride and positive emotions that allow students to continue their journey and trajectory.

Another Mid-Career student in her late thirties, Charmice, described how she came to realize what success was through her own life experiences and during her time at the Inspire Center seeped in the community of support, hope, and opportunity. Charmice was Jamaican and came to the area ten years ago for what she describes as a better life for her and her family. In
her interview she talked extensively about how hard it was to adjust to life outside of Jamaica and the battle she had with herself and what she called her own demons. She talked about her past and some of the tough decisions she had to make and how her family, and especially her two sons, were at the core of her decisions. At the beginning of her interview, she said, “I guess I’m just starting my life.” She emphasized the moment and the realization she had a few years ago when she first found out about the Inspire Center that she needed to seek support and treatment to find peace. She said when she found out at the Inspire Center, she knew it was a chance to change where her life was going and also make herself a better person overall.

At first sight, Charmice was a quiet and shy woman. But, once you started talking to Charmice and moved into conversation, she was open, honest, and raw. She had a gentle heart and a passion for her future. As she talked about her journey in her life and specifically the last ten years, I felt the strife and the pain in her voice. About twenty minutes into the interview Charmice began to cry and the tears did not stop. As she cried, she continued to talk and share about just how difficult her journey had been and how much she had learned and found about herself in the last two years at the Inspire Center. When talking about where she was from she said,

I’m from Jamaica. It’s a beautiful island, but the school system is very poor. A little to no support. Just the government but even with parents, so. Whatever I’ve learned back then, God knows what I didn’t even remember anything of it until I started school here.

She talked about how she came from nothing to now everything. She opened up about her children and her past relationships. She talked about how hard it was to get out of bed some days for her and how much hope and light she has found in herself more recently. She talked about the need for people to seek mental health support and the stigmas that exist with seeking support. She questioned whether she was worth the light she has found, but then affirmed her success through her growth and feelings of fulfillment and transformation.

Charmice was also an intellectual and also a perfectionist. She was determined to take advantage of her opportunity at the school and also finish with great grades and the chance to enroll in postsecondary education programs. Charmice graduated in July 2018 with honors and a
with a goal of continuing her education into college and into a career in interior design. Charmice said,

As many other programs, I would start and quit but this one was different. I promised myself I would take it one day at a time and do it for me. After the first week, seeing the support and feeling the love of the staff, the love of staff poured in me, my life was never the same. I wanted it so bad I could taste it. My memory had gotten better. I didn’t feel ashamed anymore. This program for me was restoration, it resorted all that was broken in me to make me a better person.

When Charmice explained that the school in turn for her was an opportunity for restoration, this shows the personal fulfillment and self-actualization taking place. What Charmice showed here was that personal fulfillment was not the initial goal of returning to school, but it was the outcome and became her orientation of success. Charmice explained, “I feel like I still have more growth. This program rebuilt me. And I feel successful. I feel accomplished.” Additionally, Charmice explained:

This is the first time in 43 years I’ve ever done anything for me and I’ve done a lot for everyone I know and don’t know. This program gives me an opportunity to do something for myself that no one can do for me. Whatever I do, I do it with pride. Knowledge is power, I’ll take control.

Charmice also showed that this personal fulfillment of coming back to school and feeling successful is now part of her personal narrative and part of her next chapter. Success as fulfillment allows one’s personal narrative to take a new shape and finds a positive in the way in which one’s story is constructed. As Rice and Pasupathi (2010) found, having a more positive self-concept comes with age and maturity and thus, with Charmice and so many of the student participants, they now see themselves in a more positive light and recognize their transitions and change. This in turn is fulfillment and success. This did not seem to differ in age across the student participants. In fact, it was a similarity.

Charmice also described the support she received at the school and how it transformed her life. When talking about the staff, she said,

The staff is amazing. I didn’t know I could do it. My past has messed me up mentally. I was ashamed. I struggled a little bit with remembering things. But the staff kind of, I looked forward to the staff every day. They kept me focused. They remind me that I’m here. I can do this. I want to say the staff really pulled me through this.”
When Charmice and many other students talked about the Inspire Center staff, they were beaming. The staff was a central source of support and part of the journey in finding personal fulfillment, which was ultimately success. When Charmice talked about graduation and what was next for her, she said, “I'm excited. Now, I have so much on my plate.” This is the same Charmice who said, “I literally started to give up on life and willing to accept whatever was given to survive.” Yet, now she said, “In 14 months with resilience, humility, and hard work, and dedication, I earned 24 credits.” Charmice shifted her outlook and changed her entire entity by feeling personally fulfilled as an outcome of coming back to school. Charmice also said, “I feel confident, I feel accomplished.” As a result of finding success in the way of personal fulfillment, Charmice is thriving. She continued, “This program gives me an opportunity to do something for myself that no one can do for me. Whatever I do I do it with pride, knowledge it power, I’ll take control. The Inspire Center is equipped to succeed with a list of amazing staff and from here I’m willing to be successful.” Consequently, personal fulfillment fuels future success and is a new way of feeling and seeing success for Charmice and so many other students.

Defining success as personal fulfillment allows for a broader view of success and also an expansion, turn, and continuation in one’s own life story. By enrolling in school, adult students in this study were seeking an opportunity to not only complete and achieve something for the first time, but also find themselves and a greater understanding of what they are capable of through this opportunity. They were working on their own narrative and have a new lens in which to construct this narrative and also with their age and context have the ability to now have a more positive self-concept (Rice & Pasupathi, 2010). It is important to note that students in all life stages in this study identified and connected success to personal fulfillment because it shows that success, regardless of age, and especially with adult students returning to school, attach success as an important part in their life story. Furthermore, it showed that adult students, regardless of age, were finding this fulfillment and feeling this fulfillment at the Inspire Center and this was an extremely important part of their life story.
I want to also bring forth three examples of Early Career students who brought light to this orientation of success as personal fulfillment too. Thus far I have brought forth both Mid-Career and Post-Career students who identified and associated with success as personal fulfillment, but again, it was seen across all age groups.

Duane was an African American male in his early twenties and an Early Career student. He came to the Inspire Center because he said he wanted something different and was tired of his cousins who were younger than him getting their diplomas and moving on. He said, “I’m watching my little cousins and stuff graduate from college. Same cousins I held in my arms. They graduating and so that’s pretty much what motivates me.” Duane had a hard shell about him. He was quiet and reserved, but also had a temper that could go off and had been seen to surface when he felt as though he had been treated unfairly. Duane was a man of few words, but whose words had power. He was also a perfectionist and became easily frustrated when he did not earn a high grade in his classes or felt as if the teachers shortchanged him from a grade, he thought he deserved. Duane had a passion for basketball and talked about his desire to one day go to college and walk onto the basketball team. Duane lived with his grandmother and talked about the happiness he felt when he made her proud. He said going to school and earning his diploma was for him and also for her grandmother. Duane will graduate in July 2019. When asked what success was to him, Duane said, “Success to me is accomplishing something that you got to set out for yourself. Anything.” By framing success as something for himself, Duane showed that he associated success with personal fulfillment. He set forth by re-enrolling at the Inspire Center to do something he had not done before, and that to him is fulfilling and satisfying and generated more success.

I asked Duane why he believed he had been successful at the Inspire Center and not at other schools. Duane said, “I think I’ve been successful here because I have grades that I ever had in my life. I got awards that I never got in my life.” When Duane said phrases such as never had in his life before, these phrases signify to me a feeling of personal fulfillment. Finding success
in something that has never been an area of success, is personal fulfillment for Duane and so many other students here.

Like Duane, Jasmine was also an Early Career student. Jasmine was an African American woman in her early twenties. She was a determined young woman who knew how to push herself. Jasmine described her experience growing up in the foster care system and how that had an impact on her life. She said,

I used to be in foster care. And I think that plays a part. If I didn’t mention it earlier that children come out of the foster care system, they’re left with a false sense of hope when people start filling their heard with, ‘Oh, you can’t do this. You’re not going to amount up to nothing,’ or anything like that. And for so long, when we’re told that, that’s what we start believing. So when we start believing that, that shows in our actions, that shows in our behavior. And then it takes for somebody like you or the other staff to turn that around, ‘You are smart. You are bright. You are funny.’ The positive affirmations. You have to start slowly chiseling down the negativity plus you have to earn our trust.

What is so profound about what Jasmine talked about is that she is able to acknowledge the deficits placed on her and other students who come from various experiences and systems. Valencia’s (1997) deficit theory says that certain students do not succeed in the education system because of their deficits and not the issues with the school structure or system. Valencia (1997) pushes schools to stop using a deficit mindset and see students from their assets and strengths. Thus, Jasmine points to an interesting perspective where she has experienced being looked at from the angle of her perceived deficiencies and this has not fulfilled her or allowed her to find success. Rather, when she arrived at the Inspire Center and built trust with staff there who saw her from the perspective of her strengths and assets, Jasmine was able to find success through personally being fulfilled. Jasmine felt fulfilled because she was seen from a strengths-based approach.

Jasmine will graduate from the Inspire Center in July 2019 and had plans to continue with her education and go to college after her graduation. Additionally, she was an advocate and someone who would speak up for others if she felt as though they were not being treated fairly or if they will not speak for themselves. She had often advocated for other students and helped students advocate for themselves by talking to their coach or teacher. Jasmine said, “I have an issue with people that do not listen to the needs of students.” As a result, Jasmine also was an
advocate for student with special needs and circumstances and talked about her experience as being a student who did have special needs and how the support was not there for her and is part of the reason why she did not complete school.

Jasmine, like many other students at the Inspire Center, was a student who had overcome many personal challenges to bring her back to school. She talked about how she was bullied when she was in high school and how mean-spirited students and teachers could be, which also was part of the reason that caused her to leave and drop out of school. She talked about how there were not a lot of supports for students with special needs at her old schools and she became frustrated with that on top of being bullied and the fact that no one stepped in to support her. Jasmine explained that she knew she was always smart, but that school was not the right thing for her at the time with all of the problems going on. When she started to talk about the Inspire Center, her whole persona shifted, and she spoke about how much she had loved her experience at the school and how she had found a place for her. Jasmine talked about her friends and the new group of students she met that had changed her outlook. She also talked about the students she had mentored and tutored and how she liked seeing people change their lives while she also worked on her life while in school. Jasmine said, “I always stayed on myself until I actually got to the Inspire Center, and then found somebody or people that are likeminded, that have the same or similar goals or ideas. And I like working together a group to formulate plans.”

When Jasmine talked about her friends at the Inspire Center she beamed and it was evident that she felt happy, comfortable, accepted, and fulfilled with her friends and where she was.

When I asked Jasmine what success meant to her and how she felt with her current choice to return to school she said, “I made it. I survived. So, I proved that to myself that I’m capable of doing a lot more than I put myself out to do.” Jasmine’s understanding that success was personal in that she is proving to herself that she is capable of pushing herself and obtaining great things shows that she orients success as personal fulfillment. She used the word survived, which I also think was significant because it emphasized her will to persevere while also showing great personal triumph. She felt fueled by this personal fulfillment and to her that is success.
Additionally, this feeling was something she had not experienced before, and so it empowered her with even more fight to fill her own goals and feel that success. When she talked about what she appreciated the most about the Inspire Center, Jasmine talked about feeling accepted and welcomed. She said,

What I appreciate most about the Inspire Center is the fact that they don’t look at the students as an outcast, they don’t make them all feel like they’re dropouts, they make them feel like this school is our second home. No matter what’s going on at home or anything like that, when I come here, I feel like somebody, I feel important, I feel smarter, I’m more wiser, especially more wiser now since I’ve gotten as far as I’ve gotten. And I like the fact that it brings out certain characteristics or strong suits that we didn’t know that were there until we started working on certain things. We learn more about ourselves as days go along, the months go along, terms go along, so that’s what I appreciate.

Jasmine’s explanation of what she appreciated about the Inspire Center aligns to success as personal fulfillment because she feels changed, transformed, and fulfilled from the experience at the school. The feeling has generated success for her, and she continues to strive for more success as a result of this feeling of fulfillment. Additionally, Jasmine brought forth the idea that the school and the staff are attempting to bring out the positive characteristics and strengths in their students, which allows the students in turn to be seen in a new light away from any deficit-based thinking and become agents of change through their strength.

Lastly, one other Early Career student, Renee, also shared similar sentiments to both Duane and Jasmine and many other participants in this success orientation around the feeling of personal fulfillment. Renee was an African American woman in her early twenties who was not originally from the area where the school is located but moved to the area for family reasons when she was a teenager. At the time of the interview Renee was pregnant and expecting her child in August 2018, which was right around the time she was expected to graduate. Renee graduated in July 2018 and had her baby the next month. Renee was a fierce young woman who exemplified a great amount of grit and determination. When asked why she returned to school she said,

I have a baby due in August. And I’m kind of at that point where I’m about to be 25 and it’s like, ‘Okay, where am I going once I have my baby? What is my next career step? So it’s either EMT or nail salon owner but of course, I can’t do one without a high school diploma.
Renee was bright and witty and explained how school was something she was always good at, but for one reason or another she did not find the right fit in finishing school and was too easily distracted. She had a passion for learning and talked about her desire to always push herself and never give up on her education. When I asked Renee about what success meant to her and how she felt about success, she said, "My thing is being above average. I don't like being mediocre so success for me is having my goal and going above and beyond that goal." This showed that for Renee, like others, she felt personally fulfilled by her own success and by pushing herself to do more. This feeling was what continued to motivate her and kept her going, and the self-fulfillment was ultimately what defines success. Renee, like the other students in this orientation of success, wanted more for themselves and the feeling of fulfillment was what made the students feel successful and know they have reached a point where they have pushed beyond so much to reach a new level.

Despite age group, student participants aligned success to a feeling personal fulfillment due to the completion of a goal, overcoming personal obstacles that once stood in the way of that goal, and also choosing to show persistence as opposed to quitting. The idea of success as personal fulfillment brought forth many emotions and was a unique way of framing success around a feeling as opposed to an end goal, and it allowed them to focus on their assets rather than any deficits they may have had. These emotions, in turn, provided the students with a foundation for success and the ability to move forward because now, anything is possible. Schools may be set up to reproduce the social order, but personal fulfillment was centered in a hope for something better. It allowed students’ agency to flourish in the face of constraint. The feeling of fulfillment lets students know they in fact are, were, and will be successful. Also, success as personal fulfillment brought forth ideas about what factors in the school environment allowed for success as personal fulfillment to foster. This will be discussed in the next few themes that emerged, but is still important to bring up here as I conclude the success as personal fulfillment section.
Success as Validation

Next, success as validation is a theme that emerged as student participants talked about the pride associated with success and the feeling that they have proved that they can be successful and continue to be successful. As explained in the literature review earlier, adult students returning to high school have not met the intended goal or outcome of high school at the traditional age and thus are part of the dropout epidemic (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Comings, Sum, and Uvin, 2000; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela 2016; Hynes, 2016). Regardless of the reason that adult students fell out of high school or were pushed or pulled out of high school, adult students did not meet the goal of completion or graduation (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela 2016). There is also a large body of literature that suggests that this is not because they could not meet the goal, but because of the inequity in the very system as it is. As research has shown, the majority of high school drop outs are of the minority race and an overwhelming number of high school drop outs are African American (Bridgeland et. al., 2010; Fears-Hackett, 2012; Rumberger, 2011). This demographic is also reflected in the study, where the student participants were majority African American and one Latina student. Thus, students who are left navigating society without a high school diploma and facing the trials and tribulations of being in an economy and society where this is a critical credential to have, are left feeling a need to show that they belong and can belong (Rose, 2011). Additionally, belonging may be further racialized fueled by both Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory and Valencia’s (1997) deficit model that explain why the systems adult students have been failed by are inequitable in the first place. Not being able to find success in a system that was not set up for them and only for the dominant class and being thought of as lacking something as thus not being able to make up for their deficit is reason enough to seek validation through returning to a formal education program (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2003; Valenica, 1997). Thus, there surfaces in the interviews a feeling and sense of redemption that can be seen as affirmation for one’s choice to return to school and validation as a way of orienting success. In fact, there is a
sense that success is fueled not only by overcoming the past, also in overcoming the systemic and structural inequity surrounding the adult students.

What was interesting with this orientation of success, success as validation, was that this theme aligned with and was found more with the Post Career students. According to Knowles (1962), the readiness and aptitude for a student to feel ready to return to school happens as an adult continues to mature. Therefore, for the Post Career students, they could be seen as more mature and therefore readier to learn and having identified with this readiness that is motivated by a desire to validate their success and validate it to others. I said this earlier, but I do think it is important to note again, success as validation lends itself to the adult students seeing their success as a way of reclaiming what was once or always theirs and proving or validating that they can be successful. This could be a driving and motivating factor for adults to return to school and therefore find their success. It also makes sense that the Post Career students are aligned more towards this orientation of success because their narrative has manifested longer in balancing their need and desire for validation with pain and hurt of not having what they so longed for. Douglah (1970) talks about the satisfaction model as a way of describing motivation to satisfy one’s needs. Deci and Ryan (2000) expand upon this by describing the various factors that are at play in satisfying the needs.

For the Post Career students, they have been yearning to satisfy their needs longer than the other student age groups and therefore have a stronger desire for and orientation towards success as validation. For the Post Career students, validation is something they have been waiting for and working towards. Validation is a moment of triumph that is long over-due and it is the desire for this validating moment that has continued to keep these students motivated. In this orientation of success as validation, I will share the stories and excerpts from four Inspire Center student participants that are all from the Post Career age group. To paint a picture of what success as validation looks like, I will share the stories and excerpts of the following students: Reesie, Rick, Sasha, and Erika.
As I did with the previous orientation of success, I want to first provide you with a table of the student participants in this section of Chapter 4 to help organize the analysis. Table 2 shows the students who aligned with success as validation and their name, age category, and a quote that will appear in the reading to follow. The table only includes one example of a quote that aligns to success as validation, but the analysis to follow includes more quotes, analysis, and explanation. Like Table 1, Table 2 is a guide to the students that will follow and a map to help identify notable quotes that align to this specific orientation of success, which is success as validation. You will see some students who have appeared in sections before, but also align with this theme as well.
### Table 2

*Student Participants in Chapter 4 and Notable Quotes Aligned to Success as Validation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Quotes aligned to success as validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reesie</td>
<td>Post Career</td>
<td>“My mission is to take back everything that was taken from me that I can still take back at my age. And my diploma was one of them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>Post Career</td>
<td>“With me, success is completing what I started. I got a lot of aspirations and I want to be successful. I don’t want to merely exist. I want to live. And I know there are great things inside of me. And I’m about to untap some of these things.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>Post Career</td>
<td>“One important thing to me is the fact that my grandson is here. And a long time ago, they said he was unteachable. But he is a success story. He is a success story. He came in here not knowing any of this, not ever seeing or having to go from classroom to classroom from different teachers. And his determination and the patience that the teachers have had with him. He is a proven success story that if he can do it, anybody can.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Post Career</td>
<td>“When I was found disabled, I was like, no, see, I can’t live with a disabled life. I don’t know what a disabled person does, but I can’t live that life. So I chose to take this time and come back and put it into the school.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The student participants in this table aligned to the theme of success as validation. These stories appear throughout the section of this chapter to follow.

Table 2

Ressie, was a Post Career, African American student in her late fifties. Reesie was a strong-willed individual who was known to many as a mother figure around the school. She was a student who came off very hard and closed in, but once you get to know her and let her open up
to you, she was caring, genuine, and charismatic. Ressie was someone that could talk forever once you get her going and who is steadfast in her opinions, values, and beliefs. She was often seen mentoring and talking with some of the younger students in the school, especially the Mid-Career students who she liked to take on as her own. She often brought food to students who did not have food of their own and helped connect students with community resources and support. Reesie was extremely generous with her time and resources, but she never lost sight of her own personal goals. During her time at the Inspire Center Reesie underwent several surgeries for some medical concerns and did not skip a beat or take time away from the school. She graduated in July 2018 with a goal of pursuing her catering passion and opening a catering business. Reesie was a student who had experienced many different educational journeys and in fact she said “I received my GED forty years ago, but it was not accredited. And I went to a lot of schools.” When I asked her what kept her motivated and pushed her to come back to school she said, “I had no choice, me and God, me and God.” Furthermore, she said, “Because I wanted my high school diploma because I felt that it was – I did want to continue going to school to get it. It was like something that was taken from me and I knew I deserved to have it.” Thus, Reesie was on a journey to validate something she believed she should have earned long ago, and it was a personal quest for her and a sense of validation that pushed her forward.

When I asked her what her goal was and how she would feel successful, she said, “My mission is to take back everything that was taken from me that I can still take back at my age. And my diploma was one of them.” Reesie continued to explain success by saying,

[Success] means you’re going to accomplish your dreams. You’re going to accomplish what you’ve set out to do. That’s an awesome feeling. That’s an awesome response. And then when you accomplish, everybody sees what you accomplish, and then their congratulations and well wishes, that motivates, that keeps you in that positive state on moving forward.

This orientation of success shows an attachment to proving others wrong or the system wrong and that feeling of overcoming a larger systematic inequality. Taking back what was hers and validating her place in this society was success to Reesie. There was a great amount of emotion in her speech during the interview and in her beliefs, which only further showed her alignment to
viewing success as validation. When we think about the inequity in place in the education system, and all that was discussed and unraveled in the literature review, it makes sense that an adult student who has experienced this very inequity wants to triumph over that very inequity and show the system what success truly is. Ressie talked about all she had overcome in her life. She also talked about how her time at the Inspire Center was different than any experience before. When she talked about her experience at the school, she said, “…because when I first came here it’s like everything that I had been suppressing over the years as far as my past, that all of the traumatic things, and the cruel things that happened to me back when I was in school that caused me to leave school. It was like it brought all that back out.” Reesie’s explanation of her past experiences showcase her strong emotions around these times and the current place she is in. Coming back to school and finding a school where she can take a new direction, one in which she believed she had been shortchanged from, is validating.

Additionally, in thinking about Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory, Ressie’s perspective in taking back what was hers points the notion that she believed she was not provided an equal opportunity to earn her education. Ressie understands the power of education and for her a high school diploma validates the inequity created by social reproduction and the way in which failed systems have made Reesie feel like she has to take back her own rights (Bourdieu, 2003; Giroux, 1983). Therefore, success as validation can be seen as an attempt to triumph over social reproduction through their agency.

Rick is another Post Career student who was in his late sixties. He was an African American male who was one of the quieter students at the school. He was a proud native of the city where the Inspire Center was and explained how he tried many different adult education programs but none of them worked and not one of them really stuck with him. He had similar sentiments towards success that show success as redemption as well. In his quiet nature, Rick exuded wisdom. He is someone who used a lot of one-liners to express his beliefs and each word he expressed had such power. He stayed a lot to himself and tended to spend his time with fellow Post Career students and peers. He often became frustrated by the younger students and did not
understand why they made the choices they do. About the younger students, Rick said, “I’m graduating in July. I’ve seen some growth with some of the young people. But still, there’s a whole lot they need to do and be held accountable.” Rick had dreams of moving into the IT industry and was also very interested in the hospitality sector. He completed the hospitality certification pathway at the Inspire Center and graduated in the class of July 2018. When I asked him about success, he said,

With me, success is completing what I started. I got a lot of aspirations and I want to be successful. I don’t want to merely exist. I want to live. And I know there are great things inside of me. And I’m about to untap some of these things.

The idea of living and not simply existing was powerful. As with the theme of success as personal fulfillment, success as validation also had some feelings of personal fulfillment and self-actualization. But the difference here was proving something or something wrong by returning to school and that validating that is success. Rick’s sentiments here showed that he was further motivated and pushed by this orientation of success. The Inspire Center was able to help validate his skills, beliefs, and philosophies and then as he says tap into some of those aspirations that he plans to pursue. He saw this as success because he felt validated knowing he can move forward and no longer had to simply or merely exist in society. By seeing success as validation, Rick felt successful when he could step into a space and know he was worthy of it and also deserving of it. Additionally, he had to be in an environment that allowed that part of him to surface, where he felt safe and comfortable enough to be exposed and also navigate through his feelings of resentment, but also overcome with validation that what he is doing is the right thing to do on his journey.

What also resonated with Rick’s sentiments is the idea of agency. When Rick said, “I want to live,” there was the sense that he was ready to step into his power and his voice. Additionally, when he said, “I know that there are great things inside of me. And I’m about to untap some of these things,” this brought up the idea of the future and moving into one’s own agency with the recognition that is there to be used and activated. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and their definition of agency, Rick’s acknowledgment of his voice and his power is
recognizing that at first, he was not using his agency and now transforming the structures that exit and activating his agency. Before feeling validated and successful, Rick was existing, as he said, and not tapping into or feeling that he could tap into his own agency. Now, feeling validated and successful, Rick was able to step into the future with a new sense of power, urgency, and ultimately a new-found agency.

Like the other students shared in this section, Sasha, was also a Post Career student who aligned with the orientation of success as validation. Sasha was an African American woman in her early sixties. She was one of the first students to enroll at the Inspire Center when it first opened in August 2016. She not only enrolled herself, but also her grandson and her husband at the same time. Both Sasha and her grandson graduated in July 2018 and attended the local community college soon after their graduation. Her husband took a break but was slated to return to the Inspire Center soon. Sasha was a fiery woman who had a natural inclination to help support others. She was the center of the community at the Inspire Center and got along with every student in the school and also helped foster a sense of community between the students and the age groups. Like Ressie, Sasha too was seen as a mother of the Inspire Center. She was gentle, kind, and welcoming. She could be seen talking to many of the younger students in the halls and assisting them with their classwork and helping to keep them on track. Sasha also had returned to the Inspire Center many times to help during new student orientations and provide tutoring support to current students. She liked to say she was always only a phone call or text away and ready to serve when asked upon. She was inspired by her grandson who was finding success like he never has before now at the Inspire Center, and this motivated her even more. Her grandson was a student with many special needs, and when she talked about him, her whole aura lit up. She was so proud of him and likewise she was so proud of herself.

During the interview Sasha continually talked about how significant returning to school was for her and how much she wanted to return to school. She said she knew once she saw the advertisement for the school, this was it. She said, “I had longtime been looking to go back to get my high school diploma, and I wasn’t satisfied with getting a GEC. I wanted my actual diploma.”
Sasha beamed when talking about her experience at the Inspire Center. She talked about how the school is a place that she can call home and she was never able to find somewhere quite like this. When I asked Sasha about why it was important for her to get her diploma, she said, “It made me feel good, something good that I had finally accomplished.” Thus, as you can see a bit of personal fulfillment here when Sasha talked about how she will feel accomplished when achieving her diploma. However, this is also success as validation because Sasha is obtaining something she has wanted for some time and is overcoming her past. When Sasha talked about success as earning her high school diploma, she expanded on this. She said,

It’s [success] being able to go out here and get a job. Get a job, even in the federal government or the district government. And if they ask you, ‘Do you have your high school diploma?’ You can proudly say, ‘Yes, I do.’

Consequently, when Sasha speaks triumphantly about her diploma and what she can now do, that is success as validation. She is overcoming, she is triumphant, and she is gaining power.

She also aligned with the orientation of success as validation through an experience associated with her return to school and return to a formal education setting, something she had wanted so much for both herself and her grandson. Sasha said,

One important thing to me is the fact that my grandson is here. And a long time ago, they said he was unteachable. But he is a success story. He is a success story. He came in here not knowing any of this, not ever seeing or having to go from classroom to classroom from different teachers. And his determination and the patience that the teachers have had with him. He is a proven success story that if he can do it, anybody can.

Sasha’s grandson was part of her own story of validation and what she associated success with. The Inspire Center had provided her an opportunity to not only validate her own personal story, but also that of her grandson and his education. Through her story and that of her grandson’s story too, Sasha made clear that there were always opportunities to prove those who said it would not be possible wrong. For Sasha, success as validation fueled fulfillment and also a sense of power, voice, and agency. Here again are the strong connections between the various orientations of success and the overlapping theme.
Additionally, Sasha’s visual representation also showed ties to the theme of success as validation. In Figure 4, Sasha drew an image that showed how she felt the Inspire Center supported its students to be successful. In this image, Sasha created a visual that positioned the students in a space where they are supported by their coaches and the learning environment at the Inspire Center.

When I asked Sasha to describe her image, she said, “With the coaches and the teachers on either side of the students, it brings togetherness and if they both work together then the students shall both succeed. And success is power.” By understanding success as power, this pointed to the orientation of success as validation. As a result of returning to school and being in an environment that is supportive, Sasha understood that she had power. This power is
also agency and the agency acted as validation that she had stepped into this power. Additionally, this idea and feeling of power further generated a feeling of validation as she had overcome hurdles and experiences to find this feeling of validation and this feeling of power. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the human self can recognize agency through various interactions and self-realizations. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) explain, “Finally, we ground this capacity for human agency in the structures and processes of the human self, conceived of as an internal conversation possessing analytic autonomy vis-a`-vis transpersonal interactions” (p. 974). Therefore, success as validation can be seen as an internal awakening within oneself that stirs up agency and the feeling of validation is what generates the feeling of power and voice. Sasha’s picture aligns to success as validation and the extended idea of agency through validation in the way in which she framed the image and explained it.

Lastly, another Post Career student who aligned with the success as validation theme was Erika. She was an African American female in her late fifties who moved to the city where the school is after a family tragedy in her hometown. Erika, like so many of the other Inspire Center students was strong-willed and determined. Also, like some of the other Post Career women that I have highlighted, Erika too played a mother figure in the school. Many students came to Erika for guidance in their lives and in their classes. She too could be found mentoring and tutoring other students. Ericka was a cancer survivor and pushed through many health concerns during her time at the Inspire Center. She also talked about realizing that she had many gaps in her education and needed to go back to school to make sure she was set up in her life. Ericka also talked about coming back to school as a promise she made to herself when her grandson died. She talked about the death of her grandson as a moment of shock and sadness and a realization that he had so much life to live and it was taken from him. She said,

I went to his funeral, when we had lost him and we had laid him to rest, and we went to his graduation. He was unable to attend his graduation from daycare to kindergarten. And when I saw his little cap and gown I had went home and I said, ‘Well, you know what?’ and I put it together and I put it in the space for him and I said, ‘This is not fair, he didn’t even get to finish. He didn’t even get a chance to start.’ So I said, ‘You know what? I’m going to do this in his honor.’ So I’ll be going to school and as I go to school, his little spirit will come and go to school with me. And that’s what made me come back.
Coming back to school is a form of validation for Erika. She is not only validating her own education, but also that of her grandson who lost his life too early in his journey. Therefore, Erika aligned to the orientation of success as validation in many ways.

Ericka graduated in January 2019 and completed the hospitality certification pathway at the school. She had a passion for culinary arts and planned to enter culinary school and continue with her passions. When Ericka walked across the stage, she had a picture of her grandson on her cap as he walked across the stage with her. When I asked Erika why she returned to school and what success meant to her, she said,

*When I was found disabled, I was like, no, see, I can’t live with a disabled life. I don’t know what a disabled person does, but I can’t live that life. So I chose to take this time and come back and put it into the school.*

Ericka’s statement showed the fight to overcome a label, an association, and a feeling and seek validation in her own self and to others by returning to school. She felt successful because she had proven that she did not have to simply be a disabled person or live associated with that label. For her, this is power and success. Again, this feeling of power, as noted in other students’ stories and Sasha’s picture above, is the feeling of being able to continue in life and move into new pathways and opportunities. This also tied into the idea of agency as providing a push into the future and being able to activate one’s inner power. Power is the feeling of choice and this is validated by returning to school and gaining a new opportunity and experience. Ericka felt validated and the feelings of this are empowering. Success as validation brought forth the connection to feeling powerful that now there are more opportunities open to the students and that the past does not have to remain the present.

These four Post Career students showed how another orientation of success can be seen as validation. In these moments of validation, it is evident that the stories showed experiences of overcoming triumph, stigmas, or labels. Additionally, these moments of validation showed a chance to earn something as a result of seeking validation. Seeing as all four students highlighted here in this section are Post Career students, this leads me to believe that the Post Career age group has more time in their life to understand the inequities that situate around them.
Additionally, it leads me to believe that the sense of prove one wrong or validate one’s existence in a positive way is aligned more with the Post Career student who might not feel like they have as much time left in their journey as younger students. Such students have more space to focus on their assets than their deficits and aligns with Rice and Pasupathi’s (2010) ideas around self-acceptance being more positive and affirming as humans get older. In these stories, all four students have a more positive self-acceptance when seeing success oriented as validation. Success has allowed the students to feel empowered, to challenge the social order reproduced in most other school settings, and ready to continue in their life journey with a renewed sense of who they are and what they stand for. Validation has been freeing and provided them with great agency. Thus, at the Inspire Center, there is an opportunity for students to feel validated and a way for students to generate an outcome where they feel successful because they are validated. I will begin to navigate what the structures and policies are that allow this success orientation to surface in later chapters, but first it is important to note the significance of a school environment that is able to generate these feelings and success orientations for its students.

Conclusion

As I synthesize the various student stories I shared in this section and conclude this chapter, I want to return to one of the central questions of this study: what do non-traditional adult students seek to achieve through enrolling in adult education opportunities? From this chapter it can be seen that adult students, of all ages, are seeking a chance to be accepted, express their feelings, validate their story and experience, and feel personally fulfilled. However, none of this is possible without feeling a sense of safety and care, which requires an asset-based view of students. Through returning to school, adult students are finding success and experiencing success in ways that defy the traditional orientations of success. Adult students have different emotions attached to success that create the foundation for these orientations of success and allow them ultimately to find that success at the Inspire Center. It is not simply the goal of being successful that is creating or defining success for the students, it is the feeling that comes with
this success and what that breeds. That in turn is defining and orienting success in these unique ways. By understanding what non-traditional adult students are seeking to achieve by returning to school, I am better able to understand what success looks like and feels like for the students in this shared space they call school. It is also important to note that there was not a large difference in the age groups and their experiences at the school and also how they are orienting success.

Even though more Post Career students aligned with success as validation, there were still students from each age group aligning to the various themes. This makes me think that the age groups are not significant, but rather the entire being and entity of the adult student is what makes this population unique and that is why it is critical that there is a clear understanding of what adult students are seeking when they return to school. Adult students are a unique demographic, but they do have similarities in that they are coming back to school to earn something they have not been successful in earning before. It is this communality and the shared space of their school, that allow me to enter and understand what they are seeking to achieve and gain that then allows me to understand what success is.

From the student interviews and stories, I have found that students’ orient success around what they are seeking to achieve by returning to school. Yet, again, for students to generate these new orientations of success they must feel safe and cared for in the very school environment they are attempting to find success. Success for adult students is emotional, personal, and motivating. Success is not simply the attainment of a goal and in fact it is much more for adult students. Success comes with personal victories and triumphs and carries many attached feelings and experiences. Success is also delicate for adult students. This meant that once adult students begin to feel these signs of success in these orientations, they must be nurtured because success is something new, especially in the context of education and school. Therefore, understanding and creating adult education programs that support these orientations of success will help with adult student retention, but also support adult students beyond their time in the adult education programs. Furthermore, adult students were coming to places of formal education seeking so much more than the traditional student, and thus it is critical that schools
understand who they are serving and the fragility or delicateness of the students they are serving so that they can provide them with what they need to generate successful outcomes. As Valencia’s work suggests, it would be a mistake to see these students only through their deficits. Often, we might assume that adult students whose experiences are like these of students at the Inspire Center have the ability to continue moving forward and dig into their resilience. This might be true. However, when they return to school, they are seeking something real and something emotional and if what they are seeking is not met and if they cannot feel successful and see their own success, then they will leave the education system once and for all and their resilience will not be enough to push forward. Also, students are seeking a safe space where they can feel cared for and loved.

Students were appreciating so much of the school they spend their time in and are feeling successful at the Inspire Center. Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry structure allowed me to pry into the stories and experiences of the students and from an appreciative stance uncover the structures and feelings behind what has generated positive outcomes and beliefs. Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry framework was a great entry point to help students think about their experience and their school by explaining what they appreciated the most and thus what they aligned with in terms of their own success.

Next, I will move into the staff participant responses and understand how the staff at the Inspire Center understand success. It is important to also take a look at the thoughts of the staff to better understand what is at play in the school to inspire and create these orientations of success. The staff also have a better understanding of the structures and policies that frame student outcomes and are in place to promote successful students, and so I want to look at their perception of these structures and policies as I understand their orientations of success. Also, I want to compare and contrast the student orientations of success to those of the staff to see what is at play in generating a larger orientation of success at the school.
CHAPTER 5: Faculty and Staff Orientations Towards Success

In the Chapter 4, I outlined the trends and themes around what adult students returning to high school for a high school diploma at the Inspire Center understood success to be. Now, in this chapter my goal is to do the same for the faculty and staff who work at the Inspire Center and to shine a light on their orientations of success for the adult students they work with each day. Once I have outlined the trends and themes for the faculty and staff, I will then move to lay out a comparison between the students’ orientations of success and what faculty and staff are starting to see what similarities and differences exist and what this might mean for adult school models. Additionally, I will also move into understanding what staff believe are the policies and structures that support student success at the Inspire Center and work to see how this aligns to the various orientations of success that have come through in the interviews.

In 2018, the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center was made up of 33 individuals and was comprised of several teams. The Leadership Team included: School Director, Lead STEM Instructor, Lead Humanities Instructor, Lead Academic Success Coach, Manager, Special Populations, Manager, Student Support Services, Registrar, Manager, Data Performance Manager, and Manager, College and Career Readiness. Additionally, the Office Manager and the Director of the Childcare both fall in alignment to the Leadership Team and are managed by the School Director. The Lead STEM Teacher and Lead Humanities Teacher worked collaboratively and managed Humanities Instructors and STEM instructors. The Lead Academic Success Coach managed the Academic Success Coaches one of whom is a Youth Services Coach. The Manager, Special Populations managed the SPED instructors and the School Psychologist. The Registrar, Manager managed the Administrative Coordinator. The Manager, College and Career Readiness managed the College and Career Readiness, Specialist. Thus, the school was comprised of an extensive staff set out to serve many needs of its student population, many different aspects of the program, and many student services that focus on supporting students in their time at the school. As highlighted in the literature review, the Inspire Center can be seen as a form of an alternative school as its students were not successful in the traditional setup of a
school (Conley, 2002). I explained that both Aaron (2006) and Paglin and Fager (1997) identified some key features of an alternative school, such as engaging curriculum, flexible schedules, structured environments, and a clear mission that support students who did not meet successful outcomes at their original schools. With this in mind, the staffing structure at the Inspire Center was organized to provide support in areas that were believed to be key areas of need to retain, engage, and serve the adult student returning to school.

The faculty and staff at the Inspire Center came from different backgrounds and stories that led them to their current positions at the school. Some of the staff found their way through public schools, charter schools, private schools, mental health counseling groups, non-profit organizations, college organizations, GED programs, government agencies, community-based organizations, and the list goes on. The faculty and staff met the minimum requirement of working two years in an organization or school that served an urban community. Each specific position included other minimum requirements based on duties and responsibilities for the position title. However, there was not a novice faculty or staff member on the team, and this was intentional in creating the staffing model. Adult education in the area where the Inspire Center is located has seen many other school models surface and fare well and not so well. But the Inspire Center was the first of its kind in the area to offer a high school diploma pathway to a student population with no age limit and also incorporating the traditional high school age population. As such, it was important that the faculty and staff come to the Inspire Center with some experience in their area of practice while honing and learning the skills needed to work in a new model of adult education. The faculty and staff ranged in ages from 24 years old to 65 years old and showcased a wide array of geographic demographics, but over half of the faculty and staff were originally from the city where the Inspire Center is located. The faculty and staff were majority African American with three members of the faculty and staff, including myself, being White.

When selecting the faculty and staff participants, I made a point to ensure each team and branch of services at the Inspire Center was represented in the interviews. I interviewed nine staff participants from the following teams: Leadership Team, Academic Success Coaching Team,
Special Populations Team, Instructional Team (STEM and Humanities), Administrative Team. I felt it was important to have a holistic representation from the faculty and staff in order to understand how staff are defining and identifying with what success means for adult students and how they are shaping their orientations of success. I believe many orientations of success are created from personal experience, perspective, and position. As such, I thought it was both necessary and critical to have all positions represented in these interviews in order to have all perspectives of staff heard when attempting to synthesize the various responses to the interview questions.

Faculty and staff interviews were longer than those of the students and ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour. The staff interviews took place in the summer leading up the 2018-2019 school year and during the first term of the 2018-2019 school year. At this time, the school was preparing for its third year and both recruiting and enrolling a large number of students. All of the faculty and staff participants were employed at the Inspire Center for at least one year and seven of the nine faculty and staff who were interviewed were part of the original faculty and staff who joined the team when the school first hired staff in spring of 2016 to prepare for its first year.

The goal of the interviews was to gain an understanding around how faculty and staff define and orient success for the adult students they are serving and what their beliefs about the students they work with each day are and how those work to create their orientations of success. Also, the goal of the interviews was to understand from the perspective of the faculty and staff, what policies and structures in place at the school help support student in their success. Often times, faculty and staff are fully engaged and caught up in the practice of their work, that they do not have time to reflect on what fuels their work and shapes their beliefs. Thus, another goal of the interviews was to provide space for reflection and also promote a sense of agency around the work the faculty and staff are doing.

As the researcher, who also was the School Director at the time of the staff interviews, I understand my positionality must be named and noted. I talked about my positionality earlier, but I want to bring it up again in this section. At the time of these interviews, I was beginning my
transition into the School Director role after being the Lead Humanities Teacher. Thus, the school was undergoing a mid-year leadership change and I, the researcher, was moving into the top leader manager in the school. I understand that my role as the School Director and lead manager, especially after serving as an equal counterpart and colleague to many for two years, might have shifted or swayed opinions and comments in the interviews. I made a point to name my positionality and make sure that all faculty and staff knew that what they said was confidential. I also reminded the faculty and staff participants that they did not have to participate in the study and that it was voluntary. Many had signed up to participate in the study before my leadership transition, and all remained in the study and wanted to participate. I also did not sway my opinion or belief about their work at the school based on the interviews. I reflected by writing memos and making an effort to detach from my role as the School Director during the interviews. Additionally, I made sure to reiterate the fact that participating in the research project was voluntary and participants could remove themselves at any time if they felt the need. Not one participant made any mention about my role or feeling of discomfort and all felt excited and fortunate in being asked to share their stories and reflections.

Additionally, given my role in the school, the staff might have viewed my study or interviews as a way to garner information or knowledge. They also might not have been as forthright or forthcoming in their responses given my position. I do not believe either of these are true, but this must be mentioned once again. Also, as the School Director, I do have a passion and a true interest in understanding how students and staff view success. If we can begin to unravel what success means to students and also to staff, then that can yield a better school environment with better school structures and policies to generate that success. With the staff participants, I believed there was a stronger hold of my positionality given my role at the school. But I also believed every staff member comes to the Inspire Center for a purpose and serves the students we serve intentionally and so I believed they also wanted the opportunity to reflect and engage in this process with the study too.
The Role of Staff in Student Success

Faculty and staff provided a unique perspective and insight into what success is and what success looks like for the students they serve. Throughout the interviews with the faculty and staff, several themes emerged about how faculty and staff both viewed and oriented success for adult students returning to school. Faculty and staff oriented success in three ways: success as self-growth, success as agency, and success as multifaceted. I will further elaborate and explain each of these orientations of success next in this chapter.

However, before doing so, I want to highlight one commonality between these three orientations of success, which was the critical role each staff member held in the students’ pathway to success. Each staff member felt a sense of purpose and a calling to the mission of their work. This framed the way in which many staff members viewed success. The staff members interviewed felt purpose in the work they did each day and it was this purpose that opened the opportunity for students to return a school that felt different, looked different, and had a different energy about it and earn their high school diploma. Tying back to the ideas of Valencia’s (1997) deficit model theory, the staff acknowledged that students return to school and enroll at the Inspire Center because they are lacking or missing something, but contrary to Valencia’s theory, the staff did not dwell or focus solely on any deficiencies. Instead, it was quite the opposite and the staff saw broken systems that surrounded their students, but also saw students who, given the right support could be agents of great change. Furthermore, staff at the Inspire Center saw growth, hope, progress, and opportunity in their students and focused on their assets and strengths as opposed to their deficits.

Valencia (2010) suggests that teachers, staff, and school systems that work with students who are not successful are constantly focusing on their deficiencies and never seeing beyond their deficits. Furthermore, according to Valencia (1997), there are many deficiencies that combine as agents against this group of students and push against their ability to ever be successful in the school systems. Valencia’s (1997) deficit model paired with Bourdieu’s (2003) social reproduction theory, together form a propelling explanation as to why the students at the
Inspire Center have not met graduation standards or traditional orientations of success in their lives. These two theories paint a bleak picture for the adult students at the Inspire Center. Furthermore, knowing these theories exist as explanations as to why the adult students at the Inspire Center are currently in the situation they are and returning to high school, the staff interviews provided a platform to interrogate these theories and see if their beliefs around success align or do not align with these strong theories and explanations that are present in society and allow for this drop out epidemic to continue.

Now, knowing that Valencia’s (1997) deficit theory implies that students are held back or pushed out because teachers and staff keep projecting deficits on them instead of valuing their assets, one might think that the staff at the Inspire Center think from a deficit-based perspective about the very students they serve. However, as stated above, at the Inspire Center, it seemed to be the very opposite. Staff did not approach their students with a deficit-based mindset or talk about their students as only a product of their deficits. Instead, throughout the interviews, staff acknowledged the lived experiences of their stories and then turned the focus to the strengths of the students. Staff uplifted their students and engaged in open, honest, and reflective dialogue about the students they serve and what they know works for the students they serve. Staff instilled a sense of belief that every student at the Inspire Center would be successful and that every student at the Inspire Center was deserving of a chance to find success. Not once did a staff member harbor on a students’ deficit as a negative or inability to find success.

The majority of faculty and staff believed earning a high school diploma was important and an indicator of success as it signified completing a goal that had yet to be completed, but not the actual definition of success for adult students. What became clear throughout the interviews was the tremendous sense of joy that existed from the faculty and staff when talking about the adult students they serve and work with. Additionally, there was a great sense of urgency and personal calling to work with the adult students and a mission to be part of changing the narrative around deficit-based thinking and showcase the assets that adult students have. This provided a groundwork for the actual success orientations to come. In the next few paragraphs, I will briefly
introduce some of the faculty and staff who will appear in this chapter to help provide the context and framing of success orientations.

For example, Evy, the school’s Office Manager, was the first person that students interact with upon applying to and being accepted into the school. Evy was a mid-forties African American woman who is a native of the urban region where the school is located and was one of the first employees on staff. Evy exuded care, nurturance, and positivity. She had a heart for the mission and vision of the school and took on a very motherly role in her way with all of the students, in fact some of them called her the school mom. Evy was a breath of optimism and a source of strength, hope, and consistency for the students. Evy worked in several other schools in the area and will say she came to the Inspire Center because of its calling to her. When students had an operational or logistics problem with their transportation, child care, or other need a, they turn to Evy. Or, if they have a question about forms or documents, they turn to Evy. Additionally, many students found themselves at Evy’s desk simply to seek guidance in their own life and feel the strength and nurturing ways of her each and every day. Evy said,

I appreciate most about our students, is that our students look so much to us to help fix the broken places in their lives. They know that they’re lacking something. They don’t quite understand what it is until the educational mind is opened up. And so I appreciate the growth that transpired whether it be at week three or 23 of being enrolled in our school, but just didn’t know that we’re making a difference in people’s lives.

What Evy acknowledged is that students understand there is something broken in their lives. Yes, this is a deficit, but she does not harbor on the deficit or only see the students as broken. Rather, she appreciated the power she has to work with students and help move beyond the broken pieces and see transformation and empowerment. Evy called this growth, and it is this growth that provides her joy and appreciation of working with the students at the Inspire Center. Evy, and many other staff you will soon meet in the next few pages, do not dwell on the idea or notion of students as broken pieces, which again is a deficit-based ideology. Rather, Evy acknowledged that students may have gone through many experiences that led them back to school and it is the Inspire Center’s goal to see the whole student, know that student can be successful, and determine what will work to generate success. The notion of being broken could prevent adult
schools from serving students, but here as Evy says, it does not and instead students flourish and become much more.

   Also, Kevin, one of the Academic Success Coaches, shared similar sentiments with Evy. Kevin’s role as an Academic Success Coach was to provide support to students on his caseload in order to identify and work around barriers towards academic and personal success. Kevin worked specifically with the youth population and had students who were under the age of 18 on his caseload. He had anywhere from 30-40 students on his caseload. As an Academic Success Coach, Kevin was the point person for the student during their time at the Inspire Center. Additionally, Kevin created his students’ schedules for each academic term and worked with his students to ensure they were on track towards graduation while also balancing their own life needs. Kevin was a veteran educator and spent most of his professional career as a Middle School teacher in one of the surrounding urban districts. When he first came to the Inspire Center, he joined the staff as a Humanities Teacher, but then made the transition the Academic Success Coach position. Kevin was not originally from the area where the school is located, but was from another large, urban region with a similar demographic and education landscape. Kevin was a mid-forties, African American male. He showed his care for his students through his consistency, follow-up, and constant check ins. Kevin balanced the relationship between being an authoritarian in terms of ensuring students were held accountable for their actions but was also a nurturer in that individual relationships form the foundation for everything. He made sure that students were heard and provided a safe space where his students could share both struggles and successes. He said, “I think the first thing we represent is hope, which is something that many of our students lacked. Success, and ultimately happiness because I think once they’re able to attain their high school diplomas and really gain confidence and self-esteem from that accomplishment, I think it will give them motivation and the drive to go even further.”

   Like Evy, Kevin acknowledged that the students were missing something in their lives, but this did not blind his perspective of the students and he did not see them through a deficit-based perspective. Kevin did not see students just as people or students without hope or self-
esteem or as a product of their deficits. Rather he saw students as having the ability to find a space to reignite that hope and re-empower their own self-esteem. He knew students have this ability once they come into the environment that fostered this. Thus, this showed that the Inspire Center was creating spaces and opportunities for students to find hope and grow their self-esteem while also promoting a future outlook beyond obtaining just one goal and also beyond being hopeless. This idea will later be more developed in the orientations of success below, namely success as agency. Kevin's belief in students, like Evy's belief in students, was that yes, students would succeed and grow beyond deficits and in fact they had many key qualities that bring them back to school and allow them to transform. Therefore, the deficit orientation was not a pervasive mindset at the Inspire Center and not stop students from being successful nor does it prevent students from growing in the eye of the staff and faculty.

How the faculty and staff talked about students was critical to their work because this was what frames their practices and actions. As discussed in the literature review, deficit-based thinking does not serve any student well on the road to success and in fact prevents a student from finding hope or any pathway to success because of perception and deficit framing both personally and institutionally. Instead, asset-based thinking is what provides a new lens and frame to view students from and provide a break in the cycle of social reproduction that does not allow for any social or upward mobility or success. Thus, hearing from faculty and staff who work day in and day out with students who often are thought about with a deficit-based mindset, allowed me to better understand how faculty and staff are positioning their work and belief system. Also, from the previous chapter, it was clear that students felt embraced by a community and staff that was non-judgmental, which speaks to the asset-based perspective as opposed to deficit-based thinking.

Also, throughout the interviews, as exemplified by excerpts from above, there was a tone of enthusiasm and non-judgement when talking about the students at the Inspire Center. This same belief aligned with the students' orientations of success, especially the orientation of success as safety and comfort. When the students explained how they felt supported by staff and
felt safe and comfortable at the Inspire Center, they then felt success. The fact that staff also showed a non-judgmental view of the students and expressed this in their interviews, showed the connection to a move away from deficit-based thinking by the faculty and staff here at this school who support the students. According to Valencia (1997), the school system is not at fault for the fact that students are not successful, it is instead their deficiencies and their deficits from the very factors that create socioeconomically and disadvantaged students of color. Valencia’s (1997) theory shows how students who do not perform well in school are assigned deficits, which set them back both in that moment, but which they then carry forward with them from year to year. The perceptions of these students as being defined by deficits, and therefore as innately flawed, is extremely difficult to overcome and gets built into the education systems that are created to serve them. Additionally, Bourdieu (2003) explains that as social institutions are often designed to reproduce the social order, they can act to maintain just this and create a society that keeps the dominant culture at the top.

Despite the deficiencies that might compromise the students at the Inspire Center and might have every label used for the students at the Inspire Center, the staff did not point to their deficiencies as an excuse or even as something to speak further on. Instead, there was a sense of hope, optimism, and a belief that students can and will succeed throughout the interviews – in short, an asset-oriented perspective. Furthermore, there was a sense of urgency and a sense of needing to create an opportunity for the students they serve. For example, Wardell, the Manager of Student Support Services said, “Ultimately, I believe that these are students who’ve had, and I don’t say this lightly, four and five what I call wrong changes in life. I’m not so sure if they ever had the chances of being in a program or some sort of environment that in my belief they aren’t set up to fail.” With this, there was an understanding the students are not a product of their wrong choices, but in fact are in a situation as a result of the context around them and thus in this new opportunity are given an opportunity. Wardell, in his role as Manager of Student Support Services at The Inspire Center, managed student discipline and lead the initiatives around school culture and school safety. Wardell came to the Inspire Center from a long career in substance abuse
counseling. He was a mid-sixties, African American male who was a native and resident of the city in which the Inspire Center is located in. The Inspire Center was his first position located within a school setting. Wardell had a passion for the students the Inspire Center serves and often talked about how he came to work in a school because what he saw in his past work experience was the need for a school that served adults who needed another chance. He felt grounded in the mission and vision and often talked about education as the stepping stone in life despite any age or experience. Wardell was skilled in listening to students and narrowing in on the core issue or cause of concern or the most prominent barrier a student was facing. He spent much of his day being present in the hallways and common spaces and checking in with students one on one. He also worked with the Academic Success Coaches to support specific students in need of extra support. Additionally, he led small student groups focused on important and critical topics to support their growth and development while at school.

As with Wardell, and his thoughts around students needing to be in a space that was not set up for failure, this tone and understanding is expressed by several other staff too. Evy, the Office Manager, who I talked about earlier also aligned with these thoughts. She said, “Our concern is ensuring that every student is entitled to a free and equal education as well as ensuring that the support that they receive regardless of where they’re coming from. Their backgrounds, their learning abilities, or disabilities, that we’re able to assist them in receiving quality education and certifications after they receive a high school diploma.” There was not one mention of a deficit here as an excuse or rationale for why the students at The Inspire Center cannot achieve great things or be successful. Thus, statements from staff like Evy and Wardell highlighted the unique environment and context created at the Inspire Center and showed that the school and those who work in it are operating against the very theories that keep adult students without a high school diploma.

Additionally, Richard, Manager of Special Populations shared a similar thought. As the Manager of Special Populations, Richard led the team that worked with students who had an IEP or 504 plan and were in need of extra support to ensure their academic productivity and
trajectory. Students with an IEP or a 504 plan could be seen as having the most deficits and thus the hardest time at reaching success or the most difficulty in obtaining any movement or traction in the education system. Richard liked to say that his team was focused on making sure students were viewed as exceptional and had exceptional services to elevate their exceptionality. Richard came to the Inspire Center from many years in the public school system in the same urban district working with the central office. He had extensive special education experience and knowledge. Richard was an early-forties, African American male. Richard approached his work from a coaching perspective and was someone who was able to take a step back and see the many factors at work in a given situation. He was optimistic about the pathways the students can move into, and especially students with exceptionalities. Richard said,

I believe that they missed the boat in life a couple of times for various reasons. I think this was a ray of hope for students. It's an opportunity to give them their life back again, to start the course, to restart the life game for themselves again. And I believe that they all can achieve with the right support, the right individuals around them, pushing them. And I think the community here is kind of fostering that achievement.

Thus, there was an overarching sense of the faculty and staff seeing their role and responsibility as critical to reserving that which has surrounded the students before they enrolled and made a choice to come back to a system that failed them. Additionally, there was not any sense of a deficit-based frame or perspective by any of the staff.

Furthermore, there was also an acknowledgement of the students' responsibility in success and the role the student plays in his or her own pathway towards success. Marie, a Reading Teacher, provided some insight into the accountability of the students to also commit to their own education. Marie was an African American woman in her mid-fifties. She came to the Inspire Center after working as an English teacher in other schools and literacy programs in the same urban region. She was a fierce advocate for students with special needs and carried a great passion for teaching adult learners how to read and approaching it from a strengths-based perspective. As a Reading Teacher, Marie taught the Reading Foundations classes, which were for students who entered the school and placed below a ninth-grade level on their placement assessments. Marie taught students who need intensive reading instruction from decoding and
phonemic awareness to students who simply need a re-fresher and comprehension support.

Marie was a native of the same region where the Inspire Center is located. She was an experienced educator with a much-needed skills set at the Inspire Center. Marie was someone who believed in a structured classroom and consistent norms and routines. She built relationships with her students and creates a safe community in her classroom where students who have had struggles with reading can feel safe in the space she had created. Her classroom was a family. She was urgent about the work she does and proud of the growth she saw in her students who progress from reading foundations courses to Humanities courses and beyond. Marie said,

> It’s life changing because a lot of our students have not been successful in school and have not been successful in a lot of places and I think it’s life-changing because they have actual proof in front of them. We have the graduating classes that have graduated. We, in a matter of terms, they can see a complete turnaround by being mindful of their progress reports. They can see actual proof of everything that we’re saying. So it’s not just come here and all your dreams are going to have to come true. They have to meet us halfway in making that come true.

Thus, it was important to many staff, and explained by Marie here, that the student understood his or her part and agency in the pathway to success too. This idea also played out in the thought around the students’ ownership over their future and realization of the power they hold in their future pathway.

The foundation of all of the faculty and staff interviews rested on the belief that the students made the decision to try something new and this opportunity is their new definition, their next step, and their future. The faculty and staff also felt revived in the sense of newness and embrace it as a model of success for the students. Also, there was a sense of pride in being on the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center and having an opportunity to make a difference in someone’s life who both needs a new opportunity and has chosen to return to high school. The faculty and staff expressed a continued sense of hope and genuine care for all of their students and their mission and purpose.

In all nine interviews, there was a strong presence of the notion of success as bringing forth something new and re-defining and re-imaging oneself and the entity of schools as they exist. The idea of success as something that was new extended from the student trying
something new and to a school model trying a new model. Given the fact that the Inspire Center was a new adult high school model in the city where it is, there is a big pull for the faculty and staff who joined the team and believed in the model. Richard, the Manager of Special Populations said,

"Just providing a different way of educating students, providing different pathways to education. Some students don't learn in traditional type settings in school. And they have an opportunity to be here in an educational environment where learning happens differently from hands-on projects to utilizing computer applications, to working with peers in a classrooms, to working with different types of teachers and providing different types of learning opportunities for our students."

This showed the perspective of how the very model of the Inspire Center and the new approach to education frames the beliefs of staff and provides context for their orientation of success. The Inspire Center was not a traditional high school model and by allowing the school a space to operate redefines what is possible for students who have not believed in possibilities for quite some time. Additionally, Richard’s statement and many of the other staff participants that I have shared so far pushed against the traditional notions and orientations of success.

Within this context of understanding where the faculty and staff are coming from in the space they operate within, it was clear that there was a rich community of support and non-judgement at the Inspire Center that is modeled by the staff. Additionally, there was a genuine feeling of passion, compassion, hope, and empathy that comes through in the interviews and brings forth several themes that define and orient success. I purposely set this chapter up with the context to start to lay the foundation for the role the faculty and staff play in the life of the student and the approach faculty and staff take in viewing success. Additionally, I wanted to show the immense passion and joy that the staff have for their students, their position, and their school.

Additionally, this context provided an entry point into better understanding how faculty and staff are orienting success at the Inspire Center. According to Fasset (2001) success is a construction that happens both internally and externally at the school and student level. Thus, like the students, the staff are also constructing their view of success from both their own experiences in education, their past education experiences, and their current education experiences. As such, the way in which staff were sharing their orientations of success as seeped in their own
construction and experiences too. Nonetheless, they all shared a commonality of all staff being present at the Inspire Center. This shared setting and experience framed their orientations and provides an entry point for me, the researcher. Additionally, as the researcher, I am going in with an understanding of the traditional ways in which success has been framed in schools and in society.

As discussed in the literature review there are clearly defined notions of success in the US education system that exist. I am posing that these traditional notions of success do not align with adult students and thus we must hear from adult students and staff to re-frame what success is and what success looks like to serve adult students. With the understanding that the way in which success is traditionally framed in schools and in our institutions has not produced successful outcomes for adult students at the Inspire Center, I entered this study hoping that staff at the school would push against these traditional orientations of success knowing that the students they serve did not meet these frames of success. Additionally, I was hoping that the staff at the Inspire Center would provide new frames and orientations for how they perceive success for adult students that would then help frame the ways in which we understand adult schools and the needs in those schools. As such, faculty and staff at The Inspire Center oriented and defined success in the following ways that branched from the feeling of something new: success as self-growth and success as agency.

However, before moving into the analysis and a further explanation of the two orientations of success that emerged from the staff perspective, I first want to situate the orientations within the context. Similarly, with the student orientations of success and the culture of safety and care being a prerequisite for the orientations that followed, there is a prerequisite that was found throughout many of the staff interviews that played a part in shaping the success orientations. At the Inspire Center there seemed to be a belief in a culture of varied outcomes meaning there was not one way to define success or one way to define outcomes. Rather, there was the acknowledgement that outcomes and success looked different across the board for students at the Inspire Center and there was a general acceptance that this was perfectly fine. In
fact, it was embraced by many staff. Given the unique model of the Inspire Center and the fact that it serves students who had not been successful in the traditional structures and notions of the education system, this does not seem too surprising that the staff who work in the school have a wider view of outcomes and ultimately success.

In the next section, I am going to explain how staff accepted and viewed the outcomes for their students and how this created a culture of varied outcomes at the Inspire Center. This culture frames the two orientations of success that surfaced for the staff. This culture of varied outcomes pushes against the very notion that there are set outcomes or metrics that must be met to generate success in school. Therefore, by embracing a culture of varied outcomes, the staff at the Inspire Center can re-frame success and see success in a broader scope. After setting this layer of context in addition to the role of staff in success that I did earlier, I will then be set up to explain the two different orientations of success.

Culture of Varied Outcomes

Often times success is thought of as a generalized definition or orientation that fits all contexts and people. Thinking back to the traditional orientations of success and specifically the ways in which success is shaped as readiness. Success as college readiness, success as career readiness, success as college and career readiness – all three orientations imply that to be successful the students are thereby ready to move into a generalized role, pathways, or transition from school (Conley, 2013). Again, this might make sense with Bourdieu's (2003) social reproduction theory and align with maintaining the dominant class by creating readiness as a metric of success that only those who are deemed ready can achieve. Yet, we know that this is unattainable for so many who don't meet the dominant class of social reproduction, are always positioned through their deficits, and are simply high school drop outs (Bourdieu, 2003; Valencia, 1997).

However, despite this, what I found in my interviews with the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center was that success for adult students returning to high school was viewed as varied
and diverse and was seen through the unique lens of each individual student. The culture of varied outcomes shaped the culture of success at the Inspire Center. This in turn created a culture of varied outcomes and an acceptance of this culture that was embraced and talked about by many of the staff. There was not a singular version or definition of success. There was not one pathway towards success for all students. This did not mean that success has no bounds, but rather success aligned to each individual’s needs. Therefore, in order to be successful, one must understand his or her goals or ambitions and the school must align to be relevant and appropriate for this students’ success. Thus, success did not look the same for all students nor did outcomes look the same. Even more so, this meant that success was not an overarching framework that could be generalized, but rather success was something that must be seen from the perspective of each individual student and the staff and school must embrace this orientation. Therefore, success was complicated, and success was knowingly varied. There was no singular definition or perception of success from the perspective of the faculty and staff, and therefore the faculty and staff believed that students were capable of moving into many different pathways and next steps, and each pathway was equally upheld. This is a tremendous shift in paradigm from how success is traditionally viewed in terms of what outcomes and pathways students can or should take. Additionally, this is a tremendous shift in how school culture promotes and upholds orientations of success.

As explained many times before, students at the Inspire Center arrive without finding success in their other school contexts. In fact, students at The Inspire Center are often called fragile because of their numerous failed experiences in school settings and having been deprived of success in the traditional sense (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Yes, students have this in common, that they are all existing without a high school diploma, and that they are students at the Inspire Center, but that does not mean their individual stories are the same. As such, that does not mean success then would be the same for each student. The faculty and staff at the Inspire Center uplifted the varied outcomes of success. The understanding that there are varied outcomes towards success then generated and produced
even more success and was seen as empowering to the staff who bear witness to this success each day. To paint a picture of what a culture of varied outcomes looks like, I will share the stories and excerpts of the following staff: Evy, Richard, Kevin, Zora, and Twin.

Evy, the Office Manager, said, “I just think it’s important for people to understand that everyone grows in their own way. What may not look like success to the bare eye, to us as an outsider, doesn’t mean that something isn’t taking place on the inside of that individual.” Furthermore, Evy said, “Success is [for a student] for them to be able to see that whether it be mid mark or at the end mark really own it and say, ‘these things have helped me to become a better person financially, spiritually, emotionally.’ And so to me, that looks like success.” Evy’s thoughts here show how success is something that might not be able to be measured or seen right away. But success is seen, felt, and observed through looking at the individual and seeing progress.

In addition to uplifting a culture of varied outcomes through what success looks like for each student, there is an idea that there are varied outcomes with success by what students achieve. In a similar sentiment to Evy, Richard, the Manager of Special Populations said,

The idea is that no path is the same. I think when you think about it, students can go down different paths, and they’ll end up on the road to success, but it may look different for every single student. For one student it may look like, ‘I’m going to college.’ For another student it may look like, ‘I’m gaining the skills so I can become an entrepreneur.’ For another student, it may just mean, ‘I completed this because I never did it.’

Consequently, Richard showed another way of viewing the culture of varied outcomes. In addition to growing at their own rates and in their own ways, Richard explained that success as an outcome may look different for each student depending on what trajectory the student takes. This pushed against the very notion that being ready for college, career, or college and career is the ultimate goal (Conley, 2013). Additionally, this allowed for the student to construct their own story and meaning of success in the school space where they are finally feeling success (Fasett, 2011). Also, this notion of success as being multifaceted allowed for students to have a voice in their own success and their own pathway and ultimately their own narrative construction and lived experience for where they are now and where they want to go (Knesting, 2008; Nieto, 1994). This
culture of varied outcomes is a culture of success. It is one that truly celebrated and uplifted the individualized and often complex nature of success and the orientation of success as multifaceted. The staff embraced this orientation and this in turn created an environment where student success was fostered. Richard’s statement showed that success happened in many forms and the belief that there was not a prescribed outcome of success is a paradigm shift. With faculty and staff at the Inspire Center believing in the orientation of success as multifaceted, this meant there was an acceptance that not everything was or will be the same for every student. And in fact, it was this very belief that for each student success is measured and success looks different that allows for students to be successful. Therefore, there is a culture of varied outcomes.

Richard also created a visual representation that portrayed success as multifaceted. When asked how the Inspire Center supports students on their pathway to success, Richard drew the image in Figure 5.

![Figure 5- Richard's Visual Representation](image-url)
In the image, Richard created a visual that shows multiple pathways and roads that lead to success. This emphasized the very nature of the culture of varied outcomes that is alive at the Inspire Center and fully embraced.

When asked to describe his image, Richard said, “The idea is that no path is the same. I think when you think about it, students can go down different paths and they will all end up on the road of success, but it may look different for every student.” When asked if other schools look at success this way, Richard said no, at the Inspire Center it is different and in fact he believed that, “Success looks different for everyone.” Richard continued, when he explained his image and said success is about, “The idea that we are all unique individuals.” I asked Richard how he came to his thinking about success and he saw success in this way. He said, I think about it from a SPED (Special Education) mindset. I think of a quote I once heard, to treat everyone the same is unfair. To treat everyone the same is unfair.” Thus, in this drawing, success is not seen as the same for all students and even more so, it would be unfair to assume that success is the same for all students. Richard also explained his belief even more, and said, “Putting our definition of what success is onto a student is unfair.” Consequently, success as multifaceted is about allowing students to pick their own pathway towards success and having the belief that each pathway will generate success for that student. At the Inspire Center, students were not forced to choose one pathway of success. Instead, multiple pathways of success were uplifted by the very courses at the school and also the postsecondary pathways. Students have a career and college counseling team where they can explore multiple pathways towards success and each pathway is seen as the best pathway, as there is not one stronger choice over the other because each student can and has the ability to move into their own pathway of success.

In addition to Richard and Evy, Kevin, an Academic Success Coach, also shared the mentality that there is not one pathway for success and that success is multifaceted. Kevin said, “But for me, success would look like my students finding their own path whether it’s through college or career. But at some point, moving beyond obtaining their high school diploma, and them moving onto something greater.” Thus, faculty and staff at the Inspire Center believe their
students will be successful and move beyond earning their diploma, but the next steps and what frames success from there, will look very different and success is seen as many different pathways or multifaceted. Furthermore, there was not one common definition of success and the school did not exist to produce one version or one example of success. Consequently, staff saw their ability to work with each student in a way that is personalized as significant, and this too is part of the success orientation here. Moreover, we have seen what happens when systems try to proscribe monolithic successful outcomes and definitions of success, we have a high school dropout epidemic. Therefore, as Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke (2006) explain, the current epidemic the US finds itself in is only fueled by the way in which the current systems operate and the ways in which success is framed. Thus, Richard’s statement provided a light onto how seeing success as multifaceted allowed for the staff to have great freedom when working with students who are navigating their next steps and also for students who are working to determine what success means, looks like, and feels like for them.

Likewise, both Zora and Twin also shared the view of Richard and Kevin in understanding success as multifaceted by what students seek to do with their achievements and on their next steps. Zora, a Humanities Teacher said, “I think the definition of success is relative, so I think it depends on each of their life experiences and where they want to go and what direction they want to go in after they leave here or while they’re here for them to define success.” Twin, the Registrar said, “Because we allow them to succeed in their own way. It’s not like, ‘Okay, if you don’t get an A, then it's not…’ we’re not putting everybody in a box. So my idea of success might not be your ideas of success, however, I can’t take away from the fact that whatever your idea of success is, it's still equally as important as mine.” Both statements show an orientation of success that lends itself to viewing success as a multifaceted outcome. Viewing success as multifaceted is harder and yes, it is more complicated. But it opens success up and allows for more success to be accepted and therefore generated. Zora explained that success can be relative based on what students want or where they are coming from. This uplifted the idea that students are not all the same and that the faculty at staff at the Inspire Center embrace this. Twin
agreed with this same idea too by explaining that all success and all forms of success are equally as important and equally as great. This belief by the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center then allows for a broader net of outcomes and embraces success as all-inclusive due to its multifaceted nature. The staff members showcased in this success orientation believe in success as multifaceted and this belief is instilled in the school environment and then also felt by the students. Thus, one could suggest that there was a mindset shift around success happening at the Inspire Center because success does not have to look or be the same for all students, and that was instilled by all faculty and staff.

Finally, success as multifaceted also meant that staff accepted the multifaceted and broader scope of success, which again is a push against from the traditional definitions of success. Success can mean many different outcomes and does not have to be a single pre-defined metric for each student. Again, this is something I have seen from the staff in their statements here and have tried to highlight and emphasize throughout the excerpts, which show their belief that authentic success does not look the same for each student. This is a fundamental belief that guides the staff’s actions and the school’s structure. Additionally, the multifaceted nature of success is so counter-opposite to the traditional ways in which success is viewed and oriented, that it leaves a lot of room to pause and think about how the US is attempting to generalize student success in its systems and that almost prescribed seemingly monolithic nature is fueling a dropout crisis. The Manager of Student Support Services, Wardell said, “But each individual may have a level of success that they believe is successful for them. But ultimately, I think success is based on going forward and not holding yourself accountable for the position you are in life.” This shows that success is viewed by him and by others as the ability to move forward and the ability to see success relative to each student. When success is oriented as multifaceted, it then becomes translated into the possibility for staff to see different versions and moments of success in their students.

At the Inspire Center, students graduate with their high school diploma which also includes a career certification. The goal is to provide students with access to move into their next
steps. The Inspire Center currently offers certifications in hospitality, Microsoft Office, and security. Also, the staff at the Inspire Center are constantly thinking of new pathways and outcomes to infuse in the school for their students as there are different desires and needs from each student and also the need in the area, which guide the research into new pathways to onboard. Additionally, all students are required to take an ACT course and the ACT. We want all students to have an option of which pathway they choose and the building blocks to help get a jump start into the college, certification, or career pathway of their choice. The essence of the school model speaks to success as multifaceted. When students reach senior status, they begin to work with the College and Career Readiness Team, who help them define their individual next steps and their own pathway. There is not one definition of success at the Inspire Center, rather it is varied and diverse, and students have options for how they will proceed.

The culture of varied outcomes formed the foundation for success at the Inspire Center. For students who have been forced to conform to an orientation of success that they have not met working through the traditional system, and who now recognizes both their assets and varied outcomes that could result from their studies could be quite liberating. Therefore, success was now seen as varied and as limitless options. This also flips the script for success by not allowing success to have a definition: it is now open-ended and personal. Faculty and staff at the Inspire Center believe in success as varied, open-ended, and equal for each individual. This is a new approach to viewing success, but also a new way to frame the culture of a high school – as something more than an institution that reproduces what has always worked before. The energy around the culture of varied outcomes and the buy in from the faculty and staff generates an area where faculty and staff can see success in a new light and in a new frame.

Now with a better understanding of the context that situates the orientations of success for the faculty and staff, I will move into describing the two orientations of success that emerged. First, success as self-growth was an orientation of success that surfaced throughout the faculty and staff interviews and aligns to the student orientation of success as personal fulfillment. Next, success as agency was an orientation of success that also emerged and aligns to the student
orientation of success as validation. I will now move into a more in-depth analysis of the two orientations of success and also make connections to the student orientations of success as well.

Success as Self-growth

The faculty and staff at The Inspire Center saw self-growth as the process through which students became more evolved versions of themselves by being in the school space. Success is therefore about transformation – where adult students started and where they finished. We know that adult students are making their way back to formal education programs (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012; Comings, Sum, and Uvin, 2000; Fears-Hackett, 2012). This could be seen as the first step in this re-frame. Additionally, the way in which staff oriented success as self-growth, there was a great alignment to the students’ orientation of success as safety and care. In this orientation staff attributed the nurturing environment of the Inspire Center and the strong relationships at play as the inputs that allow for a sense of safety and care and create success as self-growth. In this orientation of success as self-growth, I will share the stories and perspectives from three Inspire Center staff participants. Some of these stories and staff have been heard in previous sections, but their stories will be expanded, and their interviews shed light on this orientation of success as well. To paint a picture of what success as self-growth looks like, I will share the stories and perspectives of the following four staff members: Evy, Marie, Zora, and Monroe. For the staff members who I previously talked about in earlier sections, I will not go into further context or backstory, but will further elaborate on their story and alignment to the orientation of success.

As I did with the previous orientation of success in Chapter 4, I want to first provide you with a table of the faculty and staff participants in this section of Chapter 5 to help organize the upcoming analysis of each staff members’ story. Table 3 shows the staff members who aligned with success as self-growth and their name, position, and a quote that will appear in the reading to follow. The table only includes one example of a quote that aligns to success as validation, but the analysis to follow includes more quotes and more analysis and explanation.
Table 3

*Faculty and Staff Participants in Chapter 5 and Notable Quotes Aligned to Success as Self-Growth*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Quotes aligned to success as validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evy</td>
<td>Office Manager</td>
<td>“To be successful not to come in, not to leave the way they came in the door.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Reading Teacher</td>
<td>“We’re building relationships from day one, not only from the class and teacher but for every entity here. From the director to the coaches, to the front office staff, that whole building, that community thing having these closed-door conversations that have nothing to do with education. This is going on in my life. Always having students come to us for all and everything and having that concern, and when students are no longer in your class, when they know that we have built that community that they can always continuously come back. Even when they’re failing, giving them those next steps and being available and just always upfront with them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>Humanities Teacher</td>
<td>“We give them full support, like all around support, for anything they can need. And we also protect them, them being the center, because we know that they are important and they’re what needs to be protected in order to succeed. We need to provide them with all the support and protection so they can continue to bloom and grow.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>Academic Success Coach</td>
<td>“A successful student is consistent with what they say they want to do. And a successful student is able to rebound when things shift or move in their life. That’s only thing constant, is change.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The student participants in this table aligned to the theme of success as validation. These stories appear throughout the section of this chapter to follow.*
journey. She saw students question what they were about to do by re-enrolling in high school and slowly take off the mask of toughness and detachment, to then step into the school space and acknowledge they wanted to be a member of this community. Furthermore, Evy also said that success looked like many different examples of growth, transformation, and change. She said,

So it may look like a mother who has always felt that she wasn’t going to be able to receive quality education because she has gone through so many things in her life. She has so many barriers and then coming in and having a coach to support her or having our director or someone who is just looking out for their best interest in helping them to shelf them what’s on the inside of them that they may not have possessed or been able to reach ad then pull it out on their own. And so to see them at whether it be mid mark or the end mark really own that and say, ‘These things have helped me to become a better person financially, spiritually, emotionally.’ And so to me, that looks like success.

The Inspire Center was a place of self-growth, but through the means of an education journey. By returning to school and stepping into a space where students feel safe, comfortable, cared for, and loved, students were able to find success and staff saw their growth. Additionally, embedded inside the Inspire Center was a place for students to navigate their own stories and take advantage of many resources and opportunities. As such, they expanded their experiences and opportunities and took steps forward in their life. The Inspire Center allowed students to take ownership of their own story and take on the next chapter of their life. When students showed self-growth, the staff acknowledged this as self-growth and saw success in the students. For example, the Inspire Center acknowledged academic growth, personal growth, attendance growth, and the list goes on through end of term award ceremonies, graduations, and weekly progress reports and check ins. Additionally, since the school had five, eight-week terms, there are five sections of time throughout the year where students can showcase their self-growth, and this is seen by staff. Yes, each day students were growing, but the very model of the school allowed for presentations of self-growth to be seen and on display, and this is an orientation of success.

Like Evy, who saw success as self-growth, Marie, the Reading Teacher at the Inspire Center, also aligned with this orientation of success. As adult students, being in a Reading Foundations course could be difficult to both accept and acknowledge. But, one of the key pillars about the Inspire Center was the opportunity to take reading and math foundation courses in
order to build basic math and literacy skills before entering credit-bearing courses. Therefore, these courses were critical in the school model and Marie's position was a much-needed teaching position. Also, these courses provided opportunities to students who might have left school in the past due to reading or math struggles. Thus, since Marie taught the Reading Foundations courses, she worked with students who might come into the school with a resistance, hesitancy, and self-doubt as a result of their reading scores and reading course placement. Additionally, one could even suggest that Marie was teaching students with great deficits and the most need, and therefore Marie herself might have maintained the deficit-based perspective of her students (Valencia, 1997). However, that was anything but true of Marie, and she instead saw strengths, assets, and growth in her students.

In these courses Reading Foundations courses and over the eight-week terms, Marie was a witness of tremendous personal and academic growth in her students. It was not only the reading growth that Marie noted, but the ability in students to be open, take in support from others, receive feedback, and be vulnerable. This was what she defined as success. Marie believed that the culture of support at the Inspire Center attributed to student success and allowed for students to open up and be vulnerable. She believed in the community of care and support that was present in the school. When asked to define success for students at the Inspire Center, Marie said,

It's on an individual basis. You have to always be observing, for example the other day a student came in, and I said, 'What's wrong?' and 'What's wrong? Everything okay?' and at the end of the period, after a lot of pulling, we found out that somebody took her child and wouldn't give it to her. So it's a long of – we have to do a lot of life managing. And another student, 'What's wrong?' and her foster parent died the other day, and we have to do a whole lot of that because it kind of shuts down the whole class. You can't get to the next level because they haven't learned to manage their lives yet. And so we have to do a whole lot of that and whole lot of next steps and resources. And they haven't learned, necessarily, that even though those kinds of things go on, school still goes on, and you have to learn to manage that in addition to this. So yeah. It's a lot more hand-holding. It's a lot more community building. It's a lot more learning how to separate this from this, and life still goes on. Even though you're going through that, school still can go on.

Marie continued, as she said,

We're building relationships from day one, not only from the class and teacher but for every entity here. From the director to the coaches, to the front office staff, that whole
building, that community thing having these closed-door conversations that have nothing to do with education. This is going on in my life. Always having students come to us for all and everything and having that concern, and when students are no longer in your class, when they know that we have built that community that they can always continuously come back. Even when they're failing, giving them those next steps and being available and just always upfront with them.

Thus, the community of support at the Inspire Center was what Marie attributed, and also other staff, to the ability for students to show self-growth and progress. This self-growth was success and staff were fueled by the self-growth they saw while students were fueled by the personal fulfillment they felt with the self-growth. Thus, both orientations of success here align.

Additionally, this community of support was what created the nurturing environment that produces a school of care and safety, which was also a student orientation of success. As explained in the chapter before, when students felt cared for and safe, they felt successful and this then is when staff see the self-growth. Marie continued to explain and refine how she viewed success. Marie said,

> Because we present so much to you and we give you an opportunity to really reflect on what you want out of life. To be successful, we lay it out to you. This is all you have to do. and the mirror in terms of the two-way mirror reflecting, you have an opportunity to reflect on all of that to come to a very critical decision. Do I want this, or do I not want this? And if you want it, then you continuously reflect on those things to come to that decision. If you want that diploma, the you have to do these things. And then you reflect on attendance. You reflect on the use of your culture, you reflect on those kinds of things. And when I say a tow-way mirror, a lot of times in terms of a mirror, sometimes we have the ability to see out and again, a two-way mirror, that mirror reflects back on us, and you have to look at yourself and think about what am I not doing to accomplish that goal?

The idea of a two-way mirror aligned with the notion of success as self-growth. As Marie explained, when students show growth to others, such as the staff, but then also see it in themselves, this is progress, this is success. Thus, a school community and environment that fosters a place where students can grow and showcase their moments of self-growth throughout their journey is a place that generated success for the adult student.

Additionally, Zora, one of the Humanities Teachers at the Inspire Center who taught upper level Humanities classes aligned with this orientation of success as self-growth as well. Zora was an African American woman in her mid-twenties. She worked with students in their Humanities courses where they can earn two credits in their dual-credit courses. Zora came to
the Inspire Center after teaching in one of the larger public high schools in the region. Zora was from another city in a different state, like the area where the Inspire Center is located and attended college in the area where the Inspire Center is and remained in the area after graduating. Zora ran her classroom with structure and worked to promote individual action among her students. Zora’s reputation around the school was that she was a hard teacher and could be tough. She was viewed by many students as a strict teacher, but this was her structure that she imposed, created, and upheld. She mixed in her warmth mixed with her structure, and once students became adjusted to her style, her reputation as strict and tough faded. When asked to create an image that shows how students are supported towards success at the Inspire Center, Zora drew a flower, which is seen in Figure 6. Zora’s image bared some resemblance to Chandra’s image in Chapter 4 of a flower blooming with the support of the teachers, coaches, and staff at the Inspire Center who provided the critical nutrients for the flower to bloom and also showed success as personal fulfillment.

*Figure 6- Zora’s Visual Representation*
When I asked Zora to describe her image, she said, “I drew a flower with kind of small and large pedals outside of it saying the students are the center, and our support are the pedals that are around the student.” She continued and said, “We give them full support, like all around support, for anything they can need. And we also protect them, them being the center, because we know that they are important and they’re what needs to be protected in order to succeed. We need to provide them with all the support and protection so they can continue to bloom and grow.” Zora created an image that puts the students at the center of the school and layers of support, safety, and protection around them. Yet, she showed that with the holistic support and the protection of the staff, students can bloom, and they could then display that self-growth and full potential. Additionally, in Zora’s description of her image, she does not say the students are not capable of growing, which would be a deficit-based perspective. Instead, she explained that the students, when held at the core of the school and the core of the mission, are given the right environment and in this case the support and feeling of safety, then they can with all of their skills and abilities grow and bloom. This is self-growth and the students can show this self-growth when they are in an environment, like the Inspire Center, that both created and fostered this feeling of care, comfort, and safety and then this will become success.

Like Zora, Marie, and Evy, the notion of success around the idea of self-growth was also expressed by one of the Academic Success Coaches, Monroe. As an Academic Success Coach, Monroe worked with a caseload of students from their entry point at the Inspire Center to graduation. Unlike Kevin, who worked with the youth at the Inspire Center, Monroe and the other Academic Success Coaches do not have a defined age group for their caseload. Monroe’s caseload fluctuated between 70-90 students. In his position, he worked to identify and help relieve and remove life barriers that are present on the students’ pathway towards graduation. Monroe had many years of experience working in workforce development programs and GED programs before coming to the Inspire Center. Additionally, he had extensive experience in supporting adults in their job readiness and job placement process in his previous work experiences. Monroe also has experience working in other alternative schools in the same district.
as the Inspire Center. He came to the Inspire Center from an organization that supports the school in a role that was similar to a coach. Monroe was an African American male in his mid-thirties who was from the surrounding area of the Inspire Center. Monroe would never beat around the bush with a student and would have difficult conversations with students but do so with a gentle ease and great sense of genuine care. He had a passion for the students and a skill for truly listening to students and helping strategize and devise a plan. Monroe was always solution-oriented, and students knew this about him. This was a key pillar of the Inspire Center is the Academic Coaching Team. This team is the key support network for the students and the connecting link between teachers, resources, and personal life concerns.

The Academic Success coaches worked to ensure students have correct schedules, students know where they stand in their graduation timeline, and students know what other outside resources are available to them. The Academic Success coaches saw students from all perspectives and angles and provide a holistic, wrap around support to the students. When asked what a successful student at the Inspire Center looked like or presents as, Monroe said, “A successful student is consistent with what they say they want to do. And a successful student is able to rebound when things shift or move in their life. That’s only thing constant, is change.” The idea of change as the only constant in the students’ life aligned itself to the idea that committing to school and showing a constant stream of self-growth is a form of success.

Additionally, Monroe talked about seeing growth and progress in students in the physical space and context of the school and how it is organized. He associated this with success and also aligned his definition of success to this. Monroe said,

If I had to give you a definition of success, it would be wrapped around accomplishments in this space. So it would be accomplishments I came to the school the whole week or I didn’t have an opportunity where my kids had to call me to come get them from class or school, or it was about the student, why the student is here. Everything is so wrapped up in their life and they give so much of themselves sometimes, our students, that it’s about them. And so that’s why I like success because for me it is that I can see them come and do this for them.
Within what Monroe was saying, it was clear that success was not only earning good grades, passing classes, or other school-based associations of success. Rather, success was seen as personal, self-growth where students can look back and say they made a commitment and did something for themselves in this space where they also were growing academically. This was self-growth, and from the perspective of the coach this was critical growth and success.

Success as self-growth meant that students were showing signs of growth through seeking support, continuing their education, remaining engaged in school, and taking ownership of their various responsibilities and lives. Additionally, success as self-growth meant that students were accomplishing milestones in their time at the Inspire Center and these moments were noted and celebrated by the staff. The orientation of success as self-growth aligns with the student orientation of success as safety and care. Students were able to show self-growth because they were living in an environment of great safety and care, which allowed them to grow. From the Office Manager, to two teachers, to an Academic Success Coach, all very important layers of staff at this school, the notion and orientation of success as self-growth was evident. Staff members could pinpoint moments where students showed self-growth and these moments of growth fueled further success. Even more so, success as self-growth pushed against any deficit-based perspective of the students because in this orientation, students are seen from their strengths, their growth, and their progress. Success as self-growth was not simply academic achievements, but personal barrier triumph and small victories that lead to larger triumphs. Success as self-growth is also closely connected to the students’ orientation of success as fulfillment and success safety and care. When students-oriented success as fulfillment, they felt successful when they could see their own growth and feel empowered by that growth. Here, staff oriented success as self-growth in that they see these moments in the students and as staff they recognize them from all perspectives and these moments must be celebrated and recognized.

Additionally, it is this idea of success as self-growth staff felt rejuvenated by witnessing the growth in their students, which then yields even more opportunities and expanded definitions of success. Even more so, it is important to state that in this orientation of success, there is not
the mention of any one type of readiness (i.e. college readiness, career readiness, college and career readiness) as promoted by the traditional orientations of success (Conley, 2013). For these students, the emphasis on those particular forms of readiness typically led to a deficit narrative. Thus, the staff at the Inspire Center were pushing against traditional views of success in schools and posing a new orientation of success here that focused on students’ assets instead of deficits: success as the recognition of individual growth, discovery, and exploration. Again, this then created a space for more success and even more growth, which then could be seen as the ultimate form of success because success is not stagnant as self-growth can happen anywhere once it is realized and felt.

Success as Agency

The next orientation of success that emerged from the faculty and staff interviews was success as agency. Success as agency is an orientation of success where the staff saw a student grow into a position where he or she could gain access to more opportunities and also navigate the very world and context they operate in. As described earlier, agency allows an individual to have power within their context, make choices, and focus on the future actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Success as agency means that students are moving into their recognition of the power they have and are taking the skills they learn in the Inspire Center and applying them in society to further leverage their voice and their success. Additionally, success as agency meant students had a better understanding of how to negotiate the social structures in which they live and how to rise above the systems in place. Even more so, success as agency was a way for staff to view adult education and their school as a way to dismantle the inequities that their students have faced. If their students can go outside of the Inspire Center and better navigate the world they live in with their refined skills and their empowered agency, then success was generated. Social reproduction theory suggests the students in the Inspire Center will not be able to change the way in which institutions are built to maintain the dominant culture. Therefore, if one individual succeeds who would not traditionally succeed in society, this then does not
change the entire institution or open the access for success (Bourdieu, 2003). Even more so, social reproduction theory posits that one person succeeding does not disrupt systemic inequality. Therefore, with that theory in mind, it is not clear if the students at the Inspire Center will be able to leverage their success at this institution into meaningful success in other parts of society. However, it is clear that the Inspire Center is providing these students with more space to do so than any other school has in the past for them.

For the staff at the Inspire Center, success cannot take place only in the school or else that success has no life of its own. The entire purpose of the school is to set adult students on a new pathway and to break generational cycles of poverty and increase resources and opportunities. At the Inspire Center, staff believed that students must gain agency as one of the outcomes of returning to school. Furthermore, staff saw the opportunities afforded to students as a way to gain agency and took it upon themselves to create an environment that promoted agency. Thus, success as agency created empowered students, which aligned to the students’ orientation of success as validation, but also created a sense of power, choice, and endless opportunity. Success as agency is success that was built from the context of the school, but then as taken into the context of the everyday lives the students live. In this orientation of success as agency, I will share the stories and excerpts of three Inspire Center staff participants. Some of the staff members’ stories have been examined in earlier sections, but their stories and perspectives and the other stories shed light on this orientation of success. To paint a picture of what success as agency looks like, I will share the stories and perspectives of the following staff: Monroe, Zora, and Twin.

As I did with the previous orientation of success, I want to first provide you with a table of the faculty and staff participants in this section of Chapter 5 to help organize the upcoming analysis of each story. I have already talked about some of the faculty and staff in earlier sections of this chapter, and I will continue to add more about their story and experience throughout this success orientation. Table 4 shows the faculty and staff who aligned with success as agency and their name, position, and a quote that will appear in the reading to follow. The table only includes
one example of a quote that aligns to success as agency, but the analysis to follow includes more quotes and more analysis and explanation. The table is meant to serve as a road map throughout this chapter and help organize the faculty and staff who will appear in this success orientation.

Again, some of the faculty and staff have appeared in other sections and the previous success orientation, but I will continue to paint their full story.

Table 4

**Faculty and Staff Participants in Chapter 5 and Notable Quotes Aligned to Success as Agency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Quotes aligned to success as validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>Academic Success Coach</td>
<td>“My goals and hopes for students at the Inspire Center are to ultimately become self-sufficient and to be successful in this new DC. I feel like DC has gone through transformation which is throwing just the people who don’t have a high school diploma off and puts them at a very big disadvantage. So I try to empower them as much as possible, but the emotional fortitude that it is going to take in order to be successful here is also very important to know.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>Humanities Teacher</td>
<td>“I think showing growth and having them able to actually see their growth because we get students on all different levels and everyone learns differently. But if they’re able to master skills in whatever capacity they can and figure out ways to utilize them outside of here, I think that shows success.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin</td>
<td>Registrar</td>
<td>“But not only just completing it, but being able to regurgitate some of the information that they learned and being able to go out into the world and being able to influence others the way that we hopefully influenced them in a positive nature. Also, being able to see themselves as successful. Even if it’s a small success, they’re kind of—what do you call it? Like their confidence being lifted and them being able to actually see themselves going further than just a high school diploma. If you get your high school diploma, why not do a two-year? Why not go to a training program? What not do a four-year college degree? So just being able to actually see them understanding that this is just one step of many that they can actually take towards even further success.”</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Note:* The student participants in this table aligned to the theme of success as validation. These stories appear throughout the section of this chapter to follow.

*Table 4*
There were many ways the staff at the Inspire Center saw success as agency. One way was to find a way to live in the very city the school is located in. Monroe, an Academic Success Coach said,

My goals and hopes for students at the Inspire Center are to ultimately become self-sufficient and to be successful in this new DC. I feel like DC has gone through transformation which is throwing just the people who don’t have a high school diploma off and puts them at a very big disadvantage. So I try to empower them as much as possible, but the emotional fortitude that it is going to take in order to be successful here is also very important to know.

Given the context of where the school is, in an urban city that is changing and gentrifying to push out the very students it serves, the students must acknowledge this and elevate against it. As discussed in the chapter before, students are returning to school to have more opportunities, to elevate their own lives, and to find success. From the staff perspective, this is agency. In his role, Monroe saw himself as providing opportunities, knowledge, and information to students, so they could continue to grow, push, and be successful in the very world and society they live in. Just earning a high school diploma is not enough and does not define success. In fact, it is the next steps and the fortitude as was stated by Monroe that support the creation of success away from the school and after the diploma has been earned.

Like Monroe, Zora a Humanities teacher at the Inspire Center, also viewed success as agency and the ability for students to show their progress in ways outside of the school space. Zora said, “I think showing growth and having them able to actually see their growth because we get students on all different levels and everyone learns differently. But if they’re able to master skills in whatever capacity they can and figure out ways to utilize them outside of here, I think that shows success.” The ability to use new knowledge and skills outside the boundaries of the school was the very definition of having agency. Yes, there was some orientation of success as self-growth and success as personal fulfillment mixed in here, but overall Zora was emphasizing the understanding that success was being able to apply the skills in ways that promote further learning and ability. If students do not use what they are learning, both academically and socially at the Inspire Center, in the community and society they live in, then success has not been found.
Therefore, Zora viewed success as agency and simply learning new skills was not enough to be successful, it was instead the future use and implementation of these skills that is success.

Similarly, to what Zora explained, Twin, the school Registrar also saw success as agency and the ability to navigate society by questioning one’s own possibilities and opportunities. Twin was an African American woman in her mid-forties. She came to the Inspire Center after several years working in other public schools in the same region as the Inspire Center and also in another urban district in a different state. As the Registrar, Twin met all students upon entry as she reviewed old school records and transcripts and worked with their Academic Success Coaches to outline graduation plans based on schedules, credits, and availability. Twin took her role as the Registrar very seriously as she had a belief that inaccurate and disorganized student records were moments of frustration from the past that Inspire Center students have encountered, and do not need to experience here at their current school. She liked to meet with students one on one to discuss their records and also review their plans. She was direct, outgoing, and sincere. When asked how to define success and what success looks like for students at the Inspire Center, Twin provided a detailed explanation and painted a picture of success with that explanation. Twin said,

But not only just completing it, but being able to regurgitate some of the information that they learned and being able to go out into the world and being able to influence others the way that we hopefully influenced them in a positive nature. Also, being able to see themselves as successful. Even if it’s a small success, they’re kind of—what do you call it? Like their confidence being lifted and them being able to actually see themselves going further than just a high school diploma. If you get your high school diploma, why not do a two-year? Why not go to a training program? What not do a four-year college degree? So just being able to actually see them understanding that this is just one step of many that they can actually take towards even further success.

Twin associated success for students as being able to push themselves even further and realize the realm of opportunities they have ahead of them. If students can begin to position themselves in a positive mindset and also access the opportunities and resources they have, then they are being agents of change in their own lives. Additionally, this then expanded outside of the school space and context. Even more so, Twin saw success as being able to make choices and those very choices have an impact on one’s life, which was the essence of agency.
Viewing success as agency from the perspective of the staff shows the importance in adult education about the ability to take hold of one’s life trajectory. Additionally, success as agency is an orientation of success that shifts the narrative of both success and adult students. Going back to school is also more than going back to school to earn a credential. Staff oriented success with the power to then question the systemic inequalities in the communities and society they are living in. Additionally, success as agency promotes students above any perceived deficits and also allows the break in the cycle of social reproduction to have any hope. For staff who work with adult students who see the systems of institutionalized ways and processes hold back future opportunities, seeing students grow in their agency and leave the school with agency allows the students the ability to navigate the society they live in and have a chance at breaking beyond barriers. Furthermore, success as agency creates a pathway for the future for the students and generates the continued success of their students as they are able to understand their own agency.

By orientating success as agency, this brings forth the question of how the staff create a space and an environment in the Inspire Center where students can gain skills and experiences to showcase their agency. Given the fact that students at the Inspire Center have experienced several failed systems, including the education system, students have experiences to share and stories to tell that can bring light to the systematic inequalities they’d faced in schooling. Additionally, with the age demographic of the students at the school, there is an opportunity to excite agency, citizenship, and community engagement. Thus, the structures and policies at the Inspire Center shape how the orientation of success as agency surfaced. From the faculty and staff’s belief that agency had value, to the curriculum and community engagement activities, to the academic success coaching and college and career coaching that supported implementation of skills and planning for next steps, the Inspire Center infused ways in which students could generate agency.
Conclusion

As I did with the chapter before, I want to take a moment to conclude this chapter and also synthesize the three orientations of success I have posed from the faculty and staff perspective at the Inspire Center. First, I want to return, once again, to my research questions that guide me in this study as the starting point for the synthesis. One of the other central questions of this study is: How do teachers, staff, and leadership in adult education view success? Throughout this chapter I have attempted to answer this question by setting out three central themes that emerged around how the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center view success. I intentionally set up their orientations against the traditional framing of success as I outlined in the literature review. My hopes were to find new ways to frame and view success that show how the staff is thinking differently about adult student success and as such generating different outcomes for adult students who have not met success in the school context.

From this chapter it can be seen that yes, in fact, the faculty and staff do see success in a new light than the traditional ways in which success is defined. Faculty and staff at the Inspire Center see success as self-growth, success as agency, and success as multifaceted. These three orientations of success frame success around ways in which the students are using the tools and skills they learn at the Inspire Center to then continue on in their success while also acknowledging that success is not simply a metric. Success is complicated and hard to define in one word or one feeling, and that comes through in these orientations. Success is hard to measure, but success can be seen, witnessed, and generated through a supportive environment that provides the context that allows for one to explore and feel safe. Additionally, success for the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center is not simply meeting a goal or obtaining a credential. Rather, success is much more in depth and requires a student to truly grapple with his or her choice to return to school, trust the environment and people around them, and ultimately trust in his or her own decision to remain in school. Graduating and completing the high school diploma is not the ultimate definition success, but rather a milestone on the journey to self-growth, agency, and seeing the many and multifaceted pathways ahead.
Additionally, faculty and staff at the Inspire Center, oriented success in similar ways to the students they work with. In fact, success as self-growth can be seen as a way in which success as personal fulfillment is witnessed by the faculty and staff. Also, success as agency can be seen as a product of success as safety and care and also as a product of success as validation. Likewise, success as multifaceted can be seen as parallel to all of the student orientations of success as it broadens the very nature of success and allows for the individual student to be seen and heard. Therefore, there were many similarities between the student and staff orientations of success and there was a striking emotional attachment to both participant group’s orientations of success. Success is emotional for both the adult students and the staff and success is something that must be earned for but is also delicate and needs continued praise and re-fueling. Both the faculty and staff and the students at the Inspire Center have re-framed the traditional ways in which success is viewed as a simple metric, end goal, or outcome to be personalized and genuinely authentic, but also grounded in the context of an environment where these orientations of success can be fostered.

Consequently, the faculty and staff at the Inspire Center show their passion for the work they do in these interviews and through their re-framing of success. These orientations also pose next steps for thinking about school structure and policy and bring me to addressing my final research question: How do the different orientations toward success shape the experience in adult education? In the next chapter, I will look even further at how the student and staff orientations of success align and complement each other, and what implications this has for school structure.
CHAPTER 6: Success Orientation Analysis, Implications, and Discussion

I have explained the purpose of this study and both the urgency and need for a study focused on an adult education program. I have also explored the literature around the high school dropout crisis, the ways in which adults find their ways back to school, and the theories that support a rationale for why there is a great number of adults without a high school diploma. I have unpacked the setting for where this study takes place and my own relationship and positionality within that setting. Also, I have walked through the stories and experiences of both the students and staff in the school in order to paint a picture of the Inspire Center and provide a thorough understanding of the context for this study. Finally, I have navigated through my data and suggested six different orientations of success, three from the student perspective and three from the faculty and staff perspective, that re-frame the way in which success is traditionally defined and understood.

Initially when I set out on this study, I was focused on better understanding what adult students sought when they returned to high school. I believed that by better understanding what the adult students wanted through their educational journey and pathway back to school, I could develop a better sense of how to retain students in their adult education program so that they both graduate and move beyond graduation. I also wanted to look at ways in which schools working with adults could ensure that the students they served were not being framed as failures or through their deficits; adult students have already faced layers of failure through multiple failed systems. However, in order to do inform and structure an adult education program, I needed to understand what success looks like, feels like, and means for adult students I also did not believe that success for adult students meant the same as success for students in traditional settings. Furthermore, as I laid out in my literature review, I did not believe that adult students aligned with the ways that traditional schools are structured nor has there been a space for their voices to be heard as we re-imagine and think about what adult schools should look like. Adult education programs serve an extremely fragile yet powerful group of students who have the ability to be
agents of their own trajectory for themselves, their children, and future generations if they are provided with skills and tools that allow them to be successful in an educational environment.

The goal of this study was therefore to uncover answers to the following questions:

1. What are the different orientations toward student success in adult education?
   a. What do non-traditional, adult students seek to achieve through enrolling in adult education opportunities?
   b. How do teachers, staff, and leadership in adult education view student success?
   c. How do the different orientations toward success shape the experience in adult education?

Thus far I have addressed most of these questions but have not yet taken the final step in examining and explaining what these new orientations of success may mean for the larger realm of adult education nor examined the implications for practice at the Inspire Center. I will therefore also more carefully interrogate the ways that student and staff orientations of success and reveal something about adult education more broadly.

In my literature review I described the ways in which success in the education system is seen as easily measurable and tangible, such as graduating from high school, being college reading, being career ready, being college and career ready, or being identified as an exceptional learner (Conley, 2007; Conley, 2012; Conley, 2013; Rothman, 2012; Rumberger, 2001; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). These orientations of success describe a way in which the US education creates a space in which student achieve an intended outcome, goal, and are prepared for moving into their next steps of college or career journeys. I have referred to these as the traditional orientations of success and what traditional schools are framed around in order to generate successful student outcomes and how traditional schools are measured. However, as we know, and as I have explained through my literature review, society has structures in play that create ways in which not all students are ever able to meet these traditional orientations of success (Bourdieu, 2010; Valencia, 1997). Therefore, we find ourselves with a great number of adults attempting to maintain and sustain in society without their high school diploma and thus
attempting to navigate their own pathways. Adults, however, have a different orientation toward the future, and a different relationship with the educational institutions they move through. The adult students I encountered craved a space to share their experiences; and through their natural storytelling that space was built for feelings and allowed emotions to resonate and surface (Whitty, 2002). The student interviews showed a great alignment to success as a feeling and layered within many emotions. The interviews and the findings make me wonder about the emotional connection to success and how these adults have overcome previous experiences of failure.

Success for adult students is not simply a metric of readiness, it is a feeling and a way of being. Success for adult students is being able to navigate the strong force field of positive and negative forces to find that balance where perseverance and resilience (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999; Comings, 2007). Unlike younger students, for whom the future may feel like an abstract and distant destination, adult students carry their experiences from life with them, and “success” is a more active decision to return to a learning environment. As such, although many factors are involved in motivating such students to satisfy their needs to feel successful; to feel proud; to feel as though they have earned something, they were always capable of doing, adult education is also always about agency (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Douglah, 1970). These students are not simply moving on to the next thing but are actively reflecting on their life path and making a choice. This lends success for adult students a great urgency, and a palpable sense of power that seems to be less prevalent among younger, traditional students. I had expected that there would have been more difference in success orientations with the students in various age groups and categories. However, I found that adult students of all ages resonated with similar themes and orientations of success and that it was not their age that differentiated them, but rather their age that allowed them to re-frame success and explain their feelings of success through a lens of shared, lived experience. I found that adult students needed a school environment that was founded on safety and care. This was essential for students to find success and feel successful. In fact, success in the re-framed orientations was only possible when students felt mentally and
physically safe and cared for. Comfort promoted success. A safe and nurturing environment is a precondition for and an aspect of success and reflected an asset-based perspective on students. In terms of the first theme, personal fulfillment, agency was expressed in the sense that students felt self-directed – motivated by a desire to achieve something for themselves. The second theme, validation, includes an active reflection on one’s life path and the ways one is positioned in the world. Validation is an act of resistance – a reclaiming the story that others have told about you, as a story you tell about yourself.

As with the students, staff also showed a nuanced understanding of success that was less connected to goal attainment. Success, for staff, was also steeped in emotion, but unlike the student participants, staff participants more closely aligned it with outcomes in the future. When staff participants were provided a space to share their experiences with their students and their own beliefs around success for adult students, they re-framed success through milestones of growth, agency, and action. Additionally, success was re-framed first from upholding and embracing a culture of success that was framed around the idea of varied outcomes. This brought staff from an overly generalized definition of success to a more individualized and also wider understanding and belief of success. Faculty and staff at the Inspire Center seemingly embraced the idea that there are varied outcomes of success and not one definition of success defines all. Like the students, staff also saw success in a much broader view and with a greater autonomy to develop one’s own success as a result of committing to a choice and pushing through. In many ways, the themes that emerged from staff interviews paralleled the students’ themes. For example, the theme of self-growth is similar to personal fulfillment but highlights the potential for change and transformation. The idea about staff playing a supportive role and creating an environment of safety and care is a precondition of success parallels the students’ concerns about a caring and safe environment. Also, staff actively reflected on ways that students’ choices (or agency) deeply shape their success. Again, staff recognized the diverse ways that success is made manifest in the lives of these students. But what is to be learned from these parallels and alignments, that cross students and staff alike?
Accommodating Various Orientations of Success in Adult Education

Teachers and Staff at Inspire Center naturally reject deficit orientations and embrace asset-based ones, even if they are not familiar with these terms. They focus on the assets of the students as opposed to their deficits, students who are often viewed by their deficits only now become free to be seen in a light that promotes them and embraces them. As we have seen in the stories from the students, they come to the Inspire Center knowing they need something, but they are not stuck in feeling hopeless or broken, as the environment provides a space where they can harness their strengths, tap into their potential, and unlock their mind and move into new opportunities. Weiner (2006) suggests that a way to combat deficit-based theory is we can, “…acknowledge deficit explanations and examine them critically” (p. 43). Thus, staff at the Inspire Center, even if unintentionally so, are questioning and pushing back on deficit theory and promoting a new frame through a strengths-based mindset.

Additionally, Garcia and Guerra (2004) suggest that schools and educators place the problem on the student and not the school structures, practices, or outcomes. As a result, students are put in a deficit point of view where they are the reason for their failure. At the Inspire Center, students are not viewed from their deficits, but rather the school model is focused on supporting students to find their strengths and their assets and promote those. The very model of the Inspire Center responds to the structures that did not work before and works to minimize any sign or talk of deficit. Students at the Inspire Center have lived a life where they have been seen as a product of their deficits, and thus they are finding success at the Inspire Center because this is not the school’s structure or approach or the staff’s mindset.

Social reproduction theory provides an explanation for why students at the Inspire Center have not succeeded in the traditional education system – but by actively reflecting on those structural challenges, and by building a community that embraces students for where they are in their life there is a potential for challenging reproduction. Students at the Inspire Center are striving, and meeting success and staff are also seeing and feeling this very success too. There is not a deep, internalize sense of failure nor is there an over emphasis on the structural barriers.
Rather, the Inspire Center, students and staff have created a place where success is re-defined and re-oriented to then show what is possible when systemic disbelief is removed and acceptance, hope, and innovation and driving belief and action. The more challenging question, which is beyond the scope of this study, is the extent to which success at Inspire Center will extend to other aspects of the students’ lives. But the possibility remains.

With social reproduction in mind, the Inspire Center is working to provide a space where their students can see agency as a way beyond the cycle of social reproduction. The Inspire Center is providing students with tools to navigate and negotiate in the very society that held their students back. Furthermore, the Inspire Center provides a glance into what dismantling social reproduction can look like when it is recognized and then moved beyond. In a school where students have been the product of social control and the continued attempt to keep them oppressed, the students and the staff have no choice but to create and generate agency and empowerment to find validation and hopes of autonomy. Again, what is beyond the scope of the study is what this looks like beyond gradation for the students at the Inspire Center and actual implementation into day to day life and in the society and community where the students live.

Additionally, by viewing success with these new orientations, it is clear that success feeds into how inequality is reproduced through social reproduction theory and then acted on through deficit-based thinking. The emphasis on success only through the traditional path and in traditional institutions deeply reinforces the notion that the dominant ways of doing are both just and natural. These failures can become internalized and lead to further self-destruction and lack of hope. When we think about deficit-based thinking, we turn to how students who have failed in the traditional orientations of success are viewed. Students are viewed as inadequate and it is not the system that ever gets the blame. Thus, adult education can be seen as an attempt to disrupt social reproduction, to build alternative institutions that shift the narrative from deficit-based thinking to asset-based thinking. As is clear from the interviews and the stories of the students and staff you met in earlier chapters, adult students and the staff that work with them are powerful voices of change, resiliency, and optimism.
Adult students may carry a shadow of failure with them, but what this study has shown is that they are not defined by this failure and they have much more to give and tap into once they find an environment that allows them to feel cared for, safe, and actively engaged. Furthermore, this study has highlighted that the staff who work in adult programs are hungry to re-create and disrupt the narrative that exists for their current students. This, in many ways, suggests that adult education programs are attempting to flip the meaning of success by specifically aiming for those that the systems classified as failing. At the Inspire Center, students and staff presented new ways for success to be viewed and oriented and this in turn re-framed the way in which we understand success for adult students. Based on this, I want to further explore and investigate how adult education programs are working to flip the script and disrupt the narrative for how we view success, how we understand success, and how we view adult students returning to school. Therefore, despite the shadow of social reproduction and deficit-based thinking, the study provides hope that there are education programs re-framing the ways in which success is thought about to generate new outcomes for the students they serve. Thus, this brings to surface many questions. How are these re-framed orientations of success being applied at schools like the Inspire Center? How does society perceive adult education programs within these new re-framed orientations of success? Also, what other orientations of success are at work in adult education programs that are supporting successful outcomes for the students they serve?

As such and guided by Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) appreciative inquiry framework and utilizing the orientations of success that came from the student and staff interviews, I will now move into the dream phase of crafting adult education programs that align with these very orientations of success. According to Ryan et. al., (1999), appreciative inquiry is a process of reflecting and both dreaming and envision the ideal organization or in this case school. Thus, using the ideas and narratives of both the students and staff at the Inspire Center, I will set forth some key components of adult education programs that come from their experiences here and have yielded great success in the new frames of success. Additionally, by doing this I will
address the final research question: How do the different orientations toward success shape the experience in adult education?

Given what I have found in the data and throughout this study, based on the orientations of success for adult students I have presented I recommend that adult education programs include and pay close attention to the following criteria:

1. Focus on strong relationships with students and staff and discussion
2. Infrastructure that promotes celebration for student growth and progress
3. Certification pathways and planning for next steps after graduation
4. School staff that aligns with the mission and vision of adult education

With these four recommendations put into place, I believe that adult education programs will work to meet the orientations of success for the very students they serve and see outcomes for their students. Additionally, these give recommendations are derived from the very orientations of success that both students and staff in the Inspire Center understand as success. Next, I will align each orientation of success with the various recommendations above that fit or match each orientation of success.

When students acknowledged the need for a culture of safety and comfort, they were focusing on uplifting the need to feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment and this feeling of safety and comfort derives from the way in which the school is staffed and modeled. The school must focus on who they hire for their staff and guide all hiring decisions with a commitment to the mission and vision of the school. Staff that work in adult education programs must want to be there and commit to building a culture of safety and comfort in the school. Additionally, the school should focus on how the staff engages with students at all times and prioritize the creation of a positive and safe community. Safety, care, and comfort are the basic necessities to ensure adult students can find success in adult education programs and schools. When the student feels safe, cared for, and comfortable, success is then not only possible, it becomes a reality.
Next, when students were oriented toward success as personal fulfillment, they were associating success with the feeling of being accomplished and the feeling of truly preserving. Adult education programs can support this orientation of success in many ways. With this, students need opportunities beyond graduations and verbal praise to be appreciated and celebrated by their school staff and peers. Additionally, students need opportunities in the school space to see and feel their own fulfillment. These moments of recognition must be consistent and allow for students to be fueled by their own fulfillment and feel successful. Some examples of ways to do this are having awards ceremonies at the end of each academic term to celebrate student achievements. Additionally, in classrooms and with coaches, staff can review student progress reports and discuss goals, barriers, and next steps. In the hallways, all staff can focus on ensuring they recognize and highlight students and their achievements, even if it is for something small. Finally, there must be a focus on celebrating resilience and the ability of students to be resilient and show this resilience.

Finally, when students were oriented toward success as validation, they were associating success as needing constant opportunities to commit to their decision to return to school and remain engaged in school. Adult education programs can support this orientation of success by creating a space where students can share their stories with each other and with staff. The curriculum in the classrooms can be designed with a focus on sharing experiences and validating those experiences and the current choice to be here at the school. The school can have structured meetings with the students and coaches to continually re-commit and re-evaluate one’s choice and current place in life. Additionally, in these meetings, discussions around next steps can take place to begin having the students think about tangible next steps after graduation. These conversations and planning meetings must be instilled in the structure of the school. There must be a focus on validating one’s choice to return and then continually re-committing to this choice and the power of that choice. Additionally, during any new student orientation programming, there can be a student panel where students are given the opportunity
to share their experiences and their stories with new students who are embarking on the journey as well.

First, when staff acknowledged a culture of varied outcomes and a culture of success built upon their premise, they were accepting success as variety and open-ended. In fact, staff recognized there was not a one orientation that fits all definition of success. As such, the school can uphold this orientation of success by first allowing for its mission and vision to aligning with this orientation. Next, the school can incorporate multiple pathways for students to engage in during their time at the school. For example, the school can incorporate certification classes and college classes in their curriculum that are credit-based classes and allow students to move into their next steps while still in the program. The school must uphold all pathways as equally critical and important and equally successful. The staff that the school hires must align with the mission and vision of the school and truly believe in a culture of varied outcomes, which generates success. This in turn empowers staff to commit to and carry out a school culture that embodies and embraces success in multiple forms and outcomes.

When staff were oriented toward success as self-growth, they, like the students were upholding the need to have school structures where growth is seen and felt. Schools can support this orientation of success by providing opportunities where students can show moments of growth through academic and personal achievements. Additionally, the staff at the school must commit to supporting the importance of recognizing growth. There must be transparent conversations about student growth and staff structures that allow for these conversations to take place. Also, staff need opportunities to re-commit to the mission and vision of their school and also see this student growth. For example, having two graduation ceremonies throughout a school year allows for staff to re-commit to their mission and vision and fuels them and also the students.

When staff were oriented toward success as agency, they were asking for an opportunity for students to learn about their voice and apply their voice. Additionally, staff were acknowledging the importance of uplifting the student voice and explicitly connecting education to
agency. The adult education program can support this orientation of success by allowing for a curriculum that utilizes the world around the school and the very community the school is located in. The curriculum, learning, and experiences in the school should be focused on real life application. Additionally, there should be a great amount of experiential moments in the school for its students, such as panels, speakers, trips outside of the school building, and actively engaging the adult students in active citizenship. The location of the school can also support this orientation of success, and the school should think about its location relative to the community it serves and who the students can interact with each day. There must be a strong connection between education and the increased opportunities and also how one navigates those opportunities.

Consequently, there are several critical pieces of school structure that adult education programs can employ to support these six orientations of success. In turn, this will allow adult students to re-orient and re-frame success and generate further success in both the school and beyond. Adult education programs cannot continue to carry out the same structures or beliefs that traditional schools employ. If so, then the continual cycle of high school dropouts will take place, but in an adult school context. Thus, adult schools must truly understand the unique student population they face, the factors at play that have caused them to be where they are and create a place where they can be successful.

Conclusion

As explained and examined throughout this study, adult education programs are critically important in society and provide a truly transformational opportunity for the students they serve. By their very nature, they challenge social reproduction in that they can provide alternative paths for those for whom the dominant one did not work out. The different orientations of success shape the experience in adult education for both the adult students and the staff. Ultimately, the way in which success is oriented provides the context for how students and staff operate and continue to engage in their work inside the adult education space.
By better understanding how success is oriented in adult education programs, there can be a stronger focus on developing schools that align to these orientations and also promote them. Both students and staff in these schools need to feel guided by these orientations of success, which are based on what they bring to the table (assets) rather than what they lack (deficits). Additionally, the orientations of success carry the students forward in whatever next steps they move into and as such, this supports them in their continued journey.

So much of the study was founded in the idea that adult students have been failed repeatedly by the systems that serve them and society. And social reproduction theory suggests that this is an inequality built into the way that we structure schooling. But if we can begin to re-frame the ways in which success is oriented in institutions and truly create adult education programs that support them, then not only will we serve our adult students, but we may also challenge enduring features of inequality in our world. This in turn would have great benefits for society as a whole and also empower others to re-think the ways in which success is seen, felt, and witnessed in other systems and institutions. And although a great deal more of research and labor would be needed to achieve such a thing, it would be well worth the effort.

Now, what does it look like when a school implements these re-framed orientations of success in an adult education program? During my time thus far as the School Director of the Inspire Center, I have been working to lead a school that upholds the idea that success must be viewed from different orientations to generate positive outcomes for its students. I constantly say to my Inspire Center team that if our school ever begins to feel like an experience our students have had, they will not find success. It must feel different and we must approach their experience from new perspectives and angles. I have worked to bring on new staff who share the same commitment, passion, and purpose for their work that was shared by staff members in the study. Additionally, we focus on understanding what our students need to be successful. We view students from a strengths-based approach and work tirelessly to foster an environment where students feel safe, cared for, and ready to embrace a learning experience.
At the Inspire Center, students have the opportunity to become Student Ambassadors, which is where they can take a leadership role and help form their own community and be a voice of change. We also have awards ceremonies every eight weeks where we celebrate the growth, progress, and accomplishments of students in their academic, professional, and personal achievements and perseverance. Additionally, we celebrate our staff. Every four weeks we uplift our staff along our core values and acknowledge the tremendous work that staff do each day.

As a Leadership Team, we look at school data every four weeks and make adjustments and course corrections where needed to move us in the right direction of student outcomes. We embrace an understanding that success is varied, and that success is built around a culture of varied outcomes is critical. Success looks different for each student and there is no further explanation needed. We also embrace a culture that respects student assets, upholds restorative justice practices and works to approach any situation from the student perspective and context. We honor all voices and create a space where students and staff feel their voice is heard. The re-framed orientations of success guide our staff in working with our students and constantly reflecting on the community we call home. If we want students who have not found success in previous education experiences to truly find success and become agents of change, then we must commit to viewing success from different orientations and committing to those orientations in the structures we create. This is our guiding philosophy.
Appendix A

Student Demographics at the Inspire Center

Table 5

*Inspire Center Student Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students on roster</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as female</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as male</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as Black</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as White</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as Two or More Races</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Island</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as Asian</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students who identify as Latino</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The table shows the student demographics at the Inspire Center during the time of the study, which was school year 2017-2018.

Table 6

*Student Age Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students on roster</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of students who are under 18 years old</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of students between 18-21 years old</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of students between 22-29 years old</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students between 30-39 years old</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students between 40-49 years old</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students 50+ years old</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The table shows the student demographics at the Inspire Center during the time of the study, which was school year 2017-2018.
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
University of Pennsylvania ♦ Philadelphia, PA

You have been selected a voluntary participant in my dissertation study. Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

**Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students, staff, and leadership in an adult education program to inform others about a new adult education model. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to better understand the unique space adult education programs operate in within the larger framework of education, and understand what makes adult education programs and schools a unique experience and how these programs functions to achieve student success and success of its mission. Finally, the purpose of this study is to reflect on the program model of an adult education program and view various perspectives and experiences within the organization to better understand individuals’ experiences.

**What you will do in this research:** If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in individual interviews, focus groups, and a written response. You will be asked several questions. Some of them will be about your experience at your current adult education school. Others will be about your perception and ideas around student success and the school’s mission and vision. All interviews will be audio recorded and you will not be asked to state your name on the recording.

**Time required:** The data collection process will take place over 1-3 months. All interviews and focus groups will be scheduled at a time that accommodates your needs. Individual interview will take approximately 1-2 hours. Focus groups will take approximately 1-2 hours. The written response/graphic response, which you will complete during the interview, will take no longer than 30 minutes. You will also can continue the written response/graphic outside of the interview time frame. You will receive email and phone communication about the scheduled times of the interviews and focus groups, as well as a calendar of important dates for the study.

**Risks:** Some of the questions may cause some deep personal reflection. However, no risks are anticipated because of this study.

**Benefits:** This is a chance for you to tell your story about your experiences concerning education and specifically adult education. Additionally, this is a chance for you to reflect on your experiences as a member of the adult education community, while also synthesizing the work you have been a part of since you have been a member of the adult education community.

**Confidentiality:** Your responses to interview questions, focus group questions, and the written task will be kept confidential. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. You will be given the chance to create a pseudo name, which will be used throughout the study. Anyone who helps me transcribe responses will only know you by this pseudo name. All recordings and transcriptions will be kept in a secured, password protected folder on my computer. The recording will be
erased when my dissertation has been accepted and completed. The transcript, without your name and with the pseudo name only, will be kept until the research and dissertation is complete.

The data you provide me through the interviews, focus groups, and written responses will be used for my dissertation, and may be used as the basis for articles or presentations in the future. I will never use your name or information that would identify you in any publications or presentations. Again, only your pseudo name would be used in any event. Additionally, all participants will be protected through the University of Pennsylvania’s IRB process. The IRB process ensures that all research methods and practices are ethical and ensure the safety of all research participants.

**Participation and withdrawal:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. There is no compensation for this study, as it is completely voluntary. You may withdraw by informing me, the researcher, that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). You may skip any question during the interview but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

**To Contact the Researcher:** If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact the researcher, Chelsea Kirk at cheslea.j.kirk@gmail.com. You may also contact the faculty member from the University of Pennsylvania who is supervising this work: Dr. Alex Posecznick at alpos@upenn.edu.

Whom to contact about your rights in this research, for questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that are not being addressed by the researcher, or research-related harm: University of Pennsylvania, Institutional Review Board at: 3800 Spruce Street, First Floor, Room 151, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Phone: 215-573-2540. Email: irb@pobox.upenn.edu.

**Agreement:**
The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _________________________

Name (print): _________________________
Appendix C

Selection Criteria

Table 7

Selection Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inspire Center Student Participants</th>
<th>Inspire Center Staff Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection Criteria:</td>
<td>Selection Criteria:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Must have completed at least 1 full term as a student at The Inspire Center by the time of the study</td>
<td>• Must have completed at least 1 full term employed as a staff member at The Inspire Center by the time of the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Must currently be enrolled on The Inspire Center roster at the time of the study</td>
<td>• Must currently be employed by The Inspire Center at the time of the study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selection Details:

- Students who fit the above criteria, broken down into three age group categories:
  - 22-29 years old (Early-Career)
  - 30-49 years old (Mid-Career)
  - 50+ years old (Post-Career)
- 16 students selected from each age group category (at least 12 for the study from each age group, the others as backups in case a participant does not want to be in the study and/or chooses to no longer be in the study)

Selection Details:

- At least 1 staff identified from each of The Inspire Center teams listed below:
  - Leadership Team
  - STEM Team
  - Humanities Team
  - Special Populations Team
  - Academic Success Coaching Team
  - Office of Operations and Enrollment Team

Note: The table outlines the selection criteria for the study. There were a total of 47 participants in the study.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

For Student Participants:
1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What was your educational experience like before attending The Inspire Center?
3. Why did you return to school? How did you end up enrolling in The Inspire Center in particular?
4. What are your beliefs as a student at The Inspire Center?
5. What do you like best and appreciate most about The Inspire Center?
6. What have been some obstacles that you have faced as a student at The Inspire Center?
7. Have you ever considered dropping out? How did you overcome these barriers?
8. How would you describe The Inspire Center to someone who has never heard of it?
9. How would you describe your experience at The Inspire Center? Has it changed over time? Can you give 1-2 examples?
10. Given where Inspire Center students are in their lives, what do you think it means to be successful?
11. Imagine your life after The Inspire Center. What are you doing? Do you feel like you are being prepared for that life? Why or why not?
12. If you could change anything about The Inspire Center, what would that be? Why?
13. What would you describe as the guiding principles of The Inspire Center? Why?
14. What do you think the teachers and staff would like to see from the students at The Inspire Center? How do you know?
15. Now, on an 8.5x11 piece of paper, draw or write your response to the following question: How is The Inspire Center set up to support student success? Create a visual that shows how you understand the way The Inspire Center supports its students to be successful.
   a. Describe your image. Walk me through it and describe it to me.
   b. How is your image organized? Why?
   c. What did you consider when making this image? Why?
   d. What role do students play in this image?
16. What else would you like me to know?

For Staff Participants:
1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What was your professional experience like before joining the staff at The Inspire Center?
3. How and why did you end up joining the staff team at The Inspire Center?
4. What are your beliefs about students at The Inspire Center?
5. What do you like best and appreciate most about The Inspire Center?
6. How would you describe The Inspire Center to someone who has never heard of it?
7. How would you describe your experience at The Inspire Center? Has it changed over time? Can you give 1-2 examples?
8. Given where Inspire Center students are in their lives, what do you think it means to be successful?
9. What are some obstacles that you see the students face at The Inspire Center?
10. What policies or structures do you think are in place to help support the students?
11. Given where Inspire Center students are in their lives, what do you think it means to be successful?
12. If you could change anything about The Inspire Center, what would that be? Why?
13. What would you describe as the guiding principles of The Inspire Center? Why? Are these principles implemented in practice?
14. What do you think students come to The Inspire Center hoping to achieve? Why?
15. Now, on an 8.5x11 piece of paper, draw or write your response to the following question: How is The Inspire Center set up to support student success? Create a visual that shows how you understand the way The Inspire Center supports its students to be successful.
   a. Describe your image. Walk me through it and describe it to me.
   b. How is your image organized? Why?
   c. What did you consider when making this image? Why?
   d. What role do students play in this image?
16. What else would you like me to know?
## Appendix E

### Code Tables

Table 8

**Code Tables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orientations of success</strong></td>
<td>Definitions of what success is, what success looks like, and how success is oriented.</td>
<td>OS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defining success – What is success?</strong></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Success is defined by education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education – graduation</td>
<td>Education – graduation</td>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Success is defined by high school graduation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education – college</td>
<td>Education – college</td>
<td>Ec</td>
<td>Success is defined by going to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Success is defined by having a career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good life</td>
<td>Good life</td>
<td>GL</td>
<td>Success is defined as having a good and stable life</td>
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<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Success is defined as trying new things you haven’t tried before</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Traits associated with success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Success is defined by having power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Achieving and completing something you haven’t done before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Success is about having trust in the people who are there for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Success is about putting effort towards your goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Success is about being motivated to do something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Success is about not giving up on yourself and pushing beyond barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Success is having hope that you can achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td>Mi</td>
<td>Success is about having a positive mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Success</td>
<td>Participants’ explanation of what success looks like at The Inspire Center.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does success look like?</td>
<td>ES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Particular traits or activities that students see in each other or staff see in students that they think are associated with success in this space]</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Attending school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Setting goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Putting forth effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td>Mi</td>
<td>Positive mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Earning your diploma</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences</th>
<th>Student and staff experiences in an adult education program. How these experiences are described.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences in adult education –</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the experiences of students and staff in an adult education program?</td>
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<td>Things done well</td>
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<td>Traits that the school and staff have</td>
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<td>Supportive staff</td>
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<td>Care</td>
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<td>Organization</td>
<td>O</td>
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<td>Potential</td>
<td>Po</td>
</tr>
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<td>Category</td>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
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<td>Community/Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Pu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-judgmental</td>
<td>J</td>
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| Effective              | Ef           | Effective programmig at The Inspire Center                                  

186
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Learning at The Inspire Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>Tutoring at The Inspire Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvements</td>
<td>Things that the school can do better to promote student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies</td>
<td>Stricter policies around the young kids and noisy students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>More support, especially SPED and ELL students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>Add more events and activities, such as prom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterschool programs</td>
<td>Add more after school programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaches</td>
<td>Add more academic success coaches</td>
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<td>Facilities</td>
<td>Cleaner bathrooms, especially the men's bathroom</td>
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<td>Policies – Staff only</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
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<td>Accountability</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
<td>Co</td>
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<td>Attendance</td>
<td>At</td>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>Awards</td>
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<td>Staff</td>
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<td>Daycare</td>
<td>D</td>
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</table>

*Note:* The table outlines the codes used in this study and the code description, code, and code definition.
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