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This study examines the educational experiences of African American adult learners who have described their journey through higher education as transformative; particularly, learners who have attended or are attending community college. This study looks at how transformation helps move minority learners towards academic achievement and personal empowerment. The research attempted to answer the following three questions: 1) How do adult African American learners who are attending or have attended community college define their transformation within the context of transformative learning?, 2) What are the sociocultural, spiritual, and empowerment dimensions of transformative learning for this population?, and 3) What factors within this transformative experience contributed to what African American adult learners define as personal growth and achievement/success?

As part of this phenomenological narrative study, data was collected primarily through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with five, adult, African American learners, including three females and two males. Each participant described experiencing: a life change through a major event or crisis, an increase in cultural consciousness, an increase in spiritual evolution, and a stronger sense of purpose in life due to their community college learning.

A conceptual framework that incorporates transformative learning, critical race and spirituality theories was used to analyze the learners' narratives. Data show that

participants developed an overwhelming sense of empowerment while going through their educational journey that helped them develop into academically, socially, and emotionally prepared individuals ready to face an unjust society.

This study suggests that understanding the journey of African American adult learners can help educational leaders improve the transfer, retention, and graduation rates of this student population. These learners' journeys can also help educators and researchers better appreciate the social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of transformative learning at the community college level.

EVOLUTION OF THE SOUL: THE TRANSFORMATIVE CONNECTION
BETWEEN CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS, SPIRITUALITY,
AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT FOR AFRICAN
AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ADULT LEARNERS

By

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I could say that, first and foremost, some things aren't even about education. It's about the recognition of who you are. Now education, per se, can and does help in this case because you're learning. I'm learning about the Greeks and those who were before the Greeks and who they got their education from. That's ancestral. My life didn't start with the Europeans or the Greeks. The Chinese man's life didn't start with Europe. It started with his ancestors so when you embrace that and you study that it enhances whatever education you're involved in. I think it enhances your education. But education, for some, is about finding out who they are. This school could very well help a student find his blackness or his soul, you know. So you don't negate it [education] no matter what. I think one thing enhances and helps the other (Christopher, 58-year old community college student, father, "Doc" as he is called, and former drug addict).

Many African American community college adult learners such as Christopher have chosen to embark on an academic journey after years of absence from the classroom. This educational *ride* symbolizes the choice to fight against the systemic tide that keeps marginalized groups from achieving beyond what is possible. This is a study of African American adult learners who have experienced personal transformation as a result of their pursuit of higher education. Some participants have survived illness and addiction, some have dealt with a past life of crime, some are recovering from abuse and terrible loss, and some just want a better life. One common thread is that these participants all believe that they have been empowered as a result of their educational journey.

This study is a reflection of my own personal and academic transformation. I was raised as a "military brat" but I came from a background of family dysfunction that

included alcoholism and addiction, constant financial struggles, and verbal abuse. Despite my personal circumstances, I successfully earned both a bachelor's and master's degree while working and supporting myself financially. But my experiences were not without serious and painful struggles. During my academic journey, I encountered many barriers (self-induced, situational, and institutional) that impacted my pursuit of higher education. There was even a point where I was unable to continue my undergraduate studies due to my lack of financial resources and support. Five and a half years later, I achieved my goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Sadly, even with the effort and resolve that I put into making this happen, I felt very detached to my undergraduate education experience.

Nearly fifteen years later, with an eleven year career in advertising under my belt, I decided to return back to the classroom to pursue my dream of teaching. I attended a predominantly white four-year institution in Colorado and was the only African American student enrolled in that year's cohort. At the same time, I attended a local community college to complete content coursework that I needed for my teaching license. This time around, my journey into higher education and my connection to this community college was significant and even emotional. While I struggled financially and culturally at the four-year institution as the sole African American student in the particular program, I connected fully to the community college environment. My eyes were also opened wide to the importance of community college institutions for learners of color like myself. I moved from just taking one or two courses at the community college that I needed for my teaching degree to taking more courses because I enjoyed my learning experience.

My community college instructors ranged from a proud Chicano professor who had taught Latino/Latina literature at this particular two-year institution for many years, to a young self-proclaimed Wicca (someone whose religious practice involves nature worship and/or witchcraft) who loved literature and was working on her Ph.D. while teaching part-time. As a by-product of the community college's open access policy, student populations also varied in diversity, background and life experience. The students ranged in age from recent high school graduates to elderly students entering higher education for the first time. This was a place where a new immigrant to the U.S. sat in the same basic skills classroom as a 50-year old displaced worker. Corporate executives and potential doctorate students learned in the same space as young men and women with prison records who were looking to change their lives through education. I saw and experienced the possibilities that this type of institution could provide. There seemed to be a vision of achievement for underserved and minority students within this institution. This was something that was sorely lacking in my experiences at the four-year institution. There was also acknowledgement of the diverse student population that attended this community college. This acknowledgement could be seen in the resources and academic support that were available to the large number of Latino, international, and African American students, the social activities offered, and most importantly, in the significant number of minority educators and administrators teaching and working within the institution. My connection to community college institutions moved from me attending as a part-time student to me fully committing to two-year institutions as an adult educator.

As I saw in my own academic experiences, the community college offered an environment in which the students that I taught saw that success and achievement were possible. I heard students talk about their own personal growth and change as they moved through their academic journey. They did not understand this change and neither did I, but it was authentic. I know from my own academic experience that transformation—whether it be spiritual, cultural, or personal – can change one’s view of the world and it can result from educational experiences beyond classroom content and instructional methods. Environment and “what is possible” can also prompt self-empowerment. Thus, a goal of my study is to provide examples of transformation and change for adult learners of color within two-year institutions.

This phenomenological narrative study captures the educational experiences of five, African American, adult learners who have described their journeys through community college as life-changing. This study explores how transformation and the transformative learning experience have helped move these adult learners of color towards academic achievement and personal growth. In addition, this study, which is informed by a culturally relevant conceptual framework, specifically focuses on the experiences of African American adult learners as a group that has essentially been ignored by the educational research community. This study is a vehicle through which these participants shared their educational stories. The interpretation of these stories through *restorying* may offer valuable information and insight to other students of color as they journey through higher education. When researchers restory, they gather the story, analyze the story for key elements, sequencing and patterns, and finally, rewrite

and retell the story making sure to convey what the subject/individual has said (Creswell, 2005). I have done this work, and, in doing so, I hope to give voice to the experiences of African American adult learners in community colleges.

Community college leaders are realizing that the strides that have been made in student of color and nontraditional student enrollment are good but not good enough. With this research study, I hope to bring forth a better understanding of how the phenomenon of adult transformative learning can be a resource used to strengthen and increase this population's academic achievement at the community college level. In my view, the primary result of transformative learning is that unrepresented student populations develop into academically, socially, and emotionally prepared individuals ready to face an unjust society. Acquiring such understanding can then help educators and academic leaders improve this student population's transfer rates to four-year institutions and increase their retention and graduation rates.

Statement of the Problem

In the last 20 years, the United States has seen triple digit increases in non-traditional student enrollment at nation's colleges and universities (McKeachie, 2002). In 2000, 73 percent of total undergraduate enrollment was considered in some way non-traditional (Philibert, et al., 2008). Who is the non-traditional student? There are varying definitions. Philiberts, Allen, and Elleven (2008) define non-traditional students as individuals who fall into one of the following categories: 1) has delayed enrollment following high school graduation, 2) is a part-time student, 3) works 35 hours or more per

week while enrolled in college, 4) is considered financially independent under financial aid qualification guidelines, and 5) is a single parent (p. 2).

Non-traditional students within higher education are also defined as adults beyond traditional school age (25 years of age and older), ethnic minorities, women with dependent children, underprepared students, and other groups who have historically been underrepresented in postsecondary education (ERIC Thesaurus, n.d.).

In 2000-2001, women accounted for more than half (59 percent) of the total minority college population (Harvey, 2003). Women make up the majority of college students for each racial/ethnic group in most cases. African American women remain much more likely than their male counterparts to participate in higher education. For instance, as the American Council of Education (ACE) reported, 37 percent of African-American men were enrolled in college, compared with 42 percent of African-American women during the 2000-2001 academic year. Enrollment rates for Latino students show an opposite trend. Latino males remained at 31 percent (Harvey, 2003).

In addition, students who are beyond the traditional age of 25 now make up the majority of the higher education population (McKeachie, 2002). Part-time enrollment of this population reached a high of approximately 64 percent of the total community college enrollment in 1997. Older students (25 years and older) make up a great percentage of part-time enrollees than full-time enrollees (Bryant, 2001). As stated by Bryant (2001), "Clearly, the acceptance of part-time enrollment at the two-year college allows for those with job or family constraints to enroll in college" (p. 78). That is why

community colleges have become one of the fastest growing academic options for non-traditional student populations.

As many adult learners of color continue to pursue higher education at a greater rate, more and more of these students are gravitating towards two-year community college institutions as their first academic alternative. The decision to pursue higher education, despite personal odds, can become a tool for self-reflection, transformation, and empowerment for many underrepresented student populations. By being armed with a community college education, some students of color have achieved beyond what is expected by society. The rate of success for some minority community college populations, however, continues to diminish each year even as more students of color enter higher education. For instance, many African American students continue to experience decreasing retention, course completion, course passing, and college transfer rates at the community college level. African American students currently earn degrees at a ratio of one student to every two White students and one student to every three Asian students. Furthermore, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans students are more likely to enroll in two-year institutions and less likely to move to four-year colleges and universities (Swail, Redd, & Perma, 2003). Higher education leaders have tried to find ways to address the needs of a growing diverse student population, but these lower rates of academic achievement and retention among traditionally underrepresented students indicate that educational institutions such as community colleges have not been successful in serving students of color.

In light of these disturbing statistics, how do we account for the students who are succeeding? As reported by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, there are more than two million African American students enrolled in U.S. bachelor's degree programs, graduate degree programs, and two-year community colleges combined (Anonymous, 2007a). African Americans have also progressed in the attainment of two-year associate's degrees. In 2005, nearly 82,000 African American students were awarded two-year degrees (Anonymous, 2007a).

What is it that contributes to the persistence of some students of color in community colleges—despite the odds against them? Individuals will always bring their own perspectives, their own differences, and, most importantly, their own histories to the table. These factors will, inevitably, intersect with any type of experience a student will go through during their journey towards education, so it is imperative to examine what these factors are in order to understand what this experience looks like for adult students of color.

As stated by Martin (2004), cultural context can create physical, psychological, and sociocultural “distance” between and among learners that will eventually exacerbate the continual barriers that exist in higher education for students of color. By examining how students of color experience learning at the community college level, and by better understanding the social, cultural, political, and historical factors that impact these learning experiences, I hope to demonstrate how transformation and self empowerment can help this population realize greater academic success within today's community college institutions. It is important that educational leaders within these institutions

understand the background and insight that many minority students bring with them as they journey through higher education.

Research Questions

To enhance educators' understanding of how African American adult learners define their transformative learning, I examined the experiences of five, African American, adult learners who are attending or have attended community colleges, including three females and two males. The learners all described their journey through community college as life-changing. I also looked at how transformation helps move students of color towards their academic and personal goals. Specifically, I attempted to answer the following three research questions:

- 1) How do adult African American learners who are attending or have attended community college define their own transformation within the context of transformative learning?
- 2) What are the sociocultural, spiritual, and empowerment dimensions of transformative learning within this population?
- 3) What factors within this transformative experience contributed to what African American adult learners define as personal growth and achievement/success?

This study revealed that African American adult learners' academic journey takes on a cultural, spiritual, and reflective context that has not been clearly addressed in the educational literature. Through change and transformation, these community college students of color have been able to see themselves beyond the two-year institutions in which they are enrolled. As these students realized and embrace their own academic

potential, they began to find purpose in their learning experience. This change or transformative experience helped them successfully move towards the personal and academic goals they set for themselves.

Overview of the Literature

Literature related to adult learner enrollment (Hatfield, 2003), student of color retention and program completion (Dowd, 2007; de los Santos and Milliron, 2004; Greene et al., 2008), and the community college and its historical and sociopolitical constructs (Shaw et al., 1999; Cohen and Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 2001; Dowd, 2007) informed the study. The literature suggests that the rise in adult student enrollment at the community college level is a strong indicator that two-year academic institutions have become especially important to non-traditional students interested in pursuing higher education.

Why are community colleges so important for students of color? Researchers de los Santos and Milliron (2004) explain, “With a tradition of open-door admissions, low tuition, flexible programming, customized student services, and quality learning opportunities, community colleges continue to be the pathway to higher education for minorities” (p. 108). In addition, Cohen and Brawer (2003) suggest that community colleges make it easier for marginalized individuals in our society to move between social classes and break the cycle of poverty that is prevalent among populations outside the dominant white majority.

Most adult learners enter or return back to higher education because of the desire for some type of change in their lives—academic, professional, or economic. For adult

learners of color and other underrepresented groups, this desire for change can mean something greater than earning a college degree. This change, for some, can be the transformation of one's very existence. Thus, the community college is now the pathway to higher education and the vehicle for change for many adult learners of color who have decided to return back to the classroom. This study specifically looks at the positive impact of transformation on the academic journey of African American adult learners at the community college level.

Overview of the Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory. Transformative learning occurs when, through critical self-reflection, an individual revises old or develops new assumptions, beliefs, or ways of seeing the world (Cranton, 1994). This theory considers how adult learners make meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence how learners construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meaning, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional (Mezirow, 1997, p. xii). Structures of meaning (or one's meaning perspective) consist of an individual's frame of reference, world view, personal paradigm, or standard. According to Mezirow (1991), it is these perspectives that provide "criteria for judging or evaluating right and wrong, bad and good, beautiful and ugly, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate" (as cited in Taylor, 2000. p.6). For example, when individuals are in some ways trapped in a negative situation (under or unemployed, in an abusive relationship, dealing with a medical illness, etc.), one's meaning

perspective will influence how this situation is viewed. In such situations, there are three possible scenarios —the situation is someone else’s fault, the situation is permanent, and/or the situation is changeable. The “victim” blames others for his or her current situation. The “powerless” sees his or her situation as stagnant or no way out. This person has basically given up. Someone who is reflective of his or her situation and understands the dimension of the problem or issue, however, will see the possibility for change. This person might not know at that moment how to change the situation but, through self-reflection, starts to look at his or her own behavior and the surroundings in which he or she finds him/herself. The person then considers how he/she may have triggered the situation. Eventually, he or she begins to move towards personal transformation that can, in time, positively alter his or her current negative circumstance. As Taylor (2000) states, this alteration signals a shift in “world view” that becomes the core of transformative learning.

This study looks at transformative learning and its sociocultural components; specifically, the cultural consciousness, spirituality, and self-empowerment experiences of African American adult learners. Cultural consciousness is recognition and understanding of the importance of culture, in general and/or one’s culture. Spirituality encompasses faith and the belief in a divine power outside of oneself. Lastly, self-empowerment is the belief in self and the ability to have power over one’s own existence and life path.

Research Assumptions

My assumptions regarding adult transformative learning and its sociocultural components are based on the works of J. Dirkx (1997, 2008). Dirkx looks at adult transformative learning theories from what he calls a “four-lens” approach (Baumgartner, 2001, pp. 16-18). Within his approach, he sees four specific branches of transformative learning (“Four-Lens Approach”).

First, Dirkx (1997) draws from Freire’s (2003) notion of emancipatory education. Emancipatory education is the use of education to free the oppressed from oppression. It allows the oppressed to think critically about their reality, look at how one exists in the world, and look at how the “transformed” are able to change their “reality in process” (Freire, 2003). Emancipatory education is education for the purpose of liberation. For the participants within this study, increased cultural consciousness and spirituality were results of personal transformation and their community college experience.

Second, Dirkx draws from Mezirow (1997, 2000) to look at the cognitive-rational approach to transformational learning and the role of self reflection. Transformative learning theory sees personal reflection and changes in perception as catalysts to changing action and behavior. Likewise, this research study examines the connection between transformation, self-reflection, and empowerment. For some participants, earning an associate’s degree just was not enough. These adult learners became empowered—realizing that entry into a community college is only the *beginning* of their journey towards higher education. Through empowerment and self-reflection, they began to ask themselves the questions: “What will I do with what I have learned?” and “How do

I use this to change my own existence and/or behavior?” And, for many, the transformation of “self” became a tool in which these learners worked towards helping to change the lives of others.

Third, Dirkx’s draws from Daloz’s (1986; 1999) developmental approach to transformative learning, which emphasizes the connection between education and one’s social, mental, and physical development. Daloz (1999) states, “Adult learners are often in developmental transition and look for education to help them make sense of lives whose fabric of meaning have gone frayed” (p.4). During this transition, transformational learning is intuitive, holistic, and contextually based. Within the context of higher education learning, as students go through the learning process and attain more knowledge, who they are socially, mentally, and personally begins to develop. As they know more, they “see” more. Indeed, data from the five adult learners I studied suggest these individuals are able to recognize injustice and mistreatment at a higher level instead of accepting it. They are able to see their own role and purpose within the world instead of seeing themselves as insignificant. Lastly, they are able to move beyond their own issues of depression, drug addiction, and self destruction, and envision a healthier and more productive way to live.

Lastly, Dirkx connects spirituality, spiritual transformation and learning (Dirkx, 1997, 1998). He believes that “transformative learning goes beyond the ego-based, rational approach that relies on words to communicate ideas to an extrarational, soul-based learning that emphasizes feelings and images” (Baumgarter, 2001, p.18). Indeed, spirituality (and/or religion) was a major component in the personal transformation of the

participants in this study. It is through faith and religious strength that many learners within higher education persist. As one of the participants said, “My belief in God is what has gotten me through this challenging experience.”

In addition to drawing on Mezirow and Dirkx’s work, I chose to integrate critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, Ladson-Billings, 2004, Sleeter & Bernal, 2004) and spiritual transformation theory (Tisdell, 2003; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003) into my conceptual framework to better understand the sociocultural and spiritual aspects of transformative learning.

Race, gender, and class play integral roles in the daily realities of adult African American learners and they can significantly impact one’s educational journey towards self-empowerment. Critical race theory theorizes about race while also addressing the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). By incorporating critical race theory within this framework, I can help move transformative learning theory beyond its disconnected stance on race and culture’s impact on one’s learning experience.

Spirituality also impacts the transformative experiences of individuals of color. Spirituality, faith, and religion have always played a historical role within the African American community (Dillard et al., 2000, Tisdell, 2003), so it is important to examine this component when looking at how students of color describe their journey through higher education and when looking at how faith and spirituality impact transformation along one’s journey.

I assert that adult transformative learning theory, critical race theory and the theory of spirituality address three intersecting themes that help shed light on the importance of education and learning for students of color; these themes relate to learners' empowerment, social action, and self reflection. These themes also suggest there are sociocultural components of transformative learning that lead adult learners to ask, "Who am I?" and "What is my role in this world?" Indeed, it is through learning that many of these students begin to understand the value of who they are and they begin to create change that allows for personal and academic success. I designed my study to learn more about this process of change.

Research Design

To better understand the phenomenon of transformative learning in adult students of color, this qualitative study employed a phenomenological narrative design. A phenomenological narrative study identifies a phenomenon of importance to explore, collects and tells stories from individuals who have experienced this phenomenon, interprets the experiences and, finally, discusses or restories what these experiences mean for the individuals (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990); Creswell, 1998). Life change / transformation is the phenomenon of importance that I studied. The participants' narratives told the story of their transformative experiences, and how these experiences related to their community college education.

I blended a phenomenological approach with narrative methods to allow for the stories of my participants to be the primary focus. In addition, my research design

respectfully, yet honestly, captured the experiences of African American adult learners, a group that has generally been ignored or disparaged by educational research.

Specifically, I examined the personal, cultural, and spiritual transformation of these selected participants and the events, experiences, and individuals that helped to influence this transformation. I completed this examination by gathering the participants' oral histories, which I later drew upon to form their narratives. An oral history captures, through interviews, a specific aspect of a person's life. It looks at what an individual or group remembers about a particular event, issue, time, or place (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8).

Over a period of three months, I interviewed five, adult, African American community college students who had previously described their academic journey as life-changing to me. Data was collected primarily through one-on-one semi-structured interviews that addressed the phenomenon of transformation among these individuals. From their data, I constructed narratives that addressed the issue of transformation and change within the context of the participants' journey through community college. All in all, my hope is that these narratives provide greater insight into the phenomenon of transformation and its connection to education for African American community college students.

Overview of the Results and Implications

As I conducted the study, four major themes emerged that connected the participants to each other. First, all of the individuals studied experienced what Mezirow (1991) calls "disoriented dilemma," which is a crisis or event that triggers change. Second, participants conveyed a strengthening of their African-American/African-selves

as a result of their pursuit of higher education and knowledge acquisition. In other words, who they are culturally became more important to these participants. Third, spirituality and religion played a critical role in the personal transformation of the group but was described by each individual in very different ways. For instance, some of the participants became stronger in their faith as a result of this transformation. Others saw their belief in God and their personal transformation as one in the same, while one of the participants saw this spiritual transformation as his deepening connection to his own African heritage and ancestry as an African American male. Lastly, these adult learners of color were able to identify their own sense of purpose and place in the world—something that was basically absent prior to their described life change.

Each participant conveyed the same general emotion—an overwhelming sense of empowerment while going through their educational journey. As I detail in Chapter IV, learners like Ariel, a full-time student and single mother who was returning back to higher education for the first time after experiencing family tragedy, felt that obtaining a college degree was something critical to his or her personal and professional life because they believed that education would open whatever door they were looking to walk through. They all started on their journey looking for what could be viewed as a one-dimensional change in some way, such as a better job, more money, or just something to do. These participants did not expect the profound and enduring impact that their community college journey would have on who they are as individuals and on their lives.

Significance of the Study

By understanding the transformation that takes place for African American adult learners, and by knowing what this transformation may look like in its many forms as this student population moves from their first year of post-secondary education through their two-year journey at the community college level, educational researchers and leaders can begin to look into how adult transformative learning plays a critical role in changing the social, spiritual, and cultural context for African American students. This study will help educational leaders gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon of adult transformative learning and the context in which transformation can take place for adult students of color. In addition, this study will help educational leaders understand the importance of these experiences to this populations' educational achievement, personal growth, and increased retention in higher education institutions, particularly within community colleges.

As many students of color pursue post-secondary degrees at greater numbers, community colleges continue to play an important role as their primary and, in some cases, their only alternative for higher education. There are more than 1,100 community colleges across the United States (Milliron, 2004, p. 106). Despite the growing numbers of community colleges in the United States, educational researchers have yet to recognize the importance of these institutions within the overall scope of higher education. As pointed out by Quigley and Bailey (2003), out of 2,000 articles appearing in the *Journal of Higher Education* between 1950 and 2002, only 17 had community or junior college in

the title. Within the 17 articles, only four were published between 1981 and 2002. The authors (2003) further state:

But given the absence of attention paid to community colleges, it may appear surprising that they account for a large share of American higher education...In a given year, more for-credit undergraduate students enroll in community colleges than in baccalaureate-granting institutions (p. 66).

This research study will add to the small, yet growing, body of scholarly work focusing on the community college and community college learners. Hopefully this research will also motivate other researchers to begin looking at this important and undervalued educational alternative and its positive effects on marginalized sectors of adult learners.

Lastly, there are very few studies that look at the issue of adult education and transformation in a cultural context as this research does. Brookfield (2003) asserts that current theories and practices in adult education theory are “racialized.” As he explains, “When a phenomenon is racialized, it is viewed through the distinctive lens of a racial group’s experience of the world (2003, p. 154). In Brookfield’s (2003) view, adult education theories such as transformative learning theory are racialized because:

...in that the most frequently cited concepts that purport to define what is distinctive about the field and that that constitutes is dominant (arguments)—self direction, critical reflection, and transformative learning—are valued positively and identified mostly with scholarship conducted by White American, European, and Commonwealth men. However, the racialization of adult education theorizing—the way it is viewed through the lens of Whiteness—is rarely commented on (pp. 154-155).

This study brings to the forefront discussion regarding adult transformative learning theory and its sociocultural dimensions for learners of color. In doing so, I am able to, as

Brookfield (2003) suggests “start to examine how race intersects with those learning tasks of adulthood—challenging (current adult education) ideology, overcoming alienation, contesting hegemony, and unmasking power” (p. 156).

Organization of the Study

The next chapter, Chapter II, presents the literature review and theoretical framework that informed this study. In the literature review, I offer a profile of the adult learner of color within the community college context. I also look at issues and policies within the community college environment that have impacted learning and academic achievement for this particular student population. In the second part of Chapter II, I look at how transformative theories, critical race theory, and the theory of spirituality intersect to shed light on the academic needs and performance of community college students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2004, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Cranton, 1992, 2002; Delgado, 2001, Mezirow, 1997; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Tisdell, 2003, Tolliver, 2003; Dei, 2002).

Chapter III discusses the methodology used in this research study. I specify how I employed a phenomenological narrative design in order to understand the phenomenon of transformative learning among adult learners of color. Chapter III also introduces the research participants. These profiles offer background knowledge on each participant such as age, race, occupation, and why they were selected.

Chapter IV offers data-based, analytical narratives of each individual participant. These narratives further introduce some key themes that emerged from individual’s data that relate to transformative learning and sociocultural contexts.

Chapter V offers more detailed theoretical analysis of the themes that emerged across all of the participant narratives. I present additional data in this chapter that highlight the essence of my participants' experiences in light of transformative learning, critical race, and spirituality theories.

Lastly, Chapter VI discusses the significance of the study's findings for educational practice, research, and policy. It concludes by looking at what educational leaders can learn from this study in order to address issues of educational retention, access and equity that relate to students of color attending community colleges.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Literature Review – Part 1: Adult Learners, Higher Education and Transformation

For some adult students, particularly those who are returning back to college after a period of absence or entering higher education for the first time, the process of learning can be overwhelming. Adult learners are, subconsciously or consciously, seeking change through education—whether it is for economic reasons, such as making more money, academic reasons, such as earning an undergraduate degree or pursuing graduate school, or personal reasons such as the exploration of learning for learning-sake (the “life-long learner”). But, for many adult learners of color and other underrepresented groups, this desire for change can go well beyond academics and the yearning to earn a college degree. This change, for some, can be the transformation of one’s very existence.

Author Patricia Cranton (1994) points out in her book, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, that adult learning is about transformation. In her view, adult learning can mean the process of being freed from the oppression of illiteracy; it can be a means of gaining knowledge and skills; it can be a way to satisfy learner needs; and finally, it can involve a process of critical self-reflection that can lead to transformation (p.65). Cranton also moves further into the sociopolitical aspects of adult learning and what it can mean to individuals seeking change through education. As she (1994) states:

Adult education could be viewed as a political rebellion in a social system that depends on maintaining the power of an elite few by withholding information from the illiterate masses. Adult learning could be viewed as the acquisition of knowledge and skills in a society that espouses the value of equal access to information by all members of the society. Adult learning could be viewed as the fulfilling of expressed learner needs in a culture that emphasizes consumerism and the immediate gratification of needs. And finally, adult learning could be seen as a process of critical reflection during a time when individuals are questioning their political and economic systems (p. 3).

As an educator who has taught adult learners, and as a student who returned back to the classroom at the age of 35, I have found Cranton's observations to be true. For adult learners of color, intersectionality—living as a combination of the “other” (a member of marginalized race, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation groups, etc.)—has a great impact on the experiences of this student population as they move through the process of obtaining education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

As this study will demonstrate, adult learners of color enter higher education facing complex life circumstances and challenges. Many of these learners are holding down full time jobs and taking care of families. They also enter with an adult-specific outlook about returning to the classroom. Many have fears of returning back to school, anxiety about being the oldest in the classroom, and hope that their new journey will bring them what they desperately desire—a better life. But, as the high attrition and drop-out rates for this population shows, particularly for community college students of color, there are factors within and outside of higher education that are hindering some adult learners from educational attainment at this level.

Profile of the Adult Learner

According to research conducted by Janice Hatfield in “Recruiting and Retaining Adult Students” (2003), the 2000 Census Bureau reported that there were 159 million people in the United States who were 25 years of age or older. Approximately 117 million of this population did not have an education degree beyond high school. Another 10 million had not completed formal education beyond an associate’s degree. Recent community college enrollment statistics indicate that, now, many of these adults are realizing that a high school degree is not enough to survive financially or professionally in today’s world, so they are returning back to school to pursue a college education (Bowl 2001; Isserlis, 2008).

Higher education has moved beyond the world of 18-24 year old, white, middle class students. As evidenced by the rising numbers in non-traditional student enrollment, community colleges have become especially important to minority and adult students interested in pursuing higher education. The community college is now the pathway to higher education for many adult students age 25 and older who have decided to return back to the classroom. As reported by Kasworm (2005), approximately 44 percent of community college students are 25 years of age and older (p. 4). In addition, 60 percent of adults in higher education institutions are enrolled at two-year institutions. The 2008 National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2003–04, the median age of community college students (24 years old) was higher than the median age for both public and private not-for-profit, four-year, college students (21 years old) (NCES, 2008).

Now, more than 12 million adult learners are enrolled in post-secondary

credential or degree-granting programs (Nunley, 2007). By the year 2015, student of color enrollment in community colleges are projected to increase by approximately 12 percent while white student population is projected to decrease by approximately 8 percent (de los Santos & Milliron, 2004, p. 106).

College and universities have shown increased strides in adult student enrollment over the past two decades. Even so, educational leaders still continue to struggle with how to address the academic, financial, and socio/personal needs of this growing student population. In addition, higher education has been forced to respond to the needs of adult learners of color. Community college institutions, which attract large numbers of students of color, have felt the brunt of this influx and are now looking for ways to serve this complex student population.

What is it that makes the academic needs of adult learners unlike those of traditional 18- to 24-year old college students? According to Bowl (2001):

When adults decide to basically disrupt their lives and return back to school, they bring with them obligations, obstacles, and experiences that can complicate or even impede their path to education attainment. Adult students' family lives and issues are not merely the background against which their educational careers develop, but (they) are integral to their experience within higher education" (p. 102).

Indeed, most adult students entering higher education at the community college level tend to: be educationally and economically disadvantaged, have experienced past academic failure or disappointment, have not gone directly from high school to college, be underemployed or unemployed, and be caring for families and/or children.

In addition, the 2002 National Center for Education Statistics study reported that:

While traditional undergraduates are generally able to direct most of their energy toward their studies, older students, parents (especially single parents), and students who work full time have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy, and financial resources. Difficulties in obtaining child care and class schedules that do not mesh with work schedules are just two of the barriers that nontraditional students may encounter. In addition, some of the older students who did not pursue a postsecondary education when they were younger may have made this decision because they were not prepared academically. Consequently, they may struggle when they enroll later (NCES, 2002).

There is no doubt that these issues can impact the adult students' ability to juggle school and day-to-day life. As Isserlis (2008) suggests:

...adult learners live complicated lives, bring complicated experiences with them to learning contexts, and may be more or less present to and ready for learning than educators have widely understood. The complexity of these learners' lives often masks the critical strategies they develop to cope and get through the day (p. 21).

Because of continued increases in minority and adult student enrollment, American colleges and universities have had to rethink and redirect their academic programs, policies, and faculty/administrative hiring to accommodate this new wave of diverse learners. In order to understand the needs of older minority student populations, I believe that it is important to move away from dominant cultural perceptions of what minority students need to succeed in higher education; and, gain greater insight into the experiences of minority adult learners, particularly African American learners within community colleges, from learners themselves. With my study, I attempted to understand how the transformative experiences of African American adult learners of color within community colleges connect to academic achievement, self-empowerment and

persistence. I also looked at how their experiences compare to Mezirow's (1991) conceptions of transformative learning. Lastly, because students of color have unique issues and experiences, I sought to understand the sociocultural components of their transformative educational experiences.

African Americans and Educational Attainment

African Americans have taken a turbulent journey as they have fought for the right to pursue equitable and quality education. Having dealt with issues of segregation, lack of adequate funding for schools, and even physical threat in the pursuit of K-12 education, African American communities and leaders sought legal justice through a court system that played a major role in the systemic educational inequity of African American students (Willie, et al., 1991; Banks, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Educational opportunities for African Americans and other minority populations have continued to expand beyond K-12 education, starting with African American emancipation from slavery in 1863. Next, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional, influenced future legislative decisions regarding race, access, and education. Soon after, advancements within higher education were set in motion by the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Willie, et al., 1991). Title VI, implemented as part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, addressed issues of inequity and discriminatory practices against minorities within higher education. Specifically, Title VI rendered discriminatory agencies and institutions, including colleges and universities, ineligible to receive federal funds if discrimination (unintentional or intentional) was evident ("Title VI..." 2003, Par. 2-3). The act allowed

individuals to file civil complaints with the federal government against all colleges and universities that discriminate in formal and informal ways; it also allowed the government to withdraw funds from an institution if the government was able to uncover systemic discrimination (Willie, et al., 1994, 110). It was Title VI that helped contribute to the desegregation of colleges and universities. It was also the catalyst that aided in the increase of students of color enrolled in higher education institutions.

Indeed, within the last two decades, there has been a dramatic increase the presence of students of color within higher education. According to the American Council on Education in its *2000-2001 Minorities in Higher Education* report, total minority college enrollment has surged by 112 percent since 1980, up from nearly 2 million in 1980-1981 to 4.3 million in 2000-2001. African-American college enrollment grew by 56 percent (ACE, 2003).

African American presence on post-secondary campuses, particularly community college campuses, continues to grow every year. But, getting into the system does not always mean successfully getting out with a college degree. As statistics will show in this study, there are still grave issues that need to be addressed regarding African American student retention, transfer, and completion rates. While enrollment and access are vital to the balance of adult learners reaping educational equity, economic equity, and social capital, it is college completion education that drives the realization of this balance.

Success of African American Community College Students

As reported by *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, African American student populations in higher education have reached an all-time high (2007a). There are

more than two million African American students enrolled in U.S. bachelor's degree programs, graduate degree programs, and two-year community colleges combined (2007a, p. 46). Within two-year community college institutions, African American enrollment is at 42 percent. For whites, the figure is 35.5 percent (2007a, p. 47). Fifty-two percent of all African American undergraduate males attend two-year institutions and African American males make up 12 percent of all male students attending community colleges (Flowers, 2006).

The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* also reports that African Americans have made progress in the attainment of two-year associate's degrees (2007b). In 2005, nearly 82,000 African American students were awarded two-year degrees. This is more than double the number of associate's degrees awarded to African American students in 1990 (2007b, p. 48). As is the case in bachelor's and graduate degrees, African American women were the ones who received the majority of the two-year associate degrees (nearly 69 percent). Furthermore, in 2005, African American women earned 56,285 two-year college degrees as compared to 25,472 African American men (2007b, p. 48).

For African American students, community colleges offer an environment in which academic achievement and personal success are not only possible but, for many, a strong reality. In a study conducted by Bryant (2001), students of color recognized the benefits of their community college experiences. Greene et al. (2008) explained that African American community college students, for example, perceive greater increases in personal and social development than do their White peers. In addition, despite reported

low academic performance and degree attainment levels of this group, African American and Latino students report being more engaged in college than their White peers.

Overall, the enrollment numbers are showing that more and more African Americans are entering higher education than ever before. Still, many higher education professionals realize that open access is not enough. In the last 20-25 years, U.S. federal and state educational policies have primarily focused on access to higher education. Now there is a concerted effort to look at retention and student completion rates among students of color, especially African American community college students, in order to truly deem open access education a success. There is growing interest in closing the gap between African American and white student achievement and retention rates (Swail, 2002). Learning more about these students' higher educational experiences could help educational leaders do so.

Challenges for African American Community College Students

Although data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that students of color have made educational progress with respect to learning outcomes over the past 20 years, gaps in achievement between white/Asian-American and Hispanic (Latino)/African-American/Native American students are still substantial (Swali, 2002, pg. 20). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that between 2001 and 2003, an average of 66.4 percent of White students transitioned to college immediately after completing high school in contrast to only 57.2 percent of African Americans high school graduates (NCES, 2005, cited in Leinbach, 2005). African American students, on the other hand, were more likely to have non-traditional

enrollment patterns, including delayed entry, part-time attendance, and periods of “stopping out” or taking time off from college (Fry, 2002, Lee & Frank, 1990, cited in Wassemer & Shulock, 2004, pg. 665).

In addition, researchers have found that lower socioeconomic African American students, especially men, have higher attrition rates than most other groups of students in higher education (Mason, 1998). Community College Research Center data shows that well over half of all African American students who began their post-secondary education in a community college dropped out of school within six years (Blau, 1999). Blau (1999) attributes this low-level completion rate to the need for African American students to postpone their education due to financial or family hardships.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) also found that African American community college students transferred to four-year colleges at lower rates than Asian and White students, and they were less likely than their peers to earn a bachelor’s degree (cited in Leinbach, 2005). Given the average time to transfer for an entering full-time community college student is three years, a student who remains on a community college after five years is statistically less likely to transfer (Perrakis, 2008, pp. 17-18). Wasserman and Shulock (2004) believe that the organizational culture within academic institutions “introduce barriers ranging from blatant discrimination to subtle messages that dissuade students of color from the successful pursuit of a transfer program” (p. 666). The NCES study also revealed that eight years after high school, 72 percent of African American community college students had not transferred to a four-year school or earned a certificate or associate degree. Only 10 percent of all African

American first-time community college students earned an associate degree within six years and only two percent completed a bachelor's degree in the same time—one-sixth the rate for White students (Leinbach, 2005). According to Wasserman and Shulock (2004):

Underrepresented minority students are more likely to be the first in their family to attend college, and may therefore have less access to knowledge and advice of parents and other family members about the college process in general and transfer in particular (p. 665).

Furthermore, despite the gain in student of color enrollment, African American men continue to lag behind their white counterparts in the percentage of college-age high school graduates enrolled in college. The 2005 NCES data reports that African American men have earned five percent fewer baccalaureate degrees since 1990 and 5 percent fewer associate degrees in the past 17 years. This is despite the fact that 3 percent more African American men today remain enrolled in community colleges after five years from the date they first entered as community college students. In addition, Pope (2006) states that, in 2002, African American students earned only 10.7 percent of all associate degrees awarded, even though they represented 12 percent of all community college student enrollment (cited in Perrakis, 2008, pp. 17-18). As stated by Leinbach (2005):

Black students are often faced with barriers to their success, whether it is poor academic preparation in high school, financial difficulties that require employment while in school, family obligations and other challenges that require a daunting juggling of responsibilities (p. 43).

Some researchers have even asserted that students who are likely to make the decision to attend community college are individuals who, from the start, are statistically less likely to persist in higher education. According to Bailey et al. (2002), students who begin postsecondary education at a community college generally arrive less academically prepared and they require transitional support especially in the areas of reading and mathematics (cited in Greene, et al., 2008, p. 515). Furthermore, African Americans attending community college are almost twice as likely as their White peers to enroll in at least one developmental course. This same group, African American developmental education students, was 30 percent less likely than their prepared counterparts to persist and earn a degree or certificate (Greene, et al., 2008, p. 515).

While some students of color populations have been able to successfully navigate through the community college experience, some groups are still facing obstacles that have impacted their academic achievement, attrition, and transfer rates. As these statistics show, there are institutionalized issues facing African American students that are not being addressed by community college institutions, and these issues continue to impact academic success rates for this underserved population. Now, as the United States continues to face an economic recession and individuals are looking to higher education for career training and professional development, community colleges have been pushed into the spotlight even more. Educational leaders are facing pressure as a result of rapid student growth in diverse student populations, decreases in state and government funding, and the lack of a clear mission for community college institutions.

In order to bring about the possibilities of self-transformation, empowerment, and change for adult learners of color, educational leaders must develop an understanding of the social, historical, and environmental contexts that many of these students bring with them as they journey through higher education. Factors such as race, gender, and poverty pose challenges for community college systems that are not prepared for this new population of learners. So, in order to look at what factors impact learning and degree attainment for adult students of color within community college, it is important that this study examine the history, purpose, and current state of these two-year institutions.

History of the Community College and Students of Color

At the turn of the 19th century, junior colleges were established to, “provide access to college for poorly prepared students” (Floyd, et al., 2005. p. 11). The first institution of this type opened in Joliet, Illinois in 1901, and the next college opened in Fresno, California in 1910. Soon after, the establishment of junior college institutions in the United States rapidly increased. The greatest growth took place in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1960s (Dougherty, 2001). In 1947, the *Higher Education for American Democracy* (the Truman Commission Report) called for an expansion of educational services that provided educational opportunities for all Americans. The Commission renamed junior colleges “community colleges” because these institutions were specifically designed to serve the needs of the local community (Floyd et al., 2005). Floyd et al. (2005) explain, “Its dominant feature is its intimate relations to the life of the community it serves” (p.11). Today, community colleges serve roughly eight million students and about 40 percent of all undergraduates (Dowd, 2007). As stated previous, by the year 2015,

minority enrollment in community colleges is projected to increase by approximately 12 percent (de los Santos & Milliron, 2004).

Community colleges have also been “blazing a trail in building partnerships with precollegiate education” in their attempt to meet the needs of this diverse population, (Smith & Vellani, 1999, p. 8). As stated by the 2008 National Center for Education Study summary, community colleges enroll larger percentages of minority students compared to public and private not-for-profit four-year institutions. As it reported, in 2005, 19 percent of community colleges had minority enrollments that were 50 percent or more of their total enrollment compared with 15 percent of public four-year institutions and 10 percent of private not-for-profit four-year institutions (NCES, 2008).

The community college institution, for many populations of color, is the initial step towards higher education. Unfortunately, low attrition rates among minority students within these institutions indicate that educational opportunity and access do not always translate into degree attainment. As stated by McGrath and Van Buskirk (1999):

If community colleges are to fulfill the democratic promise of open access higher education, they must develop exemplary practices capable of transforming students into active learners and empowered participants in the educational process (p. 16).

Until student of color academic success, enrollment, and graduate rates match those of white students, institutions cannot deem open access admissions as the conduit to creating quality and equitable education for this population. As it stands, higher education systems such as the community college, in many ways, have failed to meet the needs of

underserved student populations, but they still play a critical role in higher education access for these learners.

Importance of the Community College

While there has been constant rhetoric coming from four-year college and university leaders purporting their efforts to reach out to more students of color, community colleges have generally attracted higher numbers of minorities. Unlike many four-year colleges and universities, community college student populations are generally mirror images of the colleges' community. For instance, community colleges in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and Phoenix (cities with large minority populations) all have high student of color enrollment. In some of these institutions, particularly in Miami's Miami-Dade College and Chicago's Malcolm X Community College, students of color make up the majority of the student population (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Cohen and Brawer (2003) also state that this pattern of student of color enrollment is also seen in many rural, largely-minority locations such as in Mississippi and Texas. In some locations, community college institutions were established to specifically address the needs of the community's populations of color. For example, colleges such as Bacone Community College in Oklahoma, Haskell Indian Junior College in Kansas, and Navajo Community College in Arizona were built to serve large Native American populations in the region (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 47). In addition, 11 community colleges are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and 17 community colleges are tribally controlled (NCES, 2008).

The increase in minority student enrollment in community college settings has become a major factor in the population growth of two-year academic institutions. Lewis and Middleton (2003) report that student of color enrollment in the community college setting are growing faster than any other sector of higher education and the largest growth has been among African American students. Overall, 46 percent of all African American students, 55 percent of all Latino students, 55 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 55 percent of all Native American students in higher education attend community colleges (NCES, 1998, cited in de los Santos & Milliron, 2004, pg. 108). Low-income and first generation students, as well as students of color, are less likely to attend four-year institutions and to persist through degree completion than are non-minority student populations (Swali, 2002, pg. 21).

When measuring the value of increased student of color enrollment in higher education, educational leaders must also look at who is actually achieving and who has been left behind. Some students of color populations are showing greater strides in academic success and enrollment at two-year institutions as compared to the same enrollment at the university level. As reported by Harvey (2003), Asian Pacific American student populations increased 224 percent between 1980-2000 at the community college level, which replicates this population's overall higher education enrollment. The number of associate degrees awarded to Asian Pacific American students grew 229 percent during this same time period—more than any other minority group (Lew, Chang & Wang, 2005).

Why are community colleges so important for students of color? Restating what authors de los Santos and Milliron (2004) said, “With a tradition of open-door admissions, low tuition, flexible programming, customized student services, and quality learning opportunities, community colleges continue to be the pathway to higher education for minorities” (p. 108). Many adult learners of color are turning to community colleges as an affordable and accessible way to begin their academic career before moving on to four-year institutions. Solarzano, Rivas, and Velez (2005) report in their examination of Chicana/o doctorate production that nearly one-fourth of all Chicana/o doctorates first attend a community college, more than twice the rate for all doctorate holders. To add, two-thirds of all Latina/o students begin their postsecondary career in community colleges (Solarzano, Rivas, & Velez, 2005). Furthermore, the presence of African Americans in American community colleges and other two-year schools has increased to their highest levels in U.S. history (Lewis & Middleton, 2003, pg. 787). As suggested by Cohen and Brawer (2003), community colleges make it easier for marginalized individuals in our society to move between social classes and break the cycle of poverty that is prevalent among populations outside the dominant white majority. The authors (2003) explain:

...now colleges were opened to ethnic minorities, lower-income groups, and those whose prior academic performance had been marginal. Of all the higher education institutions, the community college contributed most to opening the system. Established in every metropolitan area, they [community colleges] were available to all corners, attracting the “new students”: minorities, women, people who had done poorly in high school, those who would otherwise never have considered further education (pp. 26-27).

Nevertheless, community colleges institutions, which generally serve high numbers of non-traditional students, face the heaviest burden when addressing the issues that adult learners of color bring with them as they pursue higher education. While some low-income minority students and other underserved populations attend private institutions or public campuses, the vast majority of these students attend smaller institutions and/or community college with fewer resources. Statistically, community college students tend to be of lower socioeconomic status, nonwhite, and lower in K-12 academic preparation and achievement than students entering four year institutions. In addition, community college students are more likely to be female, have below-average family incomes, and have parents who are high school educated or below. Only 20-35 percent of community college entrants are looking to eventually earn a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, 2001, p. 53). Most community college entrants pursue two-year degrees, certification, remedial education, or work-related training.

In addition, students of color are less likely to transfer to a four-year institution because open-admissions institutions, such as community colleges, have the fewest resources with which to provide adequate advising, academic and financial support for high-needs students (Swail, 2002). A study conducted by Lee and Frank (1990) found that students who transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions were of a higher social class, that were less likely to be minority or female, they were more academically oriented and successful in both high school and community college, and they were likely to be working while attending college (cited in Wassemer & Shulock,

2004). This student profile is atypical of most community college institutions' student populations, especially students of color. Furthermore Dowd (2007) states:

Often lost in the accountability debates is the fact that a student's chance of success depends considerably on their racial/ethnic background and the wealth of their community. Transfer and remediation policies may be good for White, middle-class, or affluent students at the same time that they are harmful to African American, Latino, and poor students (p. 411).

These underserved and minority students get lost in the "transfer shuffle" and, eventually, either drop out or end their academic career at the certificate or associates degree level.

Current Issues Facing the Community College

By providing education that is affordable and accessible, community colleges have made strides in helping to reduce the economic and social inequities that exist between minority and non-minority populations. As students of color become more educated, many lives become empowered. But, providing avenues and resources that help to transform the lives of students of color through higher education goes well beyond open access. Unfortunately, student of color success in higher education is not following the same trajectory as the student of color enrollment numbers. Academic institutions that serve high numbers of non-traditional students face many challenges when addressing issues of retention and college completion. Even further, open-admissions institutions have the fewest resources with which to provide adequate academic and financial support for growing diverse student populations (Swail, Reed, & Perma, 2002). As stated by Evelyn (2004):

These are trying times for community colleges. With the economy continuing to stifle growth at four-year public colleges, enrollment at two-year institutions is up. State financial support is down. Unmet demand is growing. And every year more students show up who barely know how to read (p. 27).

Because of this, Phelan (2000) believes that the open door policy of community colleges, a policy that has contributed to the increase in student of color representation, is “threatening to close as a result of rising enrollments and declining public interest and investment in higher education” (p. 1).

Furthermore, within today’s higher educational institutions, many educational practices and ideologies are built on a culturally monolithic system—a system in which perspective comes from one view—the dominant cultural group’s view (Fuller, 2003). The dominant white majority has the power and resources to define their values, beliefs, and lifestyles as most important. Within this perspective, the dominant group also has the power to “subtract” what is seen as insignificant or even worthless. As evidenced by the low persistence rates of students of color at two-year institutions, this neglect continues to manifest itself, particularly in educational institutions servicing majority student of color populations. Many U.S. community colleges and urban higher education institutions fall into this category. As Smith and Vellani (1999) state:

Hence, colleges and universities must consider the extent to which access is being achieved. Questions regarding how economically challenged and minority students, often clustered in urban areas, attain access to college are fundamental to the goals of achieving equal educational opportunities for all students (p. 10).

There now needs to be a concerted effort by educational leaders to take on the role of change agents who are willing to fight against current federal initiatives that are

dismantling previous strides made towards equity and access in higher education for underserved populations such as adult students of color. As asserted by Laden (1999):

The task for educators is to create conditions for change. Educators must transform organizational practices and policies in ways that acknowledge that range and diversity of the contextual experiences students bring to higher educational institutions (p. 190).

An understanding of this continued inequity and general disregard towards minority students is critical because, without education, underrepresented minority populations are rendered economically, politically, and socially powerless.

Community Colleges: Education Gateway or Gatekeeper

With the failure of community colleges to address the academic needs of the underserved populations in which it was intended to serve, many have come to question the continued purpose of the community college and its role in serving underserved student populations. Dowd (2007) asserts that today's community colleges have become a gatekeeper as well as a gateway into America's higher education system:

As gateways, they [community colleges] are open-access colleges with minimal enrollment requirements and low tuition. They offer a 'something for everyone'... community colleges have provided access to groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in and underserved by four-year colleges and universities (pp. 407-408).

Since their inception, community colleges have been the vehicle that has allowed those who have had limited opportunities at four years institutions the chance to realize the dream of a college education. Unfortunately, they have also served as a "dumping

ground” for this student population. Dowd (2007) also contends that these same institutions are keeping underserved student populations from moving beyond a community college education. “These institutions [four-year institutions] instead of expanding, have become more focused on increasing their selectivity and other indicators as markers of quality,” (Dowd, 2007, p. 408). Thus, instead of providing more opportunities for underserved students to enter into private and competitive public universities, four-year institutions have become less accessible because there exists an educational alternative for these students—the community college.

So what are community colleges intended to do that four-year colleges and universities are not doing, and why aren’t they doing it? While the Truman Commission’s objective to provide educational access for all through local and federally-run institutions (such as the community college) has become a reality, this objective has also created an academic caste system in which some perceive that those who *don’t belong* (the underserved) have been kept in their rightful place—the community college. This academic option gives four-year and private institutions the excuse to continue their oppressive admission practices.

Dougherty’s *The Contradictory College* (2001) goes even further with the caste system assertion by arguing that community colleges have a hidden agenda that shifts away from their original purpose of serving underserved student populations. Based on a content analysis of the works of leading higher education advocates, critics, and scholars, Dougherty (2001) lays out three positions of debate. He connects these positions to three well-known theoretical frameworks (“antecedents” as he describes them) (p. 16). These

antecedents attempt to answer the following question, “Who holds the real control in determining the intent and purpose of the community college?” Dougherty explains that the first position, argued by a group he calls functionalist advocates, believes that community colleges were established to meet the fundamental needs of society as a whole. For this group, the primary role of community colleges is to promote equality of opportunity for underserved populations as well as provide institutions and businesses with vocational training for their employees. Marxist instrumentalist critics, on the other hand, believe that businesses and business owners are the stakeholders and they are the only ones that benefit from the existence of community colleges. For this group, the idea of creating educational equity is a fallacy; the real role of two-year institutions is to reproduce the class inequalities of capitalist society and to secure publicly subsidized employee training. Lastly, the institutionalists critics assert that the higher education system (state-run colleges and universities) had the primary role in the establishment of the community college system and are using these institutions “keep down university enrollments, limit access, and thus preserve the scarcity and selectivity of their degrees” (Dougherty, 2001,p. 20).

What is the actual intent of community college institutions, who are they truly intended to serve, and why aren’t community colleges showing more progress in achievement and retention for students of color? It is my belief that community colleges were established to serve those who have been underserved by our current educational system and provide a way in which this group can affordably and accessibly begin their college journey. Unfortunately, as evidenced by Dougherty’s research, there are outside

forces that are “pulling the strings” of the community college system and serving their own purposes – leaving behind the students who need this open-door access to education the most. It is nearly impossible to work towards improving academic and structural conditions for underserved adult student populations and to create transformative learning environments within our two-year community colleges if the purpose and intent of these institutions is not clearly defined. Educational leaders in today’s higher education institutions must aggressively look for ways to manage and embrace the new influx of nontraditional diverse students. Furthermore, as Dumas-Hines, Cochran, and Williams (2001) suggest, leaders should decide what they want their institutions to represent to the greater community. Until the community college establishment recognizes that they exist for the purpose of serving and successfully educating underserved student populations and are held accountable for this service, educational leaders and policy makers will continue to diminish and overlook the significance of this population to higher education.

Community College Institutions: What is Possible

Overall, the literature on community colleges show that more and more minority populations are entering higher education in double and triple digit numbers, but academic achievement, attrition, and transfer levels for these students continue to decline (Swail, 2002). So why aren’t community colleges meeting the needs of those who seek higher education, particularly those populations who have been overlooked by four-year and private university systems or who have not been prepared to enter these institutions? Is having an open door policy enough?

We already know that a large percentage of African American students are not persisting at the community college level. We now need to ask the question “Why?” Why are retention, course completion, and transfer rates for African American learners within community colleges declining as enrollment rates continue to rise in record numbers? What factors outside of this population impact the chances of receiving a quality and equitable education where all students have opportunities to achieve? It is important that we find ways to assist students of color achieve despite the internal struggles of today’s community college institutions. There are strong possibilities for achievement and success for students of color within two-year institutions.

By looking at how African American students have successfully experienced learning and by examining the sociocultural, economic, political, and historical factors that impact these learning experiences, we can justly address the issue of student of color persistence within today’s community college institutions. As I detail in the following sections, adult transformative learning theory, critical race theory, and the theory of spirituality all provide ways in which to analyze community college systems in connection to student learning, culture, society, and institutional practices.

Conceptual Framework – Part 2

Transformative Learning Theory and its Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions

The conceptual framework of this research study draws from adult transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, Cranton, 2001, etc.), spiritual transformation theory (Tisdell, 2003, Tolliver, 2003), and critical race theory (Delgado, 2001, Bell & Ladson-Billings, 2003, Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). In my view, each of these theoretical strands

gives a greater understanding into adult community college student of color learning from a historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and political perspective. Educators can utilize this framework to better promote community college students' success.

Adult Transformative Learning Theory

Adult transformative learning theories define how adult learners make meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meaning, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional (Mezirow, 1991. p. xii). Adult transformative learning theories define how adult learners make meaning of their learning experiences. These theories also describe how constructs such as personal background, belief system, frame of reference, and academic identity influence students' understanding of their learning experiences and how awareness of personal dysfunction and destructive actions can modify students' meaning making.

Transformative learning theory emerged during a period of rising growth in adult education. Transformative learning theory was introduced by Mezirow (1991, 1997) as a change process that transforms frames of reference for adult learners. He defines frames of reference as "the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences" (p. 5). According to this view, "Actions and behaviors will be changed based on the changed perspective" (Cranton, 1994, p. 730).

Mezirow's work was heavily influenced by the works of German socialist theorist Jurgen Habermas and by Brazilian activist and educator Paulo Freire. According to Mezirow (1991), it was Habermas' work on the domain of learning that provided the

social and theoretical context for transformative learning theory (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 109). Habermas' three domains of learning is a critical theory that looks at the types of learning in adult education. The three domains of learning are: 1) technical, 2) practical, and 3) emancipatory aspects of learning. Technical learning is a learning process that is rote (repetitive), specific to a task, and governed by a set of rules. Learning the alphabet is an example of technical learning. It does not require any form of critical reflection or study. It is what it is. Practical learning involves social norms. It is the process of knowing, reacting and acting as expected or acting on the basis of prior knowledge (what has been done before). For example, a school bully who continually uses physical aggression to display his or her anger is reacting and acting as expected. Emancipatory learning is the internal process of learning. It develops as a learner becomes more critically reflective of the knowledge/information that he or she receives. It also involves the process of self-reflection and understanding of self. The school bully who now begins to see how his or her fighting has gotten him/her nowhere and then chooses to walk away from a conflict has experienced emancipatory learning. As stated by Kitchenham (2008), "Mezirow's examination of Habermas's three domains of learning, specifically his focus on emancipatory learning, led to Mezirow's perspective transformation and the ten phases of learning" (p. 109).

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) also connected the process of transformation to education, empowerment, and pedagogical practices. Freire (2000) saw the power of a society to move those who have been deemed powerless (the "oppressed") from a negative reality to that in which they are fully empowered. Moreover, Freire

(2000) contends that we as humans have the power to transform through critical reflection and the act of educating oneself is the process of emancipation. He saw that emancipatory education allowed the oppressed to think critically about their own reality and how they exist in the world while seeking ways to change that reality and improve their life path. As Friere states (1970):

The more radical he [the oppressed] is, the more fully he enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can better transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or entry into dialogue with them [the oppressor] (as quoted in Taylor, 1998, p. 16).

It was this connection to emancipatory learning that informed Mezirow's research on adult transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) explains:

. . . I encountered the writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, which unequivocally challenged the validity of my relatively unsophisticated premises concerning adult education for social action and consequently the validity of the roles I played in programs designed to foster this kind of learning (p. xvi).

Mezirow's (1991) theory is primarily concerned with how adult learners gain emancipatory knowledge through critical self reflection, as he explains:

Emancipatory learning often is transformative. In emancipatory learning, the learner is presented with an alternative way of interpreting feelings and patterns of action; the old meaning scheme or perspective is negated and is either replaced or reorganized to incorporate new insights (p. 88).

While Mezirow's framework is structured around the tenets of Friere's work on transformation, there are some theoretical differences. Friere sees emancipatory learning as a way to influence collective action and social/societal transformation: "For Freire, it

[transformation] is clearly a social experience: by the very act of transformation, society is transformed” (Taylor, 1998, p. 16). In contrast, Mezirow focuses on individual and personal transformation. It is the learner’s experience that is the starting point and the point of interest for transformative learning. For Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when, through critical self-reflection, the individual revises old or develops new assumptions, beliefs, or ways of seeing the world (Cranton, 1994, p. 4).

Initially, the ten phases of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and the process of personal transformation involved:

1. A disorienting dilemma—a crisis or event that brings about change
2. Self-examination of feelings of guilt and shame
3. Critical assessment of one’s assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and transformation process are shared by others who have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of new knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisionally trying out new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1994).

Mezirow’s theory has been updated and revised several times since he introduced this ten phase process. It is Mezirow’s (2002) latest work that defines transformative learning in terms of critical examination and fundamental change in problematic frames of reference. There are three frames of reference: 1) meaning perspectives, 2) habits of mind, or 3) basic mindsets (Marsick & Mezirow, 2002, p. 1). The three common themes that connected each phase within Mezirow’s phases of transformative learning are first, the centrality of experience—recognizing that one’s current situation or experience largely influences their learning; second, critical reflection—looking rationally at and

gaining understanding of one's current situation or experience; and, third, taking what one has learned from this situation or experience and finding ways to make positive and/or productive change (Taylor, 1998).

Importantly, other approaches to adult transformative learning have emerged from Mezirow's work. Brookfield (2004) makes a direct connection to transformative learning, critical reflection, and examination. In his view, the concept of critical thinking is an interpretation of Freire's emancipatory learning (cited in Cranton, 1994). Emancipatory learning, as stated earlier, is a concept in which Mezirow's work is deeply positioned. Brookfield (2004) describes the process of critical thinking as: identifying and challenging assumptions, challenging the importance of the context that has influenced our assumptions, imagining and exploring alternatives, and exhibiting reflective skepticism.

Still, in order for one to become a critical thinker, there must be some sort of "trigger" that prompts this development. Cranton (1994) explains, "A trigger event is an unexpected event that leads to discomfort or perplexity in the learner" (p. 69). For adult learners, this trigger event can be job loss, divorce, or a health scare, for instance. Similar to Mezirow's disorienting dilemma phase, this trigger precipitates and even forces change. Eventually, this phase leads to critical self-reflection (Cranton, 1994). It is, for example, the alcoholic who has lost everything and now realizes that it is time to sober up and do something better with his or her life: It is the single mother who has struggled to financially provide for her family who now understands that going back to school and earning her college degree will make life easier for her and her children. Trigger events

evolve at varied levels, from horrific tragedies to simple inconveniences. But, for the individual experiencing the event, it becomes the catalyst for life change and personal reflection.

Several other interpretations of transformative learning exist. Dirkx (2008) looks at the connection between transformative learning and emotions. He asserts that transformative learning theories bring together “experiential, whole person, and embodied learning” (p.15), thereby making learning an emotional process. In fact, research on emotions in connection to teaching and learning has become a major topic in scholarly literature (Dirkx, 2008).

Some research has also examined the process of transformative learning from the learner’s point of view. Cranton’s (1992) framework discusses three types of learner-specific changes that can occur: change in assumptions, change in perspective, and change in behavior. She (1992) explains:

We interpret our experience and the things we encounter in our own way; what we make of the world is a result of our own perceptions of our experiences. Transformative learning, then, is a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising these perceptions (p. 26).

Cranton’s assertion builds upon Mezirow’s “change through critical reflection” phase of transformative learning theory.

Other scholars have also drawn from Mezirow’s work to revision the notion of self change. Transformative learning, according to Boyd (1991, 1994), changes the way adult learners see themselves and their world. It attempts to explain how their expectations, “framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions,” directly

influence their experiences. Transformative learning, from Boyd's (2001) view, results in a "fundamental change in one's personality, involving the resolution of personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (p. 23). For example, a person of color can see his or her racial identity as a deficit—"No one will hire me because I am Black." Or, as a transformed individual, this person can see racial identity as a source of empowerment—"I am determined to teach in my community to raise up other African American males like myself." This latter person's African American identity positively influences actions; the individual who merely believes that he will not be hired sees his "blackness" as the source of his predicament and may be compelled to blame himself or others (those who he sees as the "oppressor").

The final interpretation, held by Kappel and Daley (2004), asserts that transformative learning is unique to adulthood, because it "addresses the phenomenon of adult learning from the perspective of adult characteristics and adult social roles, responsibilities, and experiences" (p. 83). Mezirow's work focuses specifically on adult learners who are engaging in the learning process, from earning a GED to pursuing career training and professional development.

In summary, transformative learning theory looks at how adult learners define the experiences and circumstances in their lives, and how, through critical reflection, individuals can create positive change. As this student population begins to look at themselves as they experience learning, they start to see other ways of viewing and acting in the world. Current or past habits, beliefs, standards, and even actions are called into question. It is through transformative learning that populations such as adult learners of

color are able to move from dysfunctional addicts to fully-functioning human beings, from high school drop-outs to community college learners, and even from bachelor's degree-seeking students to doctoral candidates. As demonstrated in Chapter IV, adult learners of color face many financial, political, and academic barriers within community college institutions. Yet, in spite of these challenges, the participants in this study were able to realize personal transformation and academic success during their higher education journey. As these adult learners of color became more empowered, they were able to see themselves beyond their current existence or beyond their past experiences. They were also able to see themselves beyond the two-year institution they attended. Transformation through education moved these adult learners of color to a place of triumph as they personally defined it.

Intersection of the Conceptual Framework

Within transformative learning theory, critical race theory, and the theory of spirituality, there are three intersecting themes that help shed light on how sociocultural factors such as race, class, religion, and gender affect the educational/learning experiences of students of color: these themes relate to learners' empowerment, social action, and critical reflection.

According to Mezirow (1991), empowerment has three essential features: a potent and efficacious sense of self, a critical understanding of social and political relations, and more functional strategies and resources for social and political action. Education through transformative learning empowers students to become autonomous thinkers which, in turn, leads to action and change. Within the content of this study, the five participants I

interviewed all believe they were transformed as a result of their educational experiences. Through this transformation or life change, these participants became empowered and were able to make their positive life changes.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory shares ideology with both critical race theorists and critical theorists such as Freire in that it maintains that education should lead to empowerment (Baumgartner, 2001). As stated by Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is the first step towards personal growth and change for many adult learners. Through transformative learning, individuals gain critical awareness and insight into the history and consequences of institutional practices that oppress them. They discover options for self reflection and personal change. Transformative learners also build solidarity with other oppressed individuals and work together as a collective community. Through empowerment, social action, and critical reflection, they are able to interpret feedback on their efforts, deal with adversity, and learn direct-action tactics for dealing with an inherently unjust system (Mezirow, 1991).

Perspectives/distortions can be changed only through social action, and "...the way to ensure cultural transformation is to encourage personal transformation" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 208). For example, as students of color experience oppression within academic institutions (tracking, lack of diverse representation within faculty/staff, grading disparities), they begin to recognize larger issues of oppression in society. After they have persevered, in spite of this oppression, many may choose to work towards some type of change or social action. Mentoring or philanthropic giving within one's own community to ensure that cycles of oppression do not repeat themselves are examples of

social action. Non-minority populations are, in many cases, unable to recognize or even acknowledge existing issues of discrimination and racism within these institutions. Hence, institutions led by non-minority leaders are quick to dismantle programs and policies such as affirmative action and compensatory education services that serve help to move minority students towards personal and economic empowerment.

As I have seen with many adult students of color within the community college system, learners begin to identify the situations that they currently face socially, academically, and/or personally, and they act and react in more thoughtful and productive ways to change these situations.

Criticisms of Transformative Learning Theory

One of the criticisms of Mezirow's transformational theory (1991) is that it isolates only one aspect of adult learners and defines the transformative experiences as one "rational" response (Kappel & Daley, 2004, p. 93). It neglects to take into account the complex relationships and experiences that reside within individual differences. As Taylor (1997) explains:

Context reflects the sociocultural and personal factors that affect the process of transformative learning. These factors include the immediate environment of the learning event as well as what the individual brings to the learning situation: a unique context composed of a familial and social history and an individual orientation, which includes readiness for change, experience, prior stressful life events, and a predisposition for transformative experience (cited in Kappel & Daley, 2004, p.85-86).

Indeed, in Mezirow's (1991) first work, the ten phases of transformative learning did not take into account the varying experiences that can take place within an

individual's transformation, particularly for adult learners of color. Not everyone who faces a change of self will move through phases or dimensions of learning in the same way or at the same level. Sociocultural factors such as race and culture will always have some impact on what transformation will look like for minority learners engaged in the higher education process. While Mezirow's later work on transformative learning did acknowledge the importance of the affective, emotional, and social aspects of the theory, the discussion of race was all but absent in his studies (Kirchenham, 2008; Brookfield, 2003).

Furthermore, Clark and Wilson (1991) state that Mezirow fails to account for learning and its connection to cultural context—"he limits himself to masculine, white, middleclass values and fails to reflect the values he holds" (cited in Cranton, 1994, p. 76). The experiences of individuals of color and the influences of race, gender, and class on these experiences are not seen in Mezirow's theory. As stated by Kilgore (2001):

Learning, in the critical worldview, is reflecting on and challenging what we know and how we know it, and perhaps acting to change material and social conditions of oppressed people as well as the commonly held assumptions that reinforce their oppression (p. 55).

This reinforces the thought that, for adult learners of color, learning takes on cultural and social meaning. Mezirow's focus on adult learners of color and the process of transformative learning are limited, at best.

Critical Race Theory

In my view, critical race theory moves transformative learning theory beyond its racial and cultural neutrality. Critical race theory, as defined by Sleeter and Bernal

(2004), theorizes about race while also addressing the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Intersectionality, in this case, is the combination of the “other” – marginalized identities in connection to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Relating critical race theory to adult transformative learning, race, gender, and class play integral roles in adult learners of colors’ daily reality and these aspects of identity can significantly impact the educational journey towards self-empowerment. Critical race theory looks at morality and equality and the responsibility to properly educate all individuals, but it specifically addresses these issues for populations of color.

The basic tenets of critical race theory are: 1) race and racism are embedded in American society; 2) colorblindness, racial neutrality, meritocracy, and objectivity are false notions used by dominant culture to hide the reality of racism and inequity in society; and 3) the experiences and stories of people of color often constitute “counterstories” that help to tell the stories of those who are not normally heard. These counterstories bring the stories of people of color to life and help make these experiences a valued reality. Moreover, counterstories are authentic ways to understand oppression (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008).

Some members of the dominant white majority use racial bias and /or a lack of racial understanding as a means to foster and maintain inequity. For instance, their participation in continued oppressive practices, such as the elimination of affirmative action policies and the dismantling of job-training and adult education programs, confirms that racism is prevalent within the higher education system because these

practices hold back or even deny underserved individuals access to education. In contrast, for students of color, their racial identities are embedded in historical, cultural, and social contexts that can provide them the strength needed to move forward towards achievement and successfully navigate inequitable systems. Critical race theory allows us to explore such possibilities and study the connections between race, society, and learning. As Delgado (2001) states:

Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better (p. 3).

Overall, critical race theory is grounded the social realities that are defined by our experiences and the collective historical experience of our “communities of origin” (Matsuda, 2001, as cited in Schneider, 2003, p. 88). It also challenges Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant ideologies that look at the education of underserved minority learners from a monocultural perspective (Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). Monocultural institutions as stated by Rendon (1999), “adhere to homogeneity and see cultural diversity as a threat to dominant conceptions of education and society” (p. 196). Learners of color are basically invisible and voiceless within these types of institutions.

The narratives of African American adult learners in this study are counterstories—authentic ways to understand personal struggle and group oppression (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Counterstorytelling can provide a vehicle in which to tell the stories of those who have been underrepresented in today’s educational institutions by revealing the collection of lived experiences and stories of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000, Tate,

1995, 1997). Counterstories put a human face on educational theory and practices and challenge current practices for minority students. By examining the educational stories of my participants through oral narratives, a form of *counterstorying*, I can address, in part, how participants believe race influences their learning and education experiences. I can also connect the impact of race and cultural experiences to transformative learning experiences, and thereby enhance the cultural relevancy of adult transformative learning theory.

Intersecting Themes and Critical Race Theory

Just as transformative learning has three intersecting themes that help shed light on how sociocultural factors affect the educational/learning experiences of students of color, the tenets of critical race theory directly focus on themes of empowerment, social action, and critical reflection in relation to living life as marginalized identities or the “other.”

Why are community colleges important to today’s society? As stated by Cohen and Brawer (2003), community colleges make it easier for marginalized individuals in our society to move between social classes and break the cycle of poverty that is prevalent among populations outside the dominant white majority. Relating critical race theory to education, race, gender, and class play integral roles in this populations’ daily reality and can significantly impact the educational journey towards self-empowerment

Empowerment

Institutions such as community colleges provide economic and non-economic benefits for society as well as increased educational attainment for future generations. It

is through education that individuals are able to become more politically aware, socially astute, and financial independent. We also see more and more generations of minority families obtaining post-secondary educations (Swail, Redd & Perma, 2003). The more educated populations of color become, the more power and social capital they have to make changes for themselves and make changes within their own communities. They also gain a greater ability to empower other oppressed groups outside of their own communities.

Social Action

Within critical race theory is a focus on individual and group activism. To connect this to transformative learning, we look at the idea of education as a tool for empowerment. According to Mezirow (1991), the goal of transformative learning is to help learners become autonomous, socially responsible thinkers while fostering critical reflection. Critical race theory addresses the issue of empowerment but within the context of a collective community of color. It is not enough to become self-directed; this self-direction must translate into community action that will help to empower others. As individuals free themselves from their own personal oppression such as drug use, illiteracy, unemployment, etc., they become empowered to help others. For example, the reformed drug addict who decides to become a drug counselor has moved from his own personal transformation to taking action to bring about change for others who are oppressed (social transformation). So, critical race theorists assert that individual social transformation can eventually lead to the transformation of entire communities. In

relation to this study, social transformation can move students of color within community colleges as a collective towards higher academic achievement and persistence rates.

Critical Reflection

As stated by Schneider (2003), “as individuals develop morally, so will the groups with which they are socially intertwined: only then consciousness of inequities may have the potential to rise collectively in an organized opposition” (p. 90). As individuals, such as adult community college students of color, begin to transform personally, spiritually, and academically, this group will begin to recognize their own experiences. At the same time, the collective strength of this group of individuals will help to insure that the environment in which they gather (the community college institution) validates these experiences and continues to foster their academic journey.

It is only by understanding the culture of the students of color, acknowledging that race matters, and knowing how racism operates that the process of collective and individual transformation can produce outcomes for these students or the community college as a whole. Individuals will always bring their own perspectives, their own differences, and their own histories to the table (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). These distinct experiences will, inevitably, intersect with any type of transformation a student will realize during their journey towards education so it is critical to examine what these differences are in order to understand what transformative learning looks like for adult learners of color. There are multiple identities in society and diverse ways of learning and operating in the world. As stated earlier, race, gender, and

class play integral roles in the daily reality of adult learners of color within the community college and can significantly impact ones educational learning experiences.

Spirituality Theories

Lastly, this research study looks at how spirituality plays a role in the transformative process for African American adult learners. The spiritual component of my framework is primarily based in the works of Tisdell (2003), Tolliver (2003), and Dei (2002).

For some students, particularly students of color, educational transformation can have a spiritual element. As Tisdell (2003) states, “Spirituality is always present in the learning environment” (p. 31). In addition, spirituality and religion has always played a historical role within the African American community (Dillard et al., 2000; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). As a former adult educator, I have heard students talk about how their belief in God and their strong faith played a significant role in their academic success, so it is no surprise to hear spiritual themes repeat themselves when the participants of this study describe their educational journeys through higher education.

According to Mezirow, the purpose for adult development is to understand one’s own place and purpose in the world. Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) agree with Mezirow’s assertion but take “finding one’s purpose” one step further, they explain:

While we agree, as Mezirow suggests, that critical reflection is necessary, we believe that it is equally necessary to engage people on the affective or “heart” level. Further, transformative learning is perhaps better anchored if we engage on the spiritual level as well, and draw on how people construct knowledge through unconscious processes (p. 14).

They believe that spirituality has its place in culturally relevant and transformative adult education efforts (p. 14).

Together, culture and spirituality in adult education are about people's stories and experiences. Tisdell (2003) sees spirituality as many things, including: (a) a connection to a life force, God, a higher power, Great Mystery, Buddha Nature, or a higher purpose; (b) a sense of wholeness, healing, and interconnectedness of all things; (c) meaning-making; (d) the ongoing development of one's identity (including one's cultural identity) and self-actualization; and, (e) how people construct knowledge through unconscious and symbolic processes manifested through images, symbols, and music, which are often cultural. "Understanding how these dimensions of spirituality play out in our own lives and those of adult learners with whom we work offers new dimensions to culturally relevant adult education" (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, p. 13). For Tisdell (2003), spirituality is one of the ways people construct knowledge and meaning. She states that, "to ignore it, particularly in how it relates to teaching for personal and social transformation, is to ignore an important aspect of human experience and an avenue of learning and meaning-making" (pp. 20-21). This study examines the connection between spirituality and adult transformative learning for adult students of color.

Dei (2002) offers a cultural perspective on spirituality (specifically African-centered spirituality). Dei (2002) believes that spiritual and emotional involvement are inseparable in the production of knowledge. He also believes that it is a daring notion to assert that spirituality is a legitimate aspect of students' learning and knowledge (2002); and he states, "Many African ways of knowing (and the knowledge traditions of other

Indigenous peoples) affirm that personal subjectivity and emotionality must be legitimized rather than devalued” (Dei, 2002, p. 4). African teachings draw upon the traditions of African culture and community, incorporating these traditions into the education of their students. Education and learning within this tradition looks at educating the “whole child” – spiritually, socially, physically, and intellectually. As stated by Dei (2002), “Spiritual and emotional involvement are inseparable in the production of knowledge. There is no separation between the student and the study (learning).

Overall, the literature on transformative learning and spirituality affirm that there is a spiritual component in transformation that goes far beyond religion (Cranton 1994; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Spirituality within the context of transformative learning looks at the unconscious, yet emotional, restructuring of one’s life—creating an understanding of purpose and place in the world. This could take on many different forms. Indeed, as discussed in later chapters, spirituality plays a role in adult transformative learning for the participants in this study in various ways.

Intersecting Themes and Spirituality

For some adult learners of color, religion and spirituality play a major role in their everyday existence. So, as these students involve themselves in the process of higher education, religion and/or spirituality will undoubtedly intersect with this experience. For some individuals, it is their faith in a higher power that gives them the strength to persist within higher education.

Empowerment

For many individuals worshiping, praying and believing are powerful acts. One has the right to believe in what he or she wants to believe and believe how he or she wants to believe. For many individuals spirituality is a form of empowerment. As stated by Dei (2002), spirituality is how we see ourselves in the world and, for some, what gives us the will to take action. “Spirituality is a form in which we identify ourselves and the universal; and, it is therefore, an implicit way of asserting ourselves collectively and individually as creators and resisters, and as agents and subjects of change...(Dei, 2002, 10)

Furthermore, Tisdell sees spirituality as a tool for empowerment. She (2003) explains:

Many people, especially those who have been marginalized because of their culture, race, gender, class, or sexual orientation, experience learning their own history, their own cultural stories, and their move to new action at the same time that they engage with their own individual stories as part of their spirituality (p. 142).

Within the process of learning, an individual begins to hunger and seek out his or her spiritual faith and knowledge as their source of strength.

Social Action

Spirituality connects “doing God’s work” with the idea of doing what is right or good. Doing God’s work or doing the work of a *higher power* can be seen as an act of social justice – feeding the poor, sharing the “Word” with others, aiding the sick and shut-in, etc. As Tisdell (2003) states, “...there is also a sense of communal responsibility

to their spirituality that requires that they work for social justice or greater equity in the world” (p. 41). Action within a spiritual context connects doing the work of a higher power to acts of social justice. As some of the participants in this study will show, the act of learning and obtaining a college education was “doing God’s work.”

Critical Reflection

During an individual’s educational quest, there is often a period of self-reflection when learners ask “Who am I?” and “What am I doing with my life?” It is during this time when individuals look to religion or spirituality to empower themselves. Spiritual reflection and the process of examining one’s life in connection with the will of God or a higher power can prompt self-reflection. This is an examination of who one is now as compared to who he or she was prior to his or her spiritual enlightenment. Dei (2002) sees the role of learning as the process of growth for the individual to become the great soul and spirit that he or she is destined to be. Once a student is properly nurtured and respected as someone who is capable of learning and engaging in scholarship, higher levels of critical reflection take place on its own.

It is important that all students, not just students of color, understand, through learning and critical reflection, the value of who they are in order for personal positive change to take place.

In summary, for adult learners of color, factors such as race and spirituality are directly connected to who they are as learners and individuals. As these students experience transformation through their higher education journey, race and spirituality

can be the sources of strength that move them towards personal growth, self empowerment, and academic achievement.

The Power of the Community College Institution

By incorporating Mezirow's adult transformative learning theory, critical race theory, and spiritual transformation theory, I have brought together the themes of empowerment, action, and critical reflection in my conceptual framework. Doing so helps shed light on the connection between sociocultural factors and educational/learning experiences of students of color. It has also allowed me to examine the transformative learning of adult learners of color in community colleges from a historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and political perspective.

It is through education that underserved populations, such as African American adult learners, can empower themselves so that they are able to critically reflect on their own lives as well as on the world around them. Community college institutions can be that source of empowerment, social action and critical reflection for minority adult learners seeking to better life through education. The opportunity to enter higher education and earn a college degree is, by all definitions, empowering. For many students of color, the movement towards empowerment begins at the community college level.

There is also a connection between the education of students of color, particularly African American students, and the community college institution. Community colleges have, at some level, been instrumental in changing the social and economic mobility of lower-income and minority populations (Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1999). These institutions were intended to offer educational opportunities to the underserved and this

objective needs to be revisited. Because community colleges are affordable and accessible to all citizens, they are a lifeline for those who understand the power of education and those who are looking to move beyond their current reality. For many adult students of color this transformation takes place at the community college level.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological narrative study examines the experiences of African American adult learners within the context of adult transformative learning and how their community college experiences impact this transformation. The purpose of this study is to look at how African American adult learners at two-year institutions describe their transformative learning experiences. This study will demonstrate how transformative learning played a role in changing the sociocultural, spiritual, and reflective context for this student population and moved these adult learners of color towards self empowerment, persistence, and academic achievement.

Phenomenological Narrative Design

Just as transformative learning theory looks at the transitions individuals make as they become more aware of who they are and their place in their own experiences, narrative reflections provide a way in which individuals make sense of these experiences. As stated by Bogden and Biklen (2003):

If you want to understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed, you need to get close to them, to hear them talk and observe them in their day-to-day life (p. 31).

In order to effectively delve deep into the “essence” of human experience, I needed to utilize a methodology that allowed my participants’ voices to be heard and allowed my participants’ experiences to be centrally focused (Creswell, 2005).

Furthermore, as an African American researcher studying African American students, I wanted to make sure that the research design used in this study respectfully, yet honestly, captured the experiences of African American adult learners—a group that has generally been ignored or disparaged by educational research. Moreover, because this study looks at transformative learning from a sociocultural perspective, it was imperative that I use an approach that brought these experiences to light.

In the case of this study, I decided to utilize a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research examines individuals in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Moen, 2006). It is qualitative research methods such as life histories, ethnographies, and narratives that, as Tillman (2006) states, “capture a holistic contextualized picture of the social, political, economic, and educational factors that affect the everyday existence of African-Americans” (p. 269). This approach allowed me to centrally focus on the stories and experiences of my participants—adult African American community college learners.

To better understand the phenomenon of transformative learning in adult students of color, I designed a qualitative study that employed a phenomenological narrative design. As a phenomenological narrative researcher, I sought to identify a phenomenon of importance; explore, collect and tell stories from individuals who have experienced this phenomenon; interpret individuals’ experiences; and, finally, discuss or restory what these experiences meant for the individuals while staying true to their perspectives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990; Creswell, 1989). Educational change or

transformation is the phenomenon of importance that I studied. The participants' narratives tell the story of African American adult learners' transformative experiences.

Phenomenological research examines the individual but it also focuses on that individual's specific life experience. The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate and identify a particular phenomenon from the perspective of the individual. Lester (1999) explains, "In the human sphere this normally translates into gathering 'deep' information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s)" (p. 1). Getting to the "essence" of the experience through in-depth analysis is what Creswell (1998) sees as critical to this type of study.

In terms of utilizing a qualitative research design that is culturally responsive, researchers generally conduct narrative studies to focus on people who haven't been heard before. As Reissman (1993) states, "Through narrative research, it is possible to examine gender inequities, racial oppression, and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers" (p. 5).

For this study, I examined the personal, cultural, and spiritual transformation of my participants and the events, experiences, and individuals that helped to influence their transformation through the participants' oral histories. As stated by Dempsey and Noblit (1993), "Any phenomenon is grounded in social and cultural constructs" (p. 2). I chose to interview adult learners to gather their oral histories as they related to their community college learning experiences and then draw upon those oral histories to shape their narratives. An oral history captures, through interviews, a specific aspect of a person's

life. It looks at what an individual or group remembers about a particular event, issue, time, or place (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8). So I shaped and restoried the participants' narratives to demonstrate transformative learning from their perspective as adult African American community college students.

Restorying Narratives

The major component of this phenomenological narrative study is the narrative itself. A narrative is a highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning. In utilizing a narrative research design, researchers describe the lives of individuals, restory stories about people's lives, and write about individual experiences (Creswell, 2005). Creswell (2005) asserts that when researchers restory they gather the story; analyze the story for key elements, sequencing and patterns; and rewrite and retell the story making sure to convey what the subject/individual has said. As noted earlier, the participants in this study, adult African American learners, all claim to have experienced some sort of life change or transformation during and, possibly, as a result of their higher education journey.

The use of narratives in research was "championed", states Atkinson (1998), by cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (p. 7). Bruner believed that telling one's life story is a way of interpreting the meaning of experience while still living through it. Moen (2006) goes further to assert that life stories have several layers: life as it is actually lived, life as it is experienced, and life as it is eventually told (pp. 7-8). Life as it is lived is what actually takes place in one's life—what, in fact, happens. The experienced life is the "images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person

whose life it is” (p. 7). For instance, for victims of rape, the emotions and thoughts associated with living through the rape are, in most cases, described differently than the actual act of the rape. Furthermore, the actual telling of the story is dependent on the storyteller’s current existence and meaning making. Some individuals who have healed from a traumatic experience may tell the story as a “survivor”; but, someone who is still reeling from this same experience may see his or herself as the “victim” and tell his or her story from this painful place. These interpretive layers must be taken into account when restorying the life story of others. Narrative life stories are valid and credible because they *are* the participant’s experience from his or her point of reference at that particular time. Researchers within the Personal Narrative Group (1989) looked into this issue and explained:

...in personal narratives, ‘it is precisely because of their subjectivity – their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective-ridden character—that we value them’ (as cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 5).

Life stories and narratives are what the participants see as his or her experience. As Stivers (1993) states, “The historical truth of an individual’s account is not the primary issue. Narrativization assumes point-of-view. Facts are products of an interpretive process; facts and interpretations require and shade one another” (as cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 64).

Moen, in his book *Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach* (2006), reviews the literature on narrative research. He contends that there are three basic claims about narrative research:

- 1) Human beings organize their experiences of the world through narratives
- 2) Stories that are told depend on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, who the story is being told to, and when and where they are being told.
- 3) There is a "multivoicedness" that occurs in narratives (pp. 4-5).

Moen's first two claims presume that the person sharing their story, along with her or his social context, determines the story that is actually told. "Narrative research is, consequently, focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories that they tell" (Moen, 2006, p. 5). The participants in this study see themselves as transformed in some way or another, so in this research study I considered the context in which these participants see themselves as changed and the context in which this "change" took place—the community college. The third claim looks at the concept of "giving voice" to one's story. As Moen (2006) asserts, when an individual gives voice to his or her story, he/she is actually reacting to the "interactions between the individual's beliefs and experiences and past, present and future external voices" (p. 5). Narrative research is not just about giving "voice" to the storyteller. Narrative research involves the many voices that have impacted that participant's life experience(s)—family, teachers, loved ones, and even complete strangers. The multiple voices in our lives influence how we perceive our life stories. As Bruner (2004) states, "Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. 'Life' in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as 'a narrative' is" (p. 692).

As the researcher, I am responsible for reinterpreting the participants' stories and putting these stories into context with what needs to be known about the phenomenon, experience, or individual. According to Riessman (1993):

The methodological approach examines the informant's story and analyzes how it is put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades the listener of authenticity. Analysis in narrative studies opens up the forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, why was the story told that way? (p. 2).

It is through restorying my participants' narratives that I have been able to interpret their learning and transformational experiences and then bring forth the stories of a group who has been unrepresented in educational research.

Designing a Culturally Sensitive Study

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) state that reconstructed stories of people's lives are fundamental educational tools. "People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones...Stories...educate the self and others (Hones, 1998, p. 227). As an African American researcher studying African American populations, phenomenological narrative research offered the qualitative and culturally sensitive approach that I needed to capture and contextualize the stories of my participants. As stated by Tillman (2006):

Culturally sensitive research approaches have the power to help researchers to capture more fully the successes and the struggles of African-Americans—that is, the totality of their experiences. Further, such approaches are needed to address the void in what the larger research community knows and understands about the participation of African Americans in U.S. education and society (p. 269).

In this phenomenological narrative study, I utilized interviews to collect data, and I offered the participants the option of submitting written journals and self-recordings. Narratives, which provide a vehicle in which the experiences and perspectives of the participants/subjects can be heard, are a form of counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling is a tool for empowerment as described by critical race theorists Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, 2004). Scholars within this perspective utilize narratives, stories, and oral histories as “valid forms of ‘evidence’ and thereby challenge a ‘numbers only’ approach to documenting inequity or discrimination that tends to certify discrimination from a quantitative rather than a qualitative perspective” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, pp. 10-11). Counterstories put a human face on educational theory and practices and challenge current practices for “the other.” By examining the educational stories of my participants through their own oral narratives, which is a form of counterstorying, I addressed how participants believe sociocultural contexts such as race, gender, age, and spirituality influenced their learning and education experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

For a three month period, I conducted semi-structured interviews that incorporated both open-ended and structured questions that addressed the following topics: transformation, sociocultural/racial contexts, spirituality, education, learning, and empowerment. Prior to collecting qualitative data, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval to study human subjects. The selected participants were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. This agreement specified my intent as the researcher to keep the subject’s identity private and to only use the material gathered for specified research

purposes. Once written consent was secured, I began collecting participants' recollections of their educational experiences as community college students. I was not required to obtain permission from upper level administration at the community college institution because I chose not to study the institution.

I interviewed five participants, two males and three females. The interviews took place from September 1, 2008 through December 10, 2008. I conducted three interviews per person for approximately 2 hours per session (averaging 6 hours per person). There was some variation in the total interview hours conducted with each person. I did not put a time constraint on the sessions, and I allowed participants to choose the session ending time within the two hours allotted.

Table 1. *Interview Sessions Summary*

	September	October	November
<i>ARIEL</i>	2 hours	2 hours	1 hour
<i>BRANDON</i>	2 hours	3 hours	1 hour
<i>CHRISTOPHER</i>	2.5 hours	3 hours	1 hour
<i>DANIELLE</i>	4 hours	2 hours	1 hours
<i>ESTELLE</i>	2 hours	1 hours	1 hour

The interviews, which yielded approximately 32 hours of data, were tape recorded in their entirety and transcribed verbatim. In addition, I invited participants to provide written journal reflections and self-recordings that addressed any aspect of their learning

experience that they did not wish to discuss face-to-face. These vehicles would have served as multiple modes of data that could help crystallize the meaning of educational experiences, transformation /change, and learning. None of the participants chose to write journal entries or make self-recordings for this study.

After each individual interview session, I identified preliminary patterns and themes. This information was used to generate follow-up questions. Through narrative inquiry, I analyzed field notes and transcriptions of interviews to look for significant statements and patterns. I also analyzed my own reflective field notes. The data was analyzed using several strategies. First, I read through the collected data to gain an overall understanding of the material. As pointed out by Creswell (2005), I needed to get a general sense of the whole picture before I can begin to break my information down into parts. I asked myself, "Overall, what is my data showing me about the experience of transformative learning among this population of students?" Next, I reduced and coded the data based on the conceptual framework of my study, particularly concepts from adult transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, Cranton, 2001, etc.), spiritual transformation theory (Tisdell, 2003, Tolliver, 2003), and critical race theory (Delgado, 2001, Bell & Ladson-Billings, 2003, Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). During the transcript analysis, I also looked for patterns in order to identify connections and generate themes that related to my conceptual framework. Finally, after I conducted a preliminary analysis of the final interviews, I asked participants to participate in a 30-minute follow-up discussion in which I shared preliminary findings with each participant. Participants were given a chance to offer feedback during this follow-up session. I was able to meet with

three of the participants in person for approximately 20-30 minutes per person. Two of the participants opted not to offer any feedback outside of acknowledging receipt of their transcripts.

Validity and Trustworthiness

As a qualitative researcher, it is imperative that I accurately present the story of my participants' experiences. According to Creswell (2005), establishing validity within narrative research means that "meaningful and justifiable inferences are drawn by the researcher during the restorying process" (p. 600). In order to do this, narrative researchers must employ rigorous data collection and spend extensive time in the field conducting research. I was able to establish validity and trustworthiness of this study in several ways. First, I spent a significant amount of time with each research participant in order to bring about an authentic experience. As stated by Lester (1999), "The establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy is critical when interviewing in order to gain depth of information, particularly...where the participant has a strong personal stake" (p. 2). In addition, the participants were given the opportunity to verify the data. The participants were invited to review the transcripts and offer feedback before the end of the research study if they chose so. I sent a copy of the interview transcripts to each participant by email. Again, only three of the participants chose to review the transcripts and offer any additional feedback outside of the initial interview sessions via the follow up meeting or by phone. The other two participants acknowledged receiving the transcripts via email and offered no additional feedback.

The role of this qualitative study is to bring these truths to light so others may connect, validate, or even question what they read. Within qualitative research, “truth” is based on how the participant sees his or her own experience. As Creswell (1998) states, “Qualitative researchers strive for ‘understanding’ that deep structure of knowledge that comes from visiting personally with informants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meanings” (p. 193). When voice is given to those who are normally silenced, this is considered “truth,” their perspective is actually captured, which I believe I did.

The Community College Context

NC Community College is the pseudonym for the large, two-year, accredited institution located in a diverse suburban setting in North Carolina. NC Community was founded in 1950s. It was established to be a training facility to prepare workers for technical jobs created by the rapid manufacturing growth in the county. In 1960s, the school was authorized to grant associate degrees. Twenty years later the college become NC Community College and is now part of the statewide North Carolina Community College System. The college’s overall mission is to provide access to lifelong learning opportunities for personal growth, workforce productivity, and community service.

The student body consists of 97 percent in-state students and 3 percent out-of-state students. In terms of diversity of the student population, NC Community College is 1 percent American Indian/Alaskan native, 2.7 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 28.8 percent Black/non-Hispanic, 1.8 percent Hispanic, and 65.2 percent White/non-Hispanic.

NC Community College offers associate degrees and certificates. It has five campuses and it serves approximately 11,000 students as of 2009.

All of the participants in this study had or were currently attending NC Community College. I selected this site because I had worked previously as a faculty instructor at this institution for over four years and this is where I was able to connect with the study participants.

Sampling

For this study, I interviewed five, adult, African American learners, including three females and two males, who described their journey while enrolled in two-year academic institutions as life-changing or transformative. Focusing on African Americans allowed me to provide insight into the phenomenon of transformative learning among this specific population of color. Interviewees of this research study were identified using purposeful sampling. As Creswell (2005) states, purposeful qualitative sampling provides an avenue in which researchers can intentionally select people who can help us understand a phenomenon. Narrowing this sampling strategy further, I employed what Creswell (1998) calls “criterion” sampling; thus, all participants met the same criteria. In this case, I sought African American adult students or former students of NC Community College who were 25 years of age or older. In addition, all participants stated, in some form, that they experienced a change or transformation as connected to their pursuit of higher education.

Three of the participants were former students of mine at NC Community College. One of the participants was a community college instructor and former coworker

at NC Community College. The final participant was an acquaintance of one of my former students. All of these participants had either expressed their experience of change to me or had demonstrated some form of change in their behavior, grades, and/or attitude while enrolled at NC Community College when I worked there. The research participants represented all levels of community college experience with a minimum of at least two years of attendance at the community college level. All of the participants have been able to progress towards completing their associates' degree or certification as well as transfer to a four-year institution to earn a bachelors degree and beyond.

Participants' Profiles

Ariel is a 40-year old, African American, divorced mother of two young children who was born and raised in North Carolina. She is also the sole caretaker of her elderly mother and sister. In 2006, she decided to return back to higher education to complete her associate's degree after enduring several family and personal crises a few years earlier. When I met Ariel in 2007, she was a full-time student and part-time work-study student at the College. She was in her last semester at NC Community College and due to graduate with her associate's degree in business administration. Ariel believes that she has moved into her role as an independent confident Black woman as a result of her educational experiences at NC Community College.

Brandon is a 42-year old, married, African American male with three children. He was born in Chicago, Illinois and moved to North Carolina to pursue his college degree at the local historically black university (HBCU). At the time of the interview, Brandon was a science instructor at NC Community College. He had also attended NC

Community College as an adult student nine years prior. As a young man living in Chicago, he was constantly in trouble for fighting and disruptive behavior. In 9th grade, he was permanently kicked out of high school. He eventually went on to earn his bachelor's degree in engineering, a master's degree in instructional technology, and will soon be working on a second master's degree. Despite Brandon's achievements, his transformative journey has been a personal struggle. While he has been able to academically excel beyond what he or others may have thought he could, he believes that obtaining higher education comes with moral responsibilities and demands that have been tough to handle. This dilemma is something that Brandon has had to face.

Christopher is a 58-year old African American male who is in his fourth year at NC Community College. He is pursuing his associate's degree in substance abuse counseling. Christopher grew up as a young man in racially polarized Philadelphia in the 1960s and 1970s. During his early life, Christopher fathered two children, but was absent for the majority of their lives. He was also heavily involved in drugs. It wasn't until he was in his early 50s, and after 20 years of sobriety, that he decided to reconnect with this family and return back to higher education to earn his college degree. He is now a changed man trying to handle the new found knowledge that he, as an African American man, has acquired about himself and his "original" African ancestry that he now so proudly claims.

Danielle's story goes far beyond the experience of being an African American or being a woman. Danielle is a 44-year old, African American, transgender woman from North Carolina. She is also a recovering crack addict who is now four years clean and

sober. Danielle has been in and out of college at NC Community College for the last ten years due to her problems with addiction. She is now in her fourth straight year at NC Community College since her addiction recovery. Danielle has expressed the need to redeem herself for the life that she led and for the people that she hurt prior to her four years of sobriety. She is now considered a leader and a mentor by many at the community college. She fights every single day to continue her journey towards sobriety, personal growth, and academic achievement.

Estelle is a 39-year old, African American woman from central North Carolina. She is also a mother of two sons. Estelle began her college career at NC Community College after being diagnosed with muscular sclerosis. Currently, she is facing several challenges—failing marriage, health issues, etc.—as she is about to enter into the toughest phase of her academic career. Her experiences and current personal challenges have added complexity to her struggle to obtain her college education.

Role of the Researcher

For this phenomenological narrative study, I interviewed five adult students of color enrolled in community colleges but, before I began to hear about their experiences, I needed to look at my experiences as a woman of color, an adult learner, and a former community college educator. As stated by Creswell (1998):

Phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to state his or her assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation and then bracket or suspend these preconceptions in order to fully understand the experience of the subject and not impose an a priori hypothesis on the experience (p. 277).

It was important for me to examine my own connection to my topic and to my research participants. I needed to look at my own subjectivity as the researcher of this study.

I began to realize more and more that who I am has a direct impact on how I see the world. Indeed, “The researcher’s primary goal is to add to the knowledge, not to pass judgment on a setting” (Bogden & Biklen, 2003, p. 33). Yet, my belief system, my values, and my life story play a role in who I am as a researcher. I had a clear understanding that, no matter how open and objective I set out to be in approaching my research, I needed to understand that who I am will have some impact on what I unconsciously and even subconsciously “choose” to uncover. As Peshkin (1988) states: “...one’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed” (p. 17). Recognizing one’s own subjectivity allows us as researchers to monitor ourselves so that we “create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attunes” us to “where self and subject are intertwined” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20).

There is a clear connection between my own ethnic and cultural background and the ethnic background of the men and women that I interviewed. As a Black woman who has taught majority students of color throughout my six year teaching career, I have a strong connection to these students because I see myself in them in many ways. My students are like me. I have been able to move forward in my own education despite the negative odds I have faced such as a drug-addicted father, family dysfunction, and my own financial and self-esteem issues. As an educator, I want to see my own students succeed and beat similar odds. Also, my participants’ ethnic background played a role into why I wanted to learn about their particular experiences. There is an abundance of

research purporting the shortcomings of African American learners within higher education—the “deficit model”—but this study offered stories of success as defined by the participants themselves. I wanted to make sure that their real life stories of success, growth, and transformation were told. As Tillman (2006) asserts when addressing the issue of culturally sensitive research, “The researcher is committed to and accepts the responsibility of maintaining the cultural integrity of the participants and other members of the community” (p. 269). Thus, I also have an emotional connection because I, too, am a person of color trying to transcend personal and prior educational challenges.

Furthermore, because I have been a part of the educational community that I explored (two-year academic institutions) as a student and as an educator, and because I have been personally and professionally satisfied with this community, I could have been somewhat slanted towards seeing a positive versus negative environment for students of color. As I discussed in Chapter I of this study, I attended community college during my academic studies and loved it. I believe that my academic experience at the community college led to the beginning of my personal transformation. I also chose to leave my job as a public school educator in order to teach at the community college level. I saw similar experiences of transformation/change demonstrated and discussed by the students that I encountered as an educator and advisor at the community college level. Because I am familiar with this environment, I am apt to describe this community as a comfortable and safe place. Still, I understand that, for some, this setting is not familiar or comfortable. In some cases, this setting might even be problematic, so I worked to *hear* the voices of my study’s participants and realize that their experiences are not the same as mine.

Also, I originally believed that community colleges could be held up as true examples of unity and integration (open access—“all are welcome”). This created a problem for me when I began to see, through my professional work and studies, that the community college setting reflected the same prejudices and judgments that were held within its surrounding community and within our educational system in general. There are still wide disparities between minority and non-minority academic achievement rates and students of color represent the majority of developmental /remedial course enrollment, etc. As a community college instructor, I was shocked by the inequities I saw and I did not want to acknowledge the problem. This disappointment could have impacted what I looked for in my own research. Still, I am very aware of the fact that real unsolved problems exist within community college institutions that need to be addressed, as I detailed in Chapter II,

As an educator, I also cannot help but bring an “educator” perspective into my research process—particularly since this study directly relates to the field of education and student learning. Still, my selected research topic goes well beyond academics. As I reflect on own life experiences, I know that I have always had to struggle in my life, and that is why I put everything that I have into those who have persevered—the underdog. Not only does my teaching life reflect this philosophy but my life in general reflects it as well. The human in me wants to see people transform their lives and bring good into the universe. So, by listening to the stories of those who have or will be in a position to do just that, I am able to bring these voices to others whom might be inspired and informed by their journeys.

What We Learn from African American Adult Learners

What do the narratives of African American adult learners at the community college level teach us about the journey through higher education and successful access to a college degree? Adult learners' higher levels of maturity, readiness to learn, and experiences can be offered as reasons for increased productivity; but, adult learners of color are not seeing the same retention and completion rates as their white counterparts. In order for educational leaders and academic institutions to work towards increasing academic success and achievement rates for this group, they must begin to look at the emotional, spiritual, and sociocultural differences that these adult learners bring to the table. Educational leaders should ask these questions: What is it that allows some African American adult learners to succeed within two-year institutions? What is it that contributes to their persistence despite the odds against them?

Indeed, the transformation that has taken place for the participants in this study represents an important phenomenon. It is important to understand the stories of African American community college learners who have experienced personal growth and academic achievement while working to obtain a college education. Once we examine these stories, we can begin to look deeper into how transformative education plays a role in changing the context of learning for students of color within higher education. We as educational leaders and educators can also help move adult learners towards their goal of earning a college degree and experiencing positive personal change through transformative learning.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS FROM INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES

In this phenomenological narrative study, I looked at how the selected participants, African American adult learners who have attended or are attending community college, experience what Mezirow (1997, 2000) describes as transformative learning. I also explored what transformation looks like for these participants and considered what it is that connects my participants' experiences. In the end, readers should have a better understanding of transformative learning for African American adult learners and how this experience can be used to positively impact student retention, academic achievement, and personal empowerment at the community college level.

As earlier stated, this research attempted to answer the following three questions:

- 1) How do adult African American learners who are attending or have attended community college define their own transformation within the context of transformative learning?
- 2) What are the sociocultural, spiritual, and empowerment dimensions of transformative learning within this population?
- 3) What factors within this transformative experience contributed to what African American adult learners define as personal growth and achievement/success?

Participants' Stories

“In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself” (Palmer, 2000, p. 8)

The following narratives illustrate my efforts to *restory* experiences of African American adult learners who have described their educational journeys at the community college as transformational or life-changing. As an African American woman and a former adult educator at the community college level, I have been personally touched by the determination and strength of many of the students I have taught, specifically the older students of color, who are seeking change in their lives through education. I have also seen, as in the case of my own personal experience as an adult learner returning back to the classroom at the age of 35 to pursue a career change, this academic journey taking on a spiritual, cultural, and self-reflective context that has not been clearly defined by educational literature. Does the journey through higher education and the desire for “transformation” take on a different framework for students of color, particularly African American students, at the community college level? If it does, why?

Ariel

Ariel is a 40-year old, African American, divorced mother of two young children. She was born and raised in North Carolina and has lived there her entire life. Soon after graduating with her high school diploma, Ariel started working full-time as a service representative for mail delivery company. For Ariel, this organization was a growing company with plenty of career opportunities. She had always received glowing reviews for her work performance, so she decided to prepare herself to move up within the

company. In 1998, Ariel enrolled in college courses at NC Community College. While in the middle of her educational pursuits, Ariel was hit hard with several family and personal crises that had a profound impact on her life and on her studies. She explained:

At first, when I went from 1998-2001 I was going just to go to college. Then life situations happened so I had to stop....I had an ailing parent (father) and I became the care-provider of the family. Between 2004-2006, my father passed, my grandmother passed, I got married but I could not go full-time, then I had children.

After Ariel's father died, she became the sole caretaker of her elderly mother. She also became, as a result of her divorce, the head of household. Ariel was so overwhelmed with the issues facing her at that point in her life that she stopped attending classes. In 2001, she permanently withdrew from NC Community College.

Within several years of these major life events, Ariel was involved in a work accident that left her with a permanent back injury. She tried to return back to the mail delivery company with the assistance of rehabilitation, but she was unable to stand for the nine plus hours the job required each day. Eventually Ariel was laid off. She explained:

I was injured at a company that I was employed with for seven years and thought that I had a career with. It was when I could no longer perform the duties of my job I realized that restarting my college degree was the right thing to do. During that time I had gotten married and had kids. I was also taking care of my father who had gotten sick at the time. Well, later I found myself divorced, a single mother with two kids – my dad had passed and I needed to take care of my mother.

Unemployed and still reeling from the difficulties that she had dealt with the last several years, Ariel decided to return back to NC Community College in 2006 to

complete the associate's degree that she was not able to finish several years earlier. As she stated: "I knew that I had to go back to school to do what I needed to do to take care of my family—I was the one everyone was relying on."

Ariel's Higher Education Journey

The importance of obtaining a college education was not emphasized to Ariel as a young child growing up. For her, school was just school—nothing more. Finding a steady job with a decent salary and taking care of her family were her top priorities. As Ariel pointed out:

My view on education during high school was very minimal. Both of my parents were high school graduates with some college credits. They both entered employment through entry level positions and worked their way to very satisfying careers until retirement, so college was not always top on my list.

As Ariel entered into adulthood, there was a renewed sense that furthering her education was not only important, it was critical to her life. In her view, the decision to return back to school was a necessity. Ariel knew that trying find a job like the one she held at the mail delivery company was going to be tough without a college degree. It was important that she return back to school so she could take care of her family and do the things that she wanted to do professionally. As Ariel stated, "You know—life circumstances—things just happened so I could not finish school the first time. I have no choice but to finish this now."

Ariel's academic plan was to attend NC Community College, earn her associate's degree in business administration, and get the training that she needed to run her own company. At the time, she was not interested in pursuing a degree beyond this level. Ariel

was raising two children and taking care of her family on her own when she returned back to college so just staying enrolled was a challenge. Despite this, Ariel knew that she needed to forge ahead and show that she could make it. The community college offered Ariel the comfort, convenience, and affordability that she needed as an older student returning back to school. As she described:

The four-year institution was not an option for me because of the cost of tuition and the age difference between me and the current students. I had to make sure I was comfortable in the environment I was in and community college was a place that I would feel comfortable. Also, in addition to cost, the community college offered the class sizes that I needed—small classes, and the scheduling was more flexible for someone like me with a family. In addition, I was already a resident of the area and this was the nearest school. I wasn't going anywhere so I knew that NC Community College would be my choice.

Academically I was able to return back to school and even change majors. I went from criminal justice to business and I was able to do it and move on without any hassles. Actually, I changed several times but, there, it was ok.

Ariel's ultimate goal was to start her own catering business which, from her perspective, did not require a four-year college degree. She felt that her drive and culinary talents would get her where she wanted to be professionally. She just needed the "paper" that would help her secure a financially stable job, take care of her family, and finance her business. For Ariel, a college degree, while important, was something that she needed to get her foot in the door of a good company.

Despite the numerous struggles Ariel faced in her efforts to complete her associate's degree, she happily described her journey through higher education as "incredible and rewarding" As Ariel stated:

Wow! The experience of the community college was very overwhelming. I peeled off layers of uncomfortable feelings about the younger generations and accepted the fact that I was capable of achieving a goal and a sense of accomplishment.

It really has been a rollercoaster ride—highs, lows, anxiety, depression, the good and the bad. The outcome is that I have the degree. I will tell you, it ages the hell out of you, but it was my age that made me more determined to finish. I was older and I knew that I was going to have to deal with young folks in class and even teachers who were younger than me.

When asked what she would describe as the most important part of her college experiences, Ariel stated that serving as a role model for her children was her number one priority. As she described:

I believe that we are our kids' first teacher. I am an influence on my kids and because I am a Black woman and am even more of an influence. I am also an influence to other Americans as well. We have seen too many of us fail—so I had to make sure I was one of the success stories.

My degree came at a time in which I needed to feel a sense of pride in myself and for my children to see that even through there are situations that may happen in life that if you think that you can, you can.

Ariel's plan after graduating from NC Community College was to find full-time employment so she could make money and start developing the plans for her catering business. By the time our last interview concluded, the U.S. economy was struggling and Ariel was unable to find full-time employment. This, unfortunately, was Ariel's greatest disappointment, but it did not lessen the significance of her achievement. As she discussed:

The economy has made a down-turn and now my degree seems to not be worth the paper it is printed on. I continue to look for jobs and thought that my degree would lead me to the job that I wanted, but the world has changed since I entered school so now I have to do more.

In the fall of 2009, Ariel decided to return back to her “security blanket,” the community college one more time. She wanted to, as she states, “complete the first degree that I did not finish when I first started school in 1998 and to make me even more marketable.” She also wanted to strategically place herself in front of the hiring administrators and the powers-that-be at NC Community College. Ariel served as a mentor and student leader on campus. She knew that she had the power to positively assist young women on campus who were going through the same struggles she faced—raising children, self esteem issues, etc. She wanted to continue to be an active part of campus community; she felt that the best way for her to stay connected was to be of service as an employee and volunteer at NC Community College.

While Ariel felt somewhat letdown by the realization that, because of the current U.S. record high job losses and unemployment, her associate’s degree might not get her to place where she wants to be professionally and financially at this moment, she clearly understood that her experiences and her pursuit of higher education are not yet over.

Ariel commented:

Right now, I am awaiting the next challenge to come my way. I can’t define myself as a success yet, but I can be happy for my achievements—my kids, my degree—happy with myself. I am still transforming. My change has moved me from fear, confusion, conformity, and then changing again. I went through all of these phases while I was in school and I am still going through them as I try to use my degree and look for jobs. One other thing is that I am now comfortable with being educated—being an educated black woman. I see that my life is what I

make it. I am no longer afraid of success, failure, or completion, no matter in which order or in what stage of my life it enters. I am now reformatting myself again as I decide to continue with school [returning back to NC Community College to pursue her second associate's degree].

Ariel's Transformation

Ariel talked about her educational experience as life changing. As she stated, she was a very different woman before she decided to pursue her studies: "Well, previously everything was given to me—handed to me. Because of my father's death and my divorce, I am now doing things on my own." Ariel believes that the community college environment and her connection with the young students she mentored allowed her to become the self-assured independent woman that she is today. She remarked:

Well, I had grown in with the idea that the woman's place is to do household chores and support the family. My dad was the leader but my mom also supported my dad and the family by taking care of us. Well, when my father died and I got divorced, I was forced in a situation where I had to step up and take care of the family as a woman. I now see other young woman on campus looking to be taken care of by these knuckleheads that leave them pregnant or broken. As "Mama A" these girls come to me and I try to guide them in a different direction and show them that they need to take care of themselves.

The community college experience also opened her view of the world. Ariel was brought up in a strong Christian household and she has a strong faith in God. Having lived in North Carolina all of her life and raised in the church, Ariel had not been exposed to diversity and difference at the level she experienced at the community college. As she stated:

The community college also allowed me to expand socially and think bigger. There is so much diversity—all kinds of people—different races. There were

different clubs—student government, academic clubs, everything—and this allowed me to pick and choose. I said to myself, ‘I will try anything once’ and that is what I did. I became part of different clubs and organizations on campus as well as working as a work study student. This brought more people into my circle. Before this experience, I was basically in a box...not exposed too much of anything. At the community college, I was exposed to different people—gay students, international students, all kinds. I was comfortable in the environment and I become more comfortable being a student.

While she pursued her studies full-time the second time around, Ariel believed that it was her faith that kept her strong as she struggled with financial issues, academic performance, and family pressure at home. This was particularly evident when she described her last semester at NC Community College and her struggle to graduate:

Spirituality has gotten me through this pursuit. I remember one class, my accounting class that I was struggling with. I had taken it for the second, time and it was one of the classes that I needed to graduate—my graduation date was May 8th. Well I struggled in that class and I ended up with an F. I boo hooed like there was no tomorrow and decided I was going to go see the professor to see if there was something I could do. I must have sat in that office for a half hour crying about my graduation. The professor looked at me and said, ‘I know that you did everything that you needed to do to try to get through this. Do you feel like you deserve the F?’ I didn’t know what to say so I just looked down. He looked at me and said that he was going to change it to a D. I don’t know why that happened. I didn’t ask for it. I just knew that I was going to be able to graduate. I believe that my faith played a part in this. My prayer and my goal were to graduate. I had worked my butt off to get here and this professor knew that I worked to the bone—turned in all my homework, did extra, all of that. Again, it was intended for me to graduate when I did.

Ariel believes that she has truly evolved as a strong African American woman and mother as a result of her educational experiences at NC Community College. Earning her college degree and going through her academic journey challenged the way she previously saw herself. “I had been a daughter, a wife and a mother for so long that now

my identity was “student” and I am ok with that” (Ariel, 2008, TS). As Carlson (2002) states when discussing Friere and emancipatory learning, “Through education, people begin to recognize themselves better, which also means that the aim of education is self-knowledge” (p. 70). Ariel’s story demonstrates the possibility of change and self-empowerment through education.

Summary – Ariel’s Narrative

Overall, I assert that Ariel’s life situations exemplify what Mezirow (1991) defines as the disoriented dilemma phase. Throughout a span of a ten year period, Ariel experienced numerous traumas or “trigger events” (unexpected event that leads to discomfort or perplexity in the learner) that changed the direction of her life—the death of her parents, her divorce, and job loss. As Ariel attempted to pursue her education while she was in the middle of these issues, she did not have the endurance and support that she needed to continue with her classes. But, after the “storm had cleared,” she was able to see that she needed to make changes in her life in order to financially and emotionally support herself and her family. Her tragedies became the triggers that brought about change in her life. For Ariel, getting a college degree was the key to bring about the life change that she desperately desired.

Brandon

Brandon is a 42-year old, African American male from Chicago. He is married and has three children. Brandon holds a bachelor’s degree in engineering, a master degree in instructional technology, and will soon be working on a second master’s degree. At the time of the interview, Brandon was a science instructor at NC Community College.

As a young man living in Chicago, Brandon was constantly in trouble for fighting and disruptive behavior. Brandon's mother became frustrated with him and fed up with the city's troubled public school system. In her view, Brandon was slowly heading down the wrong path and moving closer and closer to the bad influences that surrounded him. Brandon's mother began to look for a ways to protect her son, so she sent him to North Carolina to live with his sister. She also enrolled him in high school where his older cousin led as the school's principal.

Unfortunately, this new location did not change Brandon's troubled behavior. After continuous incidents of fighting, skipping school, and suspension, Brandon's cousin permanently kicked Brandon out of his high school. Soon after, Brandon returned back home to Chicago. It was during that time that Brandon made the decision to enroll in school. He explained:

I don't know what it was but something clicked for me and I realized that I wanted to get my high school diploma. Sometimes, when you around a bunch of like-minded people like you, sometimes they make you think that you are smarter than they are because they always come to you for certain advice. They made me think that I knew something but I kept thinking, 'I don't know nothin' but they made me feel like I knew a bit of something. So, I took that bit of energy that they gave me and I finished my schooling.

Brandon earned his GED and mastered several trades by the age of 21 through Job Corp. Eventually he started taking classes at the local community college. Brandon's return to college was greatly influenced by his mother's decision to return back to school to finish her degree at the age of 52. His mother had previously attended college in North Carolina but was never able to complete her degree once her family relocated to Chicago:

While I was there [Chicago], I figured that now is a good time. I needed to go back to school so I started attending community college. I think it was my mom who was instrumental in me deciding to go to college.

When I was growing up my mother went back to college at a late age to study history and I'm the youngest of six and all my brothers and sisters attempted college whereas only three of us have completed college. She was 52 when she got her degree. She attended college and then this was back in the '40s. Then she got married and went on to have children in a span of 22 years, and so, when she decided to go back to school that kinda inspired me to let me know that I'm able to go to school, too. School wasn't on my agenda, but I worked at a company and I felt that I was smarter than the guys that were supervising me. So they inspired me to want to do better with my life.

Brandon knew, even as an adolescent, that he had not been the young man that his mother had tried to raise him to be. Because of his continual behavior issues in school, he had put himself further and further behind academically and intellectually. "You can't learn it if you aren't there," he said. For Brandon, getting kicked out of public school by his own family was proof that he was becoming what his cousin, the school's principal, said he was, "A nothing and a bad influence." Brandon further commented:

And, to be honest, if my mother didn't take the time to kick me out the house, too, and make me go to my sister's, I may have been going down those wrong paths.

This was the crisis or disoriented dilemma that caused Brandon to make the changes he needed to make in his life.

Brandon's Higher Education Journey

Brandon expressed the same ambivalence towards education at an early age as other participants in this study: "Education was pretty unimportant to me. Plus, I was

running the streets.” Despite this, Brandon’s mother tried to stress the value of learning and knowledge in his life. He stated:

Yeah, ‘cuz I was struggling to get As and Bs. You get a C—that’s like flunking ‘cuz I didn’t know you could get the C in college. My mother always said it’s about the knowledge. It’s about the learning—not about getting a job. So I always thought you were only allowed As and Bs in college because the whole time I was in middle school, elementary school, and a little bit of high school, I was getting Ds and Fs. That’s all I got. I thought college was different.

Brandon’s first attempt at higher education was not successful. He started off at the local community college but struggled academically. It was during this time that he was diagnosed with a learning disability. As Brandon described:

After I got my GED, probably about a year later, I started attending community colleges. My first attempt at a community college was not successful because that’s where I realized that I had learning disabilities. I found out I wasn’t a very good reader, but I did have an aptitude for math and science, but it was challenging because of the reading. Yeah, I dropped out of community college for about two years and got a job and, through working with the job, I tried other avenues of education. I tried stenography and I tried just going one class at a time, and then it came to a point where my job was getting on my nerves, so I decided to return back to school full-time.

Brandon attended the local public university, but again, struggled academically. After he withdrew from the university, he decided that Chicago was not the best place for him to be. He discussed:

My intent was to study science. I stayed there one year and had average grades. I did not take any science courses but I struggled. I struggled. After that, I decided to move away from the Chicago area ‘cuz I grew up there. I lived there most of my life. I wanted to get away, so I moved back down south to North Carolina.

In 2000, Brandon returned to North Carolina with the plan to attend the local HBCU (historically Black university) and work towards a college degree in biology. He had very little money so, as he stated, he relied on his faith to see him through:

When I told my mother and my family members that I was moving to North Carolina to go to school, they said, ‘Well how you going to pay for it? How are you going to do this?’ My main phrase was, ‘I’m going to walk by faith and not by sight.’ It was funny because —this little story—I spent four years down here [North Carolina] before I got my undergrad and I never had car insurance but I thought I did. I never got in an accident. I never got a ticket or nothing and I always had money to pay for anything I wanted. I always kept a part-time job. I had plenty of clothes. I had a brother, the one that I told you I thought was so smart—well, he used to bless me every month with \$100 ‘cuz he said he’s going to *kill me with kindness*. And so I always say I’m walking by faith and not by sight. That right there, that phrase right there, just kept me motivated to always do the best I could.

Brandon moved back to North Carolina in 2001 to begin his college studies but was not able to enroll into the local HBCU. He stated:

So I moved down south in North Carolina to attend the local HBCU, however, I could not get in because I owed money to my college back home [in Chicago]. So the admissions director at the time suggested that I attend a community college where I could possibly get in and, once I pay my bill off, I could come back and re-enroll at the university. At the time, it was inexpensive and it was an avenue to get where I was trying to go. Looking back on it, I think it was the best thing that happened to me because, when I transferred to the university, I had different study habits than the university kids did.

Brandon enrolled in NC Community College that same week so he could begin working on his studies. As he described:

I had to rebound so I enrolled in the community college. NC Community College started two weeks later, so that gave me enough time to get my finances together and to get some transcripts sent to enroll there. Plus NC Community College is

unique where they accept anyone. And, that community college is unique in that they accept anyone on delayed basis, and when I mean delayed, your transcripts can come late any time during the semester. You can pay weeks once you're into the semester. It allows you opportunities that the university did not allow. School was also very, very cheap. School was like maybe \$200 a session so I had already paid for my living. I paid for that for a year ahead of time. All I had to do was get a part-time job. This allowed me to be a full-time student.

Brandon was able to discover his own academic abilities while at the community college. Having attended both two-year and four-year institutions, he saw a drastic difference in how the community college and its faculty worked with students such as himself. As he stated:

In the community college, they prepared me for the university level by making sure that I studied right. They taught me study skills. They made sure I studied strategies. They made sure I handed in A-level work and was able to explain how to do something. They made sure I understood, in other words.

They [the community college] developed your skills. So you can say that the community college develops the student where as the university wants you to come in already knowing how to study. They have different expectations. One main thing that the university would always say is you should have learned this in high school. Well, I was an older student that didn't half way pay attention in high school so that was the disadvantage. With the community college, they didn't say you shoulda' learned this in high school; they say this is how we should do it the proper way.

When asked how the community college dealt with his learning disability, Brandon stated, "They took a little bit more time. They were able to recognize. At the university they weren't able to recognize it." He added:

Once I enrolled into NC Community College, I took the placement test. I found out that I needed to—after getting the placement tests, I realized I needed to do better grade-wise. So, I found out that I needed to strengthen my reading skills,

my writing skills, and my math skills. I started taking remedial courses—developmental courses. I took a development reading, development writing, and also a developmental math. At the time, math was self paced and it was easy. Self pace was perfect for me because my aptitude for math was strong, but I took a long time getting through the reading and the writing. But I started at the bottom of reading and writing and at the top of math.

For Brandon, a student who eventually went on to earn a masters degree, reading his first book, cover-to-cover, was a monumental and life changing experience. He explained:

This is gonna sound funny but I read my first book, first full book, at the community college. It was *The Color Purple* for an English class. My teacher said, ‘If you read a book and we sit down and discuss it then that can count as an essay grade.’ I got an A in that class because that is exactly what I did. She put it out for the whole class. She said if you read a book and we sit down and discuss it, and she gave us a list of books that we could read and one of them was *The Color Purple* and I had seen the movie so I made the association with the movie and the book and saw the difference of how books are written as opposed to movies that are made from the book. We sat down and we discussed it and it was the first full book I ever read. That was my greatest accomplishment ‘cuz I knew I had a reading problem. That was my single most important event in my college life.

After two years at NC Community College, Brandon successfully transferred to the local HBCU in his junior year at the age of 29. His declared that his initial attitude about the community college and his desire to “hurry up and be done with it so I can go to a real college” changed as he began to experience his own personal and academic growth. There was real value in his community college experience. He said, “Yeah, it falls back on what my mom taught me about intelligence. You want to go for the knowledge and what you can learn as opposed to just the degree to get the job.” In fact,

Brandon realized the community college was the most efficient way for him to complete his studies and be prepared for the four-year university. He explained:

While at the community college, when I was taking the curriculum classes, I continued to hone my skills in English and in writing. Science became really natural to me so those courses weren't a problem. I learned a lot during my English and math classes and then I realized I might as well stay here because then I can pick up most of my hours here inexpensively and transfer them over there [the four-year institution]. When I transfer, I can be a junior.

Brandon went on to earn his bachelor's degree in engineering at the local HBCU. Brandon worked as a public school teacher then in the private sector as a company manager before "stumbling" upon a teaching job at NC Community College in the same department that he started his developmental coursework. He believes that getting the opportunity to teach at NC Community College was a miracle and a blessing. Brandon also believed that it was God's intent for him to return back to the community college to serve others:

About seven years ago, I received a call from my writing instructor at NC Community College when I attended there. She let me know that there was an opening for a math instructor in the department. She was the person who kept on me and helped me when I was a struggling student. I couldn't write a paragraph to save my life but she helped me get through it. This department helped me when I was starting at the bottom with beginning level classes but without those classes, I wouldn't have known why I had the problems in school that I did. I wouldn't have known that I had a reading issue that needed to be corrected. Now I try to do what I can to help these young brothers and sisters that come through here. I was one of the first instructors of color in this department and, up until a few years ago, one of the few.

For Brandon, teaching at the community college where he attended was his way of giving back to the teachers who helped him. NC Community College was the place

where Brandon understood, for the first time, that he was intelligent and had the capacity to learn. What made his experiences at this particular institution so different from the past unsuccessful attempts? Brandon asserted that his caring and supportive instructors at the community college made the difference for him:

When the professors at the community college used to give us information, they gave us a lot of feedback on what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong. They, in essence, were transferring their knowledge on to me and telling me how to apply what they were looking for. They were honest with me. The beautiful thing about my teachers at the community college ...[compared to university instructors] (was) that they were honest about what I didn't know and what I did know and then they came around and said this is how we correct what you don't know.

Brandon's Transformation

As overviewed in Chapter II, despite the gain in overall enrollment, African American men lag behind both Black female and white students in the degree attainment, retention, and completion rates (Perrakis, 2008; Leinbach, 2005). This issue has been addressed in academic research for years, yet, the outcome remains the same. The academic experiences of Black males such as Brandon show that, as critical race theory asserts, race and gender play integral roles in this populations' daily reality and have significantly impacted the educational journey towards educational attainment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). Brandon's story is a story of success and possibility for African American males in higher education. Brandon was able to excel beyond what he or others might have thought he could excel academically. Brandon's community college experience also helped him understand the significance of education in his life as a Black male as he moved through his educational journey. This

understanding became much clearer to Brandon after he started teaching at the community college. As he stated:

You know, after being in college for so long and teaching in college for so long, I realize that being a Black man or African American in college, I'm part of the minority of Black men getting educated.

When asked what the community college experience brought to his academic journey, he stated:

Community college assured my abilities. Community college let me know I had the ability to do it. But it wasn't until I walked across the state and I was so proud of myself as a parent would be of their child. Because I said I can't believe this...to see myself graduating from college and surpassing all my friends who I thought were smarter than me.

Cranton's (1992) framework discusses three types of change that take place for learners within transformation: change in assumptions—the way one believes; change in perspective—the way one sees or thinks; and change in behavior—the way one acts and/or acts out. Brandon has seen a change in the way he believes in his own academic capabilities and the way he sees himself and his role in the world. He commented:

The things that I did in the past—the way I thought about things like, just doing enough to get by in all aspects of life. This is what I was use to do, but, after I got to college and got my degrees, I realized that just doing enough wasn't good enough 'cuz everybody can do just good enough. You want to be above average—if not all the way above or at least slightly above. You didn't want to be just regular. A lot of people are like that—just doing enough. I emphasize that with high school students. Just doing enough isn't good enough. I emphasize that with my kids. You can get a C and we'll work on it, but getting an A and a B is what is expected of you.

Now Brandon is working on his own growth as a man of God. Brandon, like many of the participants in this study, described himself as a Christian and unapologetically attributed the rewards he has received in life to his faith in God:

I believe God is almighty. I believe he is someone that can take you into the empth degree if you believe. My spiritual foundation, I believe, runs deep. I like to read scripture. My spiritual belief helped frame my decision-making. My spiritual beliefs helped frame what my gift is. My gift is teaching and, like you said, to transfer information. I think the Lord gifted me to be able to transfer and to other students and help me understand that science is a particular subject that everyone likes or would care to like. So he gifted me with the ability to be able to express it to others and to transfer to others, so I thank God for that. I believe in Jesus, but I also believe that people have the right to worship any God that they want and I love all people even if they don't believe in the God that I believe in. I believe that if they believe in something of a higher power that keeps them strong and keeps them at peace. I praise God for that.

While Brandon acknowledged that the experience of his academic journey has led to his intellectual and professional growth, he also felt that this same education temporarily moved him away from dutifully living right by God. In Brandon's view, he basically lost his way after he had achieved the success he had prayed for. As he described:

At one brief moment in time, when I achieved that particular goal, I felt I no longer needed to walk by sight or walk by faith because I had my 'mess' together. That's what I thought and school is famous for distorting you intellectually. Thinking that you have done something and so do you really need God now? Well, you need God, but not like I needed him before. So it's [schooling] famous for that. Yeah, I was distorted because I'm like, 'God, I achieved this goal. Thanks, God. Call you when I need you next time. You done help me these last couple of years, we cool. Well, all right now. You've done me this solid. I'm cool 'til the next time.'

Since Brandon had lost sight of that faith soon after he received the "blessing of an education," he was not, growing and evolving as he should be as a man of God. Brandon

believes that he became overconfident, maybe even arrogant, instead of humble as he achieved more education. This behavior, of course, went against what Brandon saw as “living right by God.”

Brandon’s story is an example of how individuals can make great strides in some aspects of their life as they continue to struggle with other areas. His story also adds to Mezirow’s (1991) notion that personal change/transformation leads to “exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions” (p. 168). As Brandon stated:

Yeah, I think it’s important that we watch the choices that we make or things that we do at a young age, in our teenage years, in your 20s, in your 30s. All your choices dictate on how happy you’re going to be in your later years. Your choices are basically connected to your happiness...I think it impacts and directly connects. If you make wrong choices, it’s easy to go down the wrong path and that has nothing to do with your intelligence. It’s just that, at the time, you may have a brief sense of not thinking clearly.

Despite his personal struggles, Brandon believes that the rewards of higher education and earning a college degree had a big impact on his view of education. He explained:

Education is one of the most important things that we can have. It is the thing now that buys opportunities. It’s more than—a top priority of it, however, it can provide so many different opportunities. It can open so many different doors. I didn’t even realize it before. It has also brought me awareness and understanding. I’m aware of the importance of education and how far it can get you and I understand now that, without education, opportunities are limited if you don’t come from an affluent family.

Even more, being a father showed Brandon what he needed to do for his own children to prepare them for their future. As he stated:

I took a different approach than my parents took with me. I let my kids know that education is top priority. Getting the masters is where you end. The PhD is optional. I say if you don't go to college one thing that you're going to do is get extended learning somewhere. And I'll explain whether it's a trade school or if you go into the military you're going to have to get extended knowledge. So right now at this point, education should be your top—top priority.

Summary - Brandon's Narrative

Brandon is conscious of the fact that obtaining a college degree comes with responsibilities and pressure that are, for some, difficult to handle. As he has experienced in his own life, having a degree doesn't mean that troubled behavior disappears. In fact, destructive behavior is magnified when a person is deemed as highly educated because "He/she should know better." Living a "transformed life" while, at the same time, trying to work out issues and behaviors from his past are some things that Brandon has had to face as a Christian, a husband, and a teacher. As in every individual, who Brandon's was will always be a part of who he is today. His particular transformation exemplifies Tisdell's (2003) back and forth spiraling as described in Chapter II of this study. As Tisdell (2003) states:

In our attempts to understand and make sense of our lives and in the ongoing development of identity, we often spiral back. Yet we don't simply spiral back; we also move forward... (p. 93).

It is during this time when individuals look to religion or spirituality to move forward, transform, and become new (*saved*). Brandon was able to transform himself from a high school dropout to a master's level academic. He is also a loving family man with a family that supports him every step of the way. But Brandon is also a man struggling with

decisions and actions that he has made and these decisions have collided with his personal and spiritual journey. As he described:

Now, after getting married and having children, I realized that I need God more than ever now. I need him more now than I did when I was walking my faith and not by sight. So I think my spirituality keeps me grounded and helps me become the man that I am for my family.

Is Brandon a success story? Yes, I believe that he is. He was able to persist and earn his college degree despite the challenges that he faced—a reading disability, several unsuccessful attempts at higher education in the past, a history of aggression and behavioral issues, etc. In addition, his former students and coworkers describe him as a caring and skillful educator who has changed the lives of students that he taught. He is also a husband and father who sees his family's needs as his primary responsibility, and he has worked hard to meet those needs. But does Brandon see himself as a success?

Success is not something he believes that he can claim as his *own*. As he put it:

Yes and no. I don't believe I am a success story because I'm just living my life the way God has planned it to be. Everybody lives out their life the way God had it planned. The way we react to situations—that's why I think I'm not a success. I think I am a success to myself based on the way I was when I was a child. I heard negative comments about me in my life. I also had negative ways that I perceived myself, so, in this case, I am a success story. Maybe my story may be successful to someone else but, in actuality, it's just the storyline that God has planned out for me.

Christopher

Christopher is a 58-year old, African American male who is in his fourth year at NC Community College. Christopher is currently pursuing his associates' degree in

substance abuse counseling and eventually looking at becoming an educator and licensed social worker dealing with addictive behavior. He had not been in the classroom in over 30+ years before he enrolled at NC Community College. Christopher was born and raised in the city of Philadelphia. The racism he experienced as a young man in Philadelphia's racially-integrated public school system tainted his view of education. He described:

Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know if I can honestly say that school was a waste, but I disdained it. All my time in elementary, well, junior high and high school, I didn't like it. The social atmosphere shaped my thinking. During the time of my early years in school, race riots and racism were very high and prevalent and almost daily. I had to fight three times a day for three years. I had to fight to get to school. I had to fight in school, and I had to fight to get home and this went on for three years of my life in junior high school. So that set the stage for my discouragement of school. I couldn't say I didn't want to go to that school. I had to go.

Christopher did well in school academically despite the racism that he encountered on a daily basis. Christopher's mother did what she could to make sure that her children were "raised right," as he says, and that they understood what it meant to be intelligent productive human beings. He said:

So, I did do well from my elementary, junior high and high school as far as reading and comprehension. I think my family helped me because of their logical nature and simplicity. My mother's actions toward us—she always tried to instill simple behavior in us. One of our old favorite sayings was, 'If I can knock a hole in your head and pour some sense into it, I would.' I've been hearing that since the age of 9, and I know and understand it better today at the age of 58. I know exactly what she meant and sincerity in saying it. Her desire was for her children to be basic sound children—not necessarily scholars and doctors—but she wanted us to have a sound and basic understanding of things.

Despite his mother's loving support and encouragement, Christopher quit high school during his 12th grade year. Soon after, he was drafted into the military to serve in Vietnam but went AWOL for refusing to fight for political reasons. He was later discharged from the Army after turning himself in. Soon after he returned to Philadelphia, his mother became very sick and eventually died. Christopher's father died roughly six months later. After the deaths of his parents, Christopher's brothers became his caretakers. It was also during this time period that he and his brothers became actively involved in neighborhood organizations connected to Philadelphia's Black Power Movement. As he recounted:

Even though I had a great family—a great mother and father, and brothers who took care of me, growing up in Phili was tough. We were in the heart of it—that bullshit that happened to Ramona Africa and MOVE cops runnin' up on us all the time. When the Black Power Movement came in strong in Phili, my brothers became very involved and included me in it. I learned more from that experience than I could ever learn in school. But, I don't know what happened but after my mother died [health reasons] and then my father died right after, things changed for me. My brothers still looked after me but I just felt lost. I think that is when I started hangin' out with some cats [friends] that I probably shouldn't have.

During the time period when Christopher entered the workforce, a high school diploma was the only real requirement needed to get a job. In 1982, he decided to return back to school to earn his high school diploma. He stated:

I did not graduate high school because I left in 12th grade. But I went back some years later to the university and I was determined to get my diploma. I did not want a GED. I wanted an actual diploma because I had done the work in school, then I tripped out. So my papers are correct. I'm in accord now. So, now I have a diploma. I got it around '84. I got out of school in 1968. That's when I left school but I got my diploma in '84.

All of Christopher's friends and "hanging buddies" were in and out of jail. He, on the other hand, was able to secure a stable job with the State of Philadelphia that came with good benefits and a decent yearly salary. Still, Christopher tried to balance this life with the circumstances he faced in a community laden with drugs and poverty. He stated:

I was one of the lucky ones because I was eventually able to get a good job with the State. Otherwise, I could have been like the others. Mind you, I was still handling my business, working, but I was also hangin' tight in the clubs and the streets.

Christopher's life took a dark direction when he became involved in drugs. When asked how and why he got involved in drugs, he believes that, at the time, "Everybody was doing it." He further explained that his own womanizing, partying, and the grief he felt over his mother and father's death all contributed to his drug use:

Not even my mother's death or my father's death or other deaths was as tragic as the consumption of drugs and dope and taking myself totally out of a self that I never knew anyway. I never even got to know myself before the drugs. So, the drugs took me further and further away from who I was.

During this time period, Christopher also fathered two children, but he was absent for the majority of their lives. He was also in and out of drug rehabilitation. It wasn't until he was in his early 50s that he decided to reconnect with this family. Christopher explained:

My enrollment in college is the result of a reunion with my daughters. We have been separated for a while and without making a long story we had—we made contact and it went well. We emailed each other, we sent pictures, we talked on the phone, and then finally the decision was made to, look, let's see each other.

They made a trip to Philadelphia around the holidays and that started it. That was the beginning of our contact and it went well.

Christopher eventually relocated to North Carolina at the request of his family. He described:

In 1998, the mother of my children and I reconnected. I had been clean of drugs, still living in Phil, and looking to make changes in my life. During that time I also reconnected with my daughters. One of the things they wanted was for me to move to North Carolina and be with them. Okay, that is the point. I'm here because of the grace of other people—the forgiveness of other people. Like I said the absence itself was, if I can say, maybe inexcusable in the eyes of other people. But, with all that being said, we still found a way that we thought it would be best to be together. A whole lot of forgiveness took place, acceptance took place, and desire kicked in. Yeah, I mean that can never be done in its entirety, but when somebody allows you or affords you to come into their life after the absence, you feel a bit of an obligation and a commitment to try and make things right.

When Christopher arrived to North Carolina, he found out that his two daughters had attended college but never finished. Their mother suggested that he enroll in the local community college and work on his career of interest. She wanted him to go to college and agreed to assist and support him while he attended full time. She was also interested in reuniting the family. As Christopher stated, “You know, I can get into school and do some things. That was the initial concept of me going to college. I also accepted it because I was tired of how things were going in my life.”

Christopher's Higher Educational Journey

A few months after moving to North Carolina, Christopher enrolled in NC Community College. At the time, he was not sure what he wanted to study but he was

interested in the idea of returning back to school. When asked why he decided to attend a two-year institution rather than looking at the local university, Christopher said:

Well, the finances were not there to start out at a four-year. Community college made sense to me because I talked to people that had gone there. They gave me all the benefits of going there and it suited my current status at the time. I came down here unemployed. I had some money, but I was unemployed.

Attending NC Community College, he stated, was pretty much his only choice:

That wasn't such a complicated choice. It was a simple choice. The people I moved to move with live here and they had gone to NC Community College themselves. They recommended and I just ...I took suggestions. When I was in the rehab my counselor would always tell me you need to take suggestions, so I did that in this case. I just took a suggestion and went with it you know and it's working out. Plus the proximity, it was just easy—right around the corner.

As Christopher talked about what it was like to attend the community college, he became emotional, expressing very strong feelings about his return back to school. As he stated:

Except for going back in '84 to take the GED test to get my diploma, it's been since 1968 since I sat in the classroom. I have more interest and desire now than ever to be better as far as from an educational standpoint.

Adult learners and student learners are differentiated by their set of life experiences and have different sets of needs. As Gerstner-Horvarth (1991) explain: "... They [adult learners] do not have time for irrelevancies, and are especially resentful when they feel their time is being wasted. Therefore, they want a learning situation to be

meaningful to their life's circumstances" (p. 40). This was definitely the case for

Christopher, as he shared:

I think with that combined with my life experiences, this [NC Community College] is like a technical college and I understand better what that means now. It combines the life experiences with the schooling...So when I can relate my life experiences to my schooling and have that benefit me from combining the two, it just makes more sense to me. It makes a better sense to me.

Maybe the question sometime should be, "What do you as an individual bring to college?" See, I brought to college my mother, my brothers, my influences, my pain, my suffering, my idiosyncrasies. I mean, my being. I bring my being to college. My persona, my lifestyle, you know, all that I'm bring. That comes with me. That's part of me.

Christopher's Transformation

For Christopher, his educational journey opened up a new sense of African identity as Black man in America. This new identity had more power and meaning. As described by Myers et al. (1991):

For some of us, claiming a positive cultural or gender identity is a process involving unlearning oppressions and negative beliefs about ourselves, our own cultural group, and that of others. For others of us, claiming a positive cultural identity might mean acknowledging privilege, and examining how we might be allies for others, as well as how we can reclaim oppressed parts of ourselves. This is the journey of our own naming (as quoted in Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, p. 14).

The more Christopher learned about his own ancestral history and the histories of other oppressed communities/populations, the more he believed that the U.S. education systems have failed to acknowledge the significance of African and African American history. As a child of the racial volatile 1960s and 1970s, he understands the importance

of being a “strong, educated Black man.” Still, because he was also just beginning to understand his own past history of self destruction and drug abuse, it took him a while to claim this title. He explained:

It’s still in progress but, to understand the feelings and the logic that people apply to their behaviors and then knowing that there’s an opportunity to change the thinking of not only myself but other people is incredible. Eventually, I hope to be able to help people with all these social ills that they have. So, I’m going through the process of examining my own social ills through my instructors that are helping me understand what I never understood before—myself, to some degree. That’s powerful.

Christopher, who described himself as “non-religious” also saw spiritual facets in his education journey. As he stated:

I don’t take being in college lightly. It means a lot to me and it soothes my soul to some degree. The teacher doesn’t want to hear that. They wanna know that you know how to do the assignment - whether it soothes your soul or not. They want to know that you put out the effort to get the assignment done and understand the criteria for the course. So, they negate the spirituality. Teachers don’t want to hear that your soul is stirring...’Did you do this assignment?’ (laughter) ‘What does that syllabus say?’ That’s how they want you to work this thing.

His spiritual journey was more of a connection to his heritage as an African man born in America, and not, as most of the other participants described, connected to some form of Christian faith. He explained:

...I think my education involves more of a practicality and a necessity. But there is room for spirituality in my education. Because when I learn certain practical applications and I learn certain dynamics, I try and filter them through my spirituality. But there are times—and I’m learning in education some times you can’t be forthright with spirituality. There’s not much room for spirituality because the parameter they [classroom educators] set is the empirical evidence

itself. If you can't see it, feel it, and touch it, and explain it, okay, then what are we gonna do with spirituality and faith—as if they don't play a part, but they do.

For Christopher, the process of learning was, as he describes it, a “spiritual” experience.

As he stated:

One thing I like to point out is that education, Ramona, is a wonderful tool and what I am really truly amazed at, to this day, is what I've studied in my black history studies. I believe this to the core of my soul—that we as black people are the leaders and the original producers of humanity. I believe that more than I believe that my name is Christopher...What I'm saying to you is, with the combination of spirituality, education, empirical evidence, we [African Americans] are people that are spiritual more than anything. First and foremost, we're spiritual people.

Christopher also believes that his educational journey has led him to the understanding of his own past life and past actions. Because he is now aware of who is his as an intelligent African-centered man, he has more understanding to change his own life. As he stated:

Well, yes, because of what I know now that this was classic conditioning. My lifestyle had been no more than classical conditioning—conditioned to my environment, conditioned to racism, conditioned to unequal less-than jobs. I got conditioned. There were times when I looked in the paper for jobs. I didn't look for no more than a dishwasher job. I knew I was capable of something else but, when I opened the damn paper, all I looked for was a dishwashing job or something menial like that. That's why I looked in the paper. I was semi-conscious about things that were better but, for practicality purposes, if I applied for this dishwashing job, I'm gone get it. I knew my chances of getting that job were greater than anything else. That's classical conditioning, you know. But I didn't know that then, but I know what classical conditioning is all about now. I know what faulty thinking is. I know what faulty faiths and beliefs are—where you don't make a genuine choice in your life because you go along with what they went along with. 'They' may mean your mother. 'They' may mean your preacher. 'They' may mean your neighbors. But it wasn't you. It wasn't your choice. You went along. You know there's a lot of growing and understanding

that I think I had a little bit of before coming to college but there is something very special about being in college because you say to yourself, ‘This is a challenge that I’m making. How much better can I be? What can I do if I do this?’

This classic conditioning, as Christopher describes, is the thought that “I am *less than* so I expect *less than*.” He began to believe what society projected to him—that being Black meant expecting less than what the dominant white majority received in society. Christopher was exposed to pervasive racial violence and negativity towards the Black community growing up in Philadelphia in the 1960s and 1970s. While he and his brothers fought against these practices through their involvement in the local Black Power Movement, Christopher saw that he, unconsciously, struggled with his own sense of self-worth. As a result, Christopher believed in his own inferiority. He also saw this in the community of individuals around him. For, Christopher, this low sense of self-worth manifested itself in several ways in his life. Dropping out of high school, becoming involved in drugs, and looking for work that was beneath his capabilities were some examples of this manifestation.

In the end, the power and process of education has changed Christopher’s life. His evolution from drug addict to father to scholar continues to have an obvious significant impact. He expressed:

This experience has been an emotional one—where I am discovering myself and connecting things together. My education has allowed me to connect what I already knew with what I am currently learning. Ramona, it’s crazy. My mind doesn’t stop thinking—even after I turn in what the teachers ask me to turn in and do what is required, I am still thinking and wondering. For years, I have been putting down my thoughts and reflections on paper but now I am able to revisit them and see a difference in, not what I think, but in how I think and in who I am.

Summary – Christopher’s Narrative

As stated by Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is the first step towards personal growth and change for many adult learners. Through transformative learning, individuals gain critical awareness and insight into the history and consequences of institutional practices that oppress them. They discover options for action while gaining greater understanding of the history of change. I contend that Christopher’s narrative demonstrates the full progression of an individual as defined by Mezirow’s ten phases of transformation, which I explain further in Chapter IV. Like Brandon, Christopher acknowledges that his transformation is not complete. At 58, Christopher’s life journey is just beginning.

Danielle

Danielle’s story goes far beyond the experience of being an African American woman. This participant’s story is also an examination of intersectionality—how living as a combination of the “other” (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.) impacts one’s existence and experiences in the world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Indeed, Danielle is a 44-year old, African American, transgender woman from North Carolina. Danielle describes herself as transgendered and is currently transitioning into living life as a male.

One of the things she is most proud of is that she is a recovering crack addict who is now four years clean and sober. After stopping and starting her studies at NC Community College over the last ten years due to her heavy drug use and abuse, she is now in her fourth straight year at NC Community College since her recovery from addiction.

Danielle is taking courses in music and counseling at NC Community College. She plans to transfer to a four-year university and eventually earn her PhD in counseling and music theory—developing music therapy programs for addicts. Danielle, more than any other individual I have ever personally encountered, spends a great deal of time mentoring and helping others. She has expressed the need to ‘redeem’ herself for the life that she led and for the people that she hurt prior to her four years of sobriety.

Danielle’s Higher Education Journey

Academics came easy for Danielle—maybe too easy. She was considered highly intelligent and academically gifted by her teachers and this created pressure from her family to pursue higher education. She shared:

Well, when I first started, I didn't really want to go to school. This is back when I first graduated high school. I had no desire to go to college whatsoever. I had very blatantly expressed this to my parents, counselors, and everybody else. But, because my grades were high, everybody insisted that I go to college. Now my senior year, they—my grades did fall because of drug use, but still, my GPA and my, you know, grades and my SAT scores were still high enough that I was quote ‘college material,’ I guess. You know, I had been taking AP courses and college prep course and all that type of stuff,

Education, for Danielle, was about someone else’s vision for her life—not her vision. She stated:

Because now it's been drilled in my head that this [attending college] is what I'm supposed to do, so I'm trying to appease the people that think that this is the way my life is supposed to go. It [education] really didn't have an importance to me. I didn't see it as a beneficial thing—like education will knock down and open doors and elevate me into higher status quos in life. I didn't see any of that. I knew you had to go because the law said you had to go for 12 years. That's why I went. What high school did for me was it gave me an outlet as far as not being at home, not being in the abus(e) and alcohol in my home. So I liked going to school. I was

in every extracurricular activity they had. If they could've had something that I could stay for 24 hours, I probably would have done that, too.

Danielle's eventual plunge into a life of drugs, while similar to Christopher's path, had a very different beginning. Danielle grew up in a middle-class diverse neighborhood in central North Carolina, as she described it:

We lived in middle class neighborhoods. We lived in — Park, You're not from here, so you really don't know. — Park was like where the doctors and the business people lived. Your car dealership people and teachers and doctors all were in this neighborhood.

It was during Danielle's first entrance into higher education at a small four-year institution that she began to use drugs on a regular basis. Eventually Danielle dropped out of college. She described:

So I went to Liberal Arts University from '86 through '88. I had a partial academic, partial athletic basketball scholarship. It was the only school I think I applied to. I wasn't one of those people that sent out a thousand applications, because I really didn't want to go. So, why I ended up there, I have no idea. You know it's was one of the first schools I saw and I just went. So I pretty much partied my two years. I played basketball and I partied. I actually had people in the athletic department suggesting things because I have always been like a little underweight or smaller—suggesting that I drink beer or eat peanut butter or stuff like that to gain weight. So I always had a refrigerator full of beer and I never kept the room door locked so people would come in and help themselves. I had a credit card and I just kept it full of beer. I think that helped me escalate into further addiction. Although I didn't know it at the time, you know, it was still a manageable thing. I drank on the weekends or whatever, and I would still go to basketball practice. I would go sometimes high. I would smoke a little reefer or something like that but still practice and things. I ended up in the last year of those two years quitting the basketball team because, now, the partying became more important.

In 1998, Danielle left Liberal Arts University for good. As she described, with nothing to do in her life at that point, she decided to enroll in NC Community College. When asked why she chose a community college versus returning back to the four-year institution she previously attended, Danielle stated:

Umm, with the community college, it's the cost. The cost is a big thing. All these other times, I think, I'm actually grateful that I didn't know all these other times from '88 to '05. I didn't really know about financial aid for some odd reason. I'm glad, you know, that I didn't. I had always been trying to pay for classes on my own, which is another reason some of the gaps were there, because I was just thinking like, 'Pay for class?' 'Buy some crack?' 'HmMMM?' 'HmMMM? Okay, I'll buy some crack this time and go to class later.' Umm, but I'm glad I didn't know about financial aid because I would have used it [financial aid] all by now, probably.

In 1998, while taking classes at NC Community College, Danielle relapsed back into her crack addiction. This began the first in a series of drug relapses that lead to the stops and starts in her college career. She explained:

I had left—let's see—I went in 1988. I was there—all right, gap. I went again in '91. Stopped and went '92 a couple of semesters. Then 2000 I went back—2001. All of those little spaces were just the moments of trying to get clean. You know and then finally, in 2005, you see a consistency in year-by-year. That is when I started recovery. You know, instead of just mere abstinence, I started a recovery program to actually learn how to live clean.

When asked if she was still using drugs and drinking at the time she enrolled at the community college, Danielle stated:

Yeah, when I was enrolling—when I started that semester, I had done crack for the summer of '88. I didn't like it so I stopped. I was a weed head, pot head, drink my beer and be cool. I just didn't think that the crack did anything. I didn't feel any of the effect of it, so I didn't like it and I stopped doing it. That summer was

fun. The summer of '88, fun, you know. I did all the little things that crack enables you to do. At the time in '88, it [crack] had just come to this area. So it wasn't deadly and it didn't propel folks to kill. We used to pass the stem around like you would pass the joint around. You'd get your hand chopped off if you tried to take somebody's stem today. You know, you'd catch a bullet in a minute. But it wasn't that serious back then; it hadn't become this addictive force.

It wasn't until Danielle completed rehabilitation in 2005 after several attempts and she stayed consistently drug-free, did she begin to see the importance of education in her life. She shared:

Now it [education] means everything to me. One, because I've lived long enough to know that McDonalds can't buy me houses. It can, you know, but it ain't gonna buy me the quality of things that I like. I like Belvedere shoes. They cost \$225. I like things now that I didn't before the drugs have taken me to the animalistic level to where it was okay to dig out of the trash can to find food, you know, out of the dumpsters. That was okay. Today, I kinda like lobster and things (laugh). I like choosing my food and choosing it well, so education is very important.

Danielle returned back to NC Community College for the third time in 2005 and has been enrolled as a full-time student since that period. When asked what has made the difference this time around versus previous times—what became her “ah ha” moment, Danielle stated:

I got clean in 2004. I started recovery. You know, instead of just mere abstinence. I started a recovery program to actually learn how to live clean. That's when it became serious. I had been taking classes at NC Community College since 1988. In the fall of 2005 is when I really started going to school because I want to be here. I want this degree.

Danielle took full advantage of her opportunities at the community college. As she explained, she excelled academically and pushed herself far beyond what she even thought she was capable of doing:

My first semester I got all As. To have returned to school after such a long period of time and to come from the background from which I had just come was just incredible.

We [students in the drug counseling program] were all living in the gutter at some point, so that's not anything special. So [in order to make me special] now my assignments have got to be better than yours. The competition is in effect. Something has got to make me better than you. I don't know where that comes from. I still—that still has to do with some form of acceptance. The competition [against other students for grades] has something to do with a lack of self of acceptance. You know, it's nobody's fault but mine. I'm still searching and meditating and looking inward for that self-acceptance.

Danielle believed that this experience also gave her the opportunity to “reinvent” herself and use the skills she acquired in her past life to become a success student and drug-free individual. She stated:

Very good, there are a lot of things that I am getting do-overs in...I have excelled in my grades. I am kinda sought out as far as leadership things, which feels really good. The normal characteristics within me are still there. The drugs didn't take away what was built into me. Yea, so, it [drugs] made me put that stuff to the side for a minute, but it didn't rob me of the leadership skills that I have. I mean, even in drug use, I was a leader. I was the master manipulator—I came up with the plans.

I am currently the president of my academic program's career club. I'm the president of the honor club, although not for this semester...I have done the women's mentoring program where the young lady that I am mentoring graduated this past summer. I was able to go and take her to her graduation, which felt really good. What else? Black Student Union. I've been a part of that although we haven't done that much on NC Community College's campus with that particular club. What else, they recently just changed the name of the *Gay/Straight Alliance* to *Gay, Straight, and Transgender Alliance*. I went to a few of their meetings just

to be involved in that aspect. Ahh, again, not much really going on with that organization. They tried to get it off the ground. Had I had more time to do that I would have probably tried to help bust that but, at the time, I was just a little busy. Ah yes, I made the first women's basketball team. I made it, but I am ineligible to play because I played ball two years at Liberal Arts University so that knocked me out...

One of the most important aspects of Danielle's community college experience was the fact there were other individuals in her drug counseling program and at the community college who shared the same lived experiences that she had lived. She was not an outside among the crowd. She was, just like others, a person who is trying to transform her formerly negative life through education. She felt a connection with the students in her program. As she described:

'Cuz I got a whole building of people now that, fuck it, they're just like me so they understand. It's neat. We push each other up because we do realize, okay, you've been where I am so you feel some of the things I feel. I'm gonna lift you up. So we lift each other up. We call each other "professor" and things and things, you know. We just do that. Not everybody gets those titles but everybody gets lifted in some way or another. I guess we've [understood] that we've been called crack heads and sons of bitches and nobodies and you'll never amount to anything; we've all heard those things, so we lift each other up.

Just as a first A grade boosted the confidence of the participants in this study, the first poor grade caused a temporary burst in their newly-found confidence. Danielle's over-commitment to campus activities, mentoring duties, church, her girlfriend, her godson, etc., finally took its toll. In addition to becoming physically sick with the flu, Danielle also experienced a big drop in her class grades. She explained:

I sat in my instructor's office...He said, 'You know, anybody else I can see this, but not you.' Then he told me this one line you know, 'You make a terrible

Superman. You make a great student, but you make a terrible Superman.’ Meaning that you know all of this stuff that I had named before...participating in clubs, mentoring, helping other folks, my work in Narcotics Anonymous, all that – like Superman is all over saving the whole world and all this stuff. That was me. He was like, ‘You make a terrible Superman.’

Danielle’s Transformation

As a transgendered woman, Danielle dealt with several difficult issues related to her spirituality and Christian faith. At the age of 16th, Danielle was “outed” by a church member. As she described, “I had a rude awakening when I kinda found out that somebody thought I was gay. It was really traumatizing. I probably need to see counsel, for real.” Yet, Danielle believes that her personal transformation has led her on a spiritual journey to help others. As she described:

Spirituality has granted me purpose to education. It has given meaning to having an education. It means, to me, that before I was just going to school for something to do. Just hanging out. Just, you know, not really having any purpose behind it. Spiritually—because of what I wanted to do—helping other people—that’s what I feel my spiritual purpose is in being here. It has given education now a meaning which has validated it and given it importance, therefore, I want it. It’s a means to an end. But my spiritual purpose is to help others and because of that purpose, my life totally connects to education—connects to the need to get the education.

I want to professionally help people. I talk to people all the time but she [God] spiritually tells me it is okay to get paid to do that, too. Dammit, if I’m going to be sitting around listening to people and talking to people, which I do anyway, that can pay the bills. It’s okay.

As demonstrated by some of the other participants in this study, Danielle believes that she has experienced a strengthening of her faith as a result of her connection to a church that has supported and encouraged her pursuit of higher education. They also

welcomed her as part of the church family despite her past drug use or sexual orientation.

During her higher education journey, Danielle also came to the realization that she wants to live her life as a male because she believes she was born, as she puts it “in the wrong body.” Danielle stated:

I’ve always felt that tug of war inside me. I didn’t understand what has happening. The beginning was, probably, I would say the fall of ’06 in a counseling class that I had. Everybody had papers on which specific subject to write and we had to give a synopsis of our paper. Well, one girl in class did something about homosexuality and she made reference to some pages in the counseling textbook. All right, I being a person that, when the preacher is preaching and says, “Mark 5:12 says this,” I’m flipping to find out. You better get it right, you know. So I’m flipping and I turn one page too many and there was this section in the textbook talking about gender identity disorder. I was like, what is this? I started to read that, and it was like, oh, wow, okay. Might that might be what the tug-of-war feelings I felt inside of me for these years was about? I never heard it [the term gender identity disorder] before, so that kind of opened the door. It gave me something tangible to identify with. That is why I’m seeking counseling and, even more so, letting it all come out of me—that person I’ve always kept hidden or secret in or in the closet somewhere or tucked down under somewhere within. That person is saying, ‘Let me out or kill me. Let me out or kill me!’

When Danielle was asked if the college environment prompted the awakening of her sexual identity or was it happenstance, she stated that the fact that she was clean and sober and in the process of pursuing her college education at the time was, “a purposed accident.” She continued:

Well, I guess now is the time for me to know. It would had been a shame that I had gotten a sex change or whatever when I was 20 and been just a male transgender, crack head, going through all that stuff. I think now is when it’s time for me to know.

For Danielle, her educational journey also prompted a rise of her own cultural consciousness and a coming into her own blackness. Having grown up and socializing with whites for most of her life, Danielle did not come into higher education with her own sense of who she was culturally as an African American. She stated: “I grew up around white people. I was one of those people that literally, seriously, thought I was white for real. It’s just recently that I’m coming into realization that I’m black. I played soccer, and this was before we were quote end quote ‘Black.’ I would be like the only person on both teams that was Black.”

It wasn’t until she was drug-free that she became more conscious of living everyday life as a person of color. She began to realize that being Black will always be part of her identity and that society and those in power will never let her forget it. As she stated:

So she [Danielle’s current girlfriend] kinda helped open my eyes so now another part of transformation for me is that the rose colored glasses are being removed and I’m starting to see the big ugly world for that which it is. There are some days that you may hear me say, ‘Damn, I wish I was still getting high if this is what the world looks like for real. Damn, I should have just stayed high and just skipped all this shit.’

Danielle has been empowered by her renewed cultural identity. Soon she will fully transition into living life as a Black man, as she looks into the possibility of undergoing gender reassignment surgery in the next several years. She has experienced oppression and discrimination as a former drug addict and transgendered individual. Now she is now adding life as a Black male to her story; this physical and mental transition will bring even greater dimensions to her personal journey. She refuses to continue her

current existence or go into her ‘next life’ being mistreated or disrespected in any way.

As she explained:

I made myself an outcast for so long. Now I dare anyone else to not acknowledge my presence when I come into a room. Yeah, I dare you. I dare you not give me my food the way I want it ‘cuz I wasted too much money giving it to dope dealers that would give me any and everything and call me all kinds of names and do whatever they wanted to do and say whatever they wanted to say to me. For me to now to be paying for something like the DVD player or whatever and I turn the bitch on and it ain’t doing what ya’ll told me it’s going to do, I’m bringing it back. I want... you know... I want my steak medium and, if it’s too dark for me, I’m sending it back. I’m not paying for this because I have the power to do that again. I’m not being an ass about it. *‘Oh, yeah, please and thank you and ha ha and ki ki.’* Even when I’m sending it back, I’m still nice about it unless you get un-nice then you know—wait a minute!!! I’m spending my money and, just for the day, I don’t have to accept unacceptable behavior. For a long time, for 20 years of my life, I did accept it.

Despite Danielle’s transformation from a serious drug addict to a powerful student leader and mentor for others, she still feels very connected to her past existence. The fear of “fucking up,” as she puts it, is very close to the surface of her emotions. Because she lived more than half of her life, as she described it, “barely existing,” she is on a mission to prove that she can be a fully functioning human being making a contribution to society. In fact, Danielle seems to have more than atoned for this lost life by “doing it all”—getting good grades, holding down a full time class schedule, committing to three church bands, serving as a school leader and mentor for many campus organizations, and on and on and on. As Danielle described:

I think, from me needing to prove that I can. I didn’t know in my own mind that I saw myself as—what’s the girl’s name in the *Scarlet Letter*—the one that had the big A on her? Prin—whatever her name was—Hester somebody. Hester was in there. It was as if I was wearing a shirt or sign or tattoo on my forehead that said,

‘Crack head.’ I felt it with everything that was in me. I had to prove that’s not all I ever was in life. So I went into super-student mode and super-involved mode—student government, everything, you know. I had to be in everything. You gotta know me ...I admitted to everything in my past. Yes, I did those things. I admit to those things, but it’s like nobody would have ever known [about her past] if I hadn’t put it all on paper in some five-page letter. Nobody would have ever known that side of me had I not put it all out there.

She still fears that the emotional connection to her past life and the newness of her current drug-free life could possibly lead to her downfall if she does not believe that she really *is* this changed and continually transforming person. Danielle explained:

I want to do it [earn a college degree] fast. I want to do it in a hurry. I want my damn PhD! I so fear—I fear my own success for this reason in that I can be a 49-year old person with a PhD with the mentality of a 21-year old and the power of a PhD and go fuck it all up by not knowing how to responsibly be a 49-year old with a PhD. I’m not going to try and fuck it up. I’m just going to make some dumb—you know, I’m going to have a fucking crying client who’s 25. My age says that I’m 49 or whatever. My academic record says that I have a PhD but my brain is stuck at 20. So, I can very well be that damn motherfucker that ruins my whole career ‘cuz I’m gonna go sleep with this 25-year old client.

Yet, for Danielle, there is true purpose to her educational journey; it is not just about the process of earning a college degree. As she described, it is: “For me, finishing that goal with integrity, honesty...with integrity and honesty. How do I define success? Staying clean today.”

Summary – Danielle’s Narrative

Danielle experienced several powerful transformations. She is living drug free after nearly 20 years of alcohol and drug abuse. According to Taylor (1998), personal and social transformation cannot be separated. “It is the combination of both the biographical of the personal and that of the social that sets the stage for emancipation” (p. 18). For

Danielle, there was a personal transformation, but there was also a change in how she saw herself in a social context and how she now acts/interacts within this world. As Danielle stated:

The street thing—I realized actually how being high or not being high and not having bathed for a couple of days and going into a store and actually seeing people like, ‘Ugh!’ impacts how people treat you. You know, actually feeling that or seeing that and actually experiencing that helped me to understand, first of all, people do treat people differently...

Danielle lived almost 20 years fighting drug and alcohol addiction. So, in her view, she lost 20 years of time in her life. Because of this loss, she is now a 44-year old, drug-free individual learning the things that she should have learned in her 20s and 30s. She believes that her age and the pressure that comes with being an older student with obvious intellect puts her at a disadvantage. She stated:

I dropped off the face of the earth, per se. So when I started using on a heavy basis, it’s like my mind and my growth, you know, the natural growth process that people go through as human beings, stopped. So now I’m growing again but I’m growing now from 15-years old [when she started using drugs and alcohol]. I’m learning now as a 44-year old person.

Today Danielle continues towards her journey to earn a PhD and help change the lives of others through her mentoring, faith, and counseling. Danielle knows that her particular success story is extraordinary, but, as she puts it, “It is not easy. It is a minute-to-minute struggle, and I thank God everyday that I am free.”

Estelle

The final participant in this phenomenological narrative study is Estelle. Estelle is a 39-year old, African American woman from eastern North Carolina. She is also a mother of two teenage sons. Estelle was preparing to enter into the physical therapy assistant program next fall. She attended both NC Community College and the local four-year university during her post-secondary studies.

Estelle was a single mother at the time she entered into higher education. For her, getting a college degree was always in the back of her mind but she did not have the confidence to believe that she could pursue higher education and handle the arduous life of a student. Estelle confessed to having deep self esteem issues in regards to her intellectual abilities. She struggled academically in high school and did not have the support that she needed from her family to improve her studies. She also had to deal with the fact that, during her last year of high school, she became pregnant with her first child. As Estelle stated:

I always wanted to go to college but I didn't have confidence in myself. I wasn't bad in school but school was very hard for me. I never thought I could write, I didn't think my work and my grades were good enough. Then I got pregnant with my second child so school was definitely out of the picture. Then, when I got sick and I saw what the nurses, physical therapists, and doctors were doing to help me, I knew, no matter what, I wanted to go to school to do the same thing. I was determined to go to school. I wanted to be a physical therapy assistant. Eventually I want to be a physical therapist. I knew it would be hard but I was just that determined.

Estelle's Higher Education Journey

Estelle began her college career at NC Community College after being diagnosed with muscular sclerosis. This diagnosis was a mixed blessing because it led to decision to pursue higher education. As she explained:

Seven years ago, I was diagnosed with muscular sclerosis. I ended up getting really sick roughly two weeks after the doctors told me that I had it. I was so depressed because my body was falling apart. I lost a bunch of weight, got depressed, and was weak all day. It seemed like I spent more time in the hospital than out. My physical therapist and doctors took care of me and still take good care of me. I knew that, because of how I felt, that I wanted to do what they were doing for me. I want to help others who are sick and give up. I can see myself as a physical therapy assistant so that is why I came to NC Community College.

For Estelle, the community college offered her everything that she needed to begin her pursuit of higher education. As she explained, she was not confident in her academic ability and she was worried about how her health would impact her studies:

I started off pretty low in my math and English courses. I had to start with developmental courses before I could even apply for the PT assistant program, so I never thought I would even get that far. I had more help in my classes than I ever thought I would. The teachers helped me. We had tutors. I was able to talk to the teacher after class about stuff I had trouble with. This all really helped—it helped a lot.

NC Community College has a great physical therapy assistant program and it was fairly close to where I lived. I really thought about going to the local four-year university but I did not think that I could afford it. I was not working when I first started so I relied on financial aid. I had to go somewhere I could pay for my degree and NC Community College was a good place. Plus it would only take me two years to complete the physical therapy assistant program. I wanted to quickly finish and starting working right away. NC Community College program—it would let me do that.

While Estelle was earning high grades in her classes as she moved closer to applying for the College's physical therapy assistant program, she had to deal with the conflict and jealousy of her husband at home. Estelle had married a man (her current husband), who had newly immigrated to the United States a few years before she started taking classes at the community college. They had dealt with marital issues in the past, such as his personal conflicts with her sons, his issues with obtaining employment, etc., but she kept hoping that he would eventually be supportive of her endeavors. Estelle was even instrumental in getting her family to look at college as an option too—going as far as bringing home applications, enrolling them into courses, helping to advise them, etc. At one point, she, her oldest son, and her husband were all attending NC Community College at the same time.

Estelle's husband's growing resentment towards her academic success and her growing independence began to surface shortly after he started his own classes. As Estelle recalled:

Dealing with my husband —things got so bad. While I was getting As, he wouldn't even go to class. I ended up doing most of his work and tried to keep him going to school. He hated that I was doing well. He hated even talking about school with me.

Estelle's confidence rose and she continued to achieve in school despite the chaos she faced at home. Soon after her husband's first semester at NC Community College, he left her and her two sons. Despite the toll that her husband's abandonment took on her emotionally (depression) and physically, Estelle was able to see her husband's decision to

leave her as she was entering the most difficult phase of her academic career, as positive and necessary. The breakdown of her marriage had little impact on her continued desire to earn her degree and to help others. Estelle felt enough confidence in herself as a result of her positive educational experiences to persist through this rough time. Estelle is now working to complete the physical therapy assistant program and plans to transfer to the four-year university to earn her bachelor's degree.

Estelle's Transformation

As in the case of Ariel, Estelle transformed from a woman full of self-doubt and fear to a woman of strength. Estelle faced so many personal and health challenges in her life that these challenges eventually took over who she was. "Every time I felt stress, I got sick. When I got sick, my disease took over, so I was on a constant roller coaster." She struggled academically her first year as she tried to balance work, family, and taking care of health. Estelle relied on her strong faith in God to keep her from, as she stated, "going crazy." She felt that she was being challenged by negative forces as she tried to get to her ultimate goal—completing her studies and entering the College's physical therapy assistant program. She explained:

Ms. Cox, I don't know how to handle this! You just don't know. I had to deal with his unholy mess [her husband's Muslim beliefs that conflicted with her own Christian beliefs] throughout my house for the last few years. I had to cleanse my house of him just to get my head right. I got him into school, helped him with his schedule, his classes, and he did nothin' but tear me down—call me stupid. I can't believe I dealt with this. Then I had to kick my brother out for the same crap. Tryin' to help him get his life together then he just steps on me. You know, I even failed my first psych test behind of this mess. I am too close now for this stuff to mess things up for me. I am definitely being tested right now.

One of Estelle's primary goals was to be a good role model for her two sons despite the health and personal issues that she faced. As she stated:

My determination has pushed me to show my son that this [getting an education] is necessary and possible. I want them to be able to say 'Mama did it so I better do it.' You are your own worst enemy and only you can stop your own path.

Estelle wanted her sons, in particular, to understand the importance of young Black males getting an education. As Estelle progressed from developmental courses to her curriculum courses, her confidence rose and she excelled academically. This, for her, was the beginning of her personal transformation. She also began to take courses at the local university. This is when everything clicked and she realized that she belonged in higher education, as she described:

Yea, I needed this course, a biology II course, that I had tried to get at NC Community College for two semesters. Every time, the class filled up. So one of my friends said to take it at the local four-year university. She had taken it and loved it. I didn't even think I was ready for that campus but I did ok—actually got an A- and I felt good. I started taking some of my other classes there and I felt like I was really there—in a real college setting. The more I did there the more I felt like I could even try to work on my bachelors after I finished the PT program. I knew it was for me.

She believed that her positive educational experience at the community college changed her own perspective on education and her own ability to achieve.

Summary — Estelle's Narrative

As students such as Estelle open themselves up to their own academic potential, they begin to find purpose in their learning experience. As stated by Carlson (2002):

Once disempowered and marginalized peoples challenge this dependency, if only in their minds, once they affirm that they deserve to be treated with respect and that they are capable of directing their own lives, Hegel argues that they are—at least in spirit—no longer slaves (p. 11)

Indeed, once the participants in this study became empowered, earning an associate's degree just wasn't enough. It was Estelle's faith and spirituality that provided her with the strength to continue her education. For Estelle, who is still pursuing her education, community college was just the beginning. As asserted by Tisdell (2003), it is the power of their faith in a higher power that gives some individuals the strength to persist within higher education. Estelle was able to transcend beyond the issues that she faced, such as health issues, loss of a marriage, and new academic challenges, as she moved into her medical program and she became stronger in spite of these challenges.

The Importance of African American Adult Learners' Stories

As our society continues to measure human value and intellect according to the level of education an individual has achieved or the type of job an individual holds, the adult African American learners in this study found their own sense of value and self worth through education. Each of these individuals falls into a category, such as single mother, high school dropout, and even Black male—categories that deem some educators to view them as “at risk” or even problematic. Some of the participants were written off by teachers during their earlier schooling. Some brought about their own self-destruction through drug abuse, disruptive behavior, or self doubt. Some even chose to disconnect from schooling all together. Yet, as adults, they all made the same decision to change their lives through one vehicle—the community college.

The African American adult learners in this study all demonstrate the amazing power of the educational journey. For each of these participants, the process of education—making the decision to pursue higher education despite the issues they were facing, taking control of their own academic experience by becoming a student/learner/participant, and making the choice to use their education to help improve the lives of others—was empowering. They were able to transform who they were and change their lives through the educational process.

The adult learners of color in this study also displayed incredible resiliency and determination as they move through their educational journey. While learners are ultimately responsible for their own academic experiences, educational leaders within the higher education community have a professional and moral obligation to make sure that these academic environments allow for personal transformation and change.

Ultimately, it is imperative that leaders and educators within these institutions look at the emotional, spiritual, and cultural differences that adult learners of color bring to the table in order to facilitate increased retention, program completion, and college graduation rates. By understanding the transformation that takes place in these students as they move from their first year of post-secondary education through their two-year journey at the community college level, educational leaders can begin to look further into how community colleges institutions can play a role in recognizing the social, historical, and cultural context for students of color within these institutions in connection to transformative learning. Leaders can then help move adult learners towards the attainment of a college education.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF TRANSFORMATION

“But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark.” (Palmer, 2000, p. 8)

This phenomenological narrative study examined the experiences of five, African American adult learners who described their journey through higher education at the community college level as life-changing. The purpose of this study was to look at how African American adult learners defined their transformative learning experiences within the community college context. I also looked at how transformation helped move these adult learners of color towards their academic and personal goals. Lastly, this study looked at transformative learning and its sociocultural components; specifically, the cultural consciousness, spirituality, and self-empowerment experiences of African American adult learners. Cultural consciousness is one’s recognition and understanding of the importance of culture. Spirituality encompasses religion and/or faith and the belief in a divine power outside of oneself. Lastly, self-empowerment is the belief in self and the ability to have control over one’s life, one’s decisions, and one’s actions.

In the remainder of this chapter, I build upon the individual narrative findings discussed in Chapter IV to analyze the themes that emerged across the participant narratives. Such themes pertain to the adult learners’ general community college experiences and the nature of their learning transformation. In addition, I specifically

highlight the sociocultural, spiritual, and empowerment dimensions of their learning and personal growth to answer my research questions.

Lessons about Participants' Community College Experiences

All of the participants in this study eventually sought out the community college as their channel to higher education. As discussed in Chapter II of this study, community colleges are the “common school”— a place in which underserved individuals come together with the hope of eventually achieving the *American dream* and the possibility of a better life through education (Smith & Vellani, 1999, p. 8). For many underserved student populations who are sometimes faced with limited finances, poor academic preparation, and even internal institutional obstructions (e.g. inequitable admissions practices), community colleges are the first and, sometimes, the only post-secondary education option available. As stated by Milliron (2004):

Community colleges are champions of access, opening the door of higher education to those traditionally less likely to engage this pathway to possibility. Almost half of all first-year college students begin their work with community colleges. Clearly, the open-door philosophy of the community college is meeting, and will continue to be called to meet, the social need for access to higher education (p. 108).

The participants in this study believed that their community college experience and their educational journey through the community college greatly impacted their personal and academic transformation. Ariel stated:

My degree came at a time in which I needed to feel a sense of pride in myself and for my children to see that even though there are situation[s] that may happen in life that if you think that you can, you can.

Estelle also asserted, “Because I was an older student, I was more of a community college student and I felt better being there.” When participants were asked about what they saw as the contributor(s) to their success, the participants named several factors — some internal forces and some forces outside of themselves —that moved them towards degree completion and academic success. For some of the other participants, it was the care of teachers and the open and accessible environment of the community college that aided in their transformation. As Estelle stated:

Without half my teachers, I wouldn’t have gotten through my classes...actually, they were the ones who encouraged me to hang on and don’t quit when I was just going crazy...straight crazy.

Community college institutions play a vital role in the education of underserved students, especially students of color. Therefore, as community colleges continue to see triple digit growth in enrollment rates and continual changes in the demographic landscape, educational leaders within these institutions must begin to realize that they face challenges unlike ones faced by other institutional leaders within higher education. As stated by Smith and Vellini (1999), “In the 1960s and 1970s, the challenge was to provide the space and open the doors to accommodate a large number of students seeking higher education;” they add, “The current task is to assume a major role in serving the academic needs of the new populations” (p. 8) Indeed, community colleges have always been active in recruiting nontraditional, underrepresented, and minority learners but now they are centering on ways to *keep* them (Cowen & Brawer, 2003).

In recent years, there has been a growth in research focusing on the negative impact of community college enrollment on student of color transfer, retention, and college completion rates. As stated by Cohen and Brawer (2003):

Several analysts have charged that minority students who begin their college education at a community college will do less well than those of equal ability who enroll at the senior institution and that this differential is greater for them than it is for the majority students (p. 50).

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter II, African American learners are more likely to have non-traditional enrollment patterns such as delayed entry, part-time attendance, and periods of “stopping out” during their academic studies (Fry, 2002, Lee & Frank, 1990, as cited in Wassemer & Shulock, 2004, pg. 665). The participants in this study did demonstrate that these patterns and issues are a true reality for adult learners of color. It is also evident that these issues have contributed to the low retention and program completion rates for this student population. Yet, despite the serious challenges that the participants in this study faced, they all persisted. The African American adult learners in this study all defied the many odds that they faced—drug addiction, health issues, financial hardship, and more—and they continue to see positive personal and academic changes in their lives. As Cranston (1994) asserts, learning, specifically adult learning, is about the process of critical reflection and questioning through the attainment of knowledge and skills. Through transformation of the self, these students were able to achieve beyond what they expected for themselves. It was the act of educating oneself and learning that led to them on a path towards self-empowerment, resiliency, and change.

Insight into the Participants' Overall Transformation

Below, I overview how findings from this study address my guiding research questions in light of my conceptual framework and its integration of transformative learning, critical race and spirituality theories.

Research Question #1: How do adult African American learners who are attending or have attended community college define their own transformation within the context of transformative learning?

As the participants' narratives demonstrated, transformation and transformative learning can take place in various ways but the end result always leads to some type of change of self. One of the most important aspects of this study, as indicated by my first research question, is its look at how African American adult community college learners define their own transformation. What does it mean to "transform" for this particular group? How and why does this transformation take place in the context of their community college journey? How does their transformation connect to transformative learning theory? When asked, "What does transformation mean to you?" all of the participants defined it as *change* in some capacity:

Ariel: Change. Transformation is like a journey or a planned trip mapped out in the beginning and starting on time. Later, encountering some delays and misguided directions, yet, throughout the journey, you meet some wonderful people and see some amazing sites.

Brandon: For me, it meant the transfer of knowledge, one mind to another and, when you are transferring, it's providing the opportunity for it [knowledge] to be used.

Christopher: Well, (pause) in its simplest form, a change. But, then things happen when you specify it; [it] takes on a different meaning. But, it could mean the difference between condemnation and salvation. It could mean, well simply put, life or death. It could mean a behavior change where, you know, you're no longer angry but know you're comfortable or satisfied.

Danielle: Transformation, to me, is growing from one stage to another. Yes, growing from one stage to another. I would say like a metamorphosis, a butterfly going from caterpillar to, you know, all of those little stages that a butterfly has to go through to get 'butterflyish.'

Estelle: It means to change—to be better. It can also mean to change for the worse.

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory looks at how individuals define the experiences and circumstances in their lives, and how, through critical reflection, individuals can create positive change. As learners begin to look at themselves as they experience learning, they start to see other ways of viewing and acting in the world. Current or past habits, beliefs, standards, and even actions are called into question.

Personal, academic, and spiritual transformation occurred at different levels within the participants' journeys because each of their starting points was very different. There were some clear connections to Mezirow's initial ten phases of transformative theory as I will demonstrate in this chapter. As listed in Chapter II, these phases include:

1. A disorienting dilemma—a crisis or event that brings about change
2. Self-examination of feelings of guilt and shame
3. Critical assessment of one's assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and transformation process are shared by others who have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of new knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisionally trying out new roles

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 1991; Cranston, 1994).

There were also connections to Mezirow's (2002) updated work on transformative learning, critical examination, and the changing of problematic frames of reference. As discussed in Chapter II, common themes that connected Mezirow's work on adult transformative learning are first, the centrality of experience—recognizing that one's current situation or experience largely influences their learning; second, critical reflection—looking rationally at and gaining understanding of one's current situation or experience; and, third, taking what one has learned from this situation or experience and finding ways to make positive and/or productive change (Taylor, 1998). Demonstrated below are some of the phases of transformation that the participants in this study experienced during their community college journey. Overall, I discuss the six phases (out of the ten) that were evident in the narrative data. First, I overview three phases that connected to the adult learners' journey in general; then, I discuss three additional phases that proved to be most relevant to their transformative learning.

General Connections to Learners' Journey

Data related to three transformative learning phases appeared to generally affect the adult learners: (a) self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; (b) critical assessment of assumptions; (c) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions (Mezirow, 1991).

Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame

Introspective reflection was a key element of the transformative process for the participants in this study, and this reflection brought on the learners' *self-examination with feelings of guilt and shame*, which is Mezirow's (1991) second phase. The purpose for adult development, learning, and change according to transformative learning theory, is to understand one's own place and purpose in the world (Mezirow, 1991). This understanding takes place within the process of self-reflection as well as critical reflection, which is an understanding of the historical, cultural, and biographical reasons for one's needs, wants, and interests.

The participants' narratives themselves are examples of self-examination and critical-reflection. For some of them, this reflection brought upon powerful emotions that came with revisiting events and experiences that were often painful or rough to recall. Danielle's drive to redeem herself for the life she previously led is one example. It is evident that Danielle has feelings of guilt and shame as she tries to disconnect or move past 20 years of drug abuse and, as she puts it, "wasting my life." She is reflective, yet, still very critical of herself. As she stated:

Sometimes I am a prisoner in my own mind—still stuck with the 'crack head' tattoo on my forehead and seeing how I felt like I had to prove myself to be better than anyone around me.

Words such as "fear," "joy," and "excitement" were used by other participants such as Christopher, Estelle, and Ariel, when asked if they had experienced any emotions or feelings connected to their transformation. Understandably, the self-reflection process

within transformation brought on a myriad of emotions for these participants. As stated by Dirkx (2001):

Emotionally charged images, evoked through the contexts of adult learning, provide the opportunity for a more profound access to the world by inviting a deeper understanding of ourselves in relationship with it (p. 64).

As demonstrated by Estelle, who was only at the beginning of some life crises at the time of our interviews:

I am totally overwhelmed and tired. I don't feel sad even though I should since my marriage is over...but I don't. I am overwhelmed because I want to finish my degree and I pray that my feelings do not stop me.

As the participants' began to see who they were and how they lived more clearly through the process of transformation, the emotions that are connected with "what was" or "what should have been" began to surface. For some participants, past actions and behaviors brought on feelings of guilt and even sadness. For others in the study, the ability to live and act in transcending ways brought on positive, affirming emotions.

Critical assessment of assumptions

The participants in this study engaged in critical reflection that led them to reevaluate some of the values and beliefs they have about themselves and the world. These reflections also led to change in their perspectives about the value of education in their lives. As Mezirow stated (2000), as learners reflect on old meaning and examine distortions/falsehoods that have been part of their previous existence, they begin to change their view of the world and, hopefully, take action to implement personal change

(Mezirow, 2000). The students in this study all demonstrated personal change by the very act of pursuing higher education and by the change in their view of education. This change illustrates Mezirow's (1991) fourth phase, which is *critical assessment of one's assumptions*

Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

It is through "doing"—changing one's actions—that individuals begin to realize personal transformation and life change. This often leads learners to go through Mezirow's (1991) fifth phase, which is *exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions*.

Ariel shows this by her actions—returning back to the community college despite the numerous challenges and tragedies she faced. As she proudly states:

I was the first to go to college and finish in my family – others in my extended family had gone before but I was the one who graduated. I had two cousins going to school at the same time and we were in a competition as to who was going to finish first. They were younger and were good in school, but I was the first to actually graduate. That, to me, was something.

Others, such as Christopher and Danielle, seemed to moved through the recognition of their new roles, relationships, and new actions at a higher intensity than the other participants. As discussed by Christopher:

College—one thing I know is it helped me analyze a whole lot better and have to analyze the decisions that I want to make. So, if I got door 1, 2 or 3, they let me get a peek at what's behind each door—letting me decide based on my previous knowledge what options will be best for me. Education will open your eyes to think more clearly and to think farther than the future. It has given me awareness and understanding. I'm aware of the importance of education and how far it can

get you, and I understand now that, without education, opportunities are limited if you don't come from an affluent family.

As Mezirow (1991) asserts, the purpose of learning for adults should be to help learners understand more clearly the reasons for their problems and understand the options available to them (in terms of personal action) so they can “improve the quality of their decision making” (p. 203).

Evident Connections to Transformative Learning Theory

Within Mezirow's (1991) phases of transformative learning theory, three particular phases (that differ from the ones described above) showed themselves the strongest: (a) life changing crisis or event (disoriented dilemma); (b) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan; and (c) building of a competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

Life Changing Crisis or Event: Participants' Disoriented Dilemmas

As asserted by Mezirow, there must be some sort of “trigger” in order to prompt change and transformation (1991, 1997) – this is his first phase. All of the participants in this study experienced some type of trigger event that moved them towards higher education. Cranston (1994) explains, “A trigger event is an unexpected event that leads to discomfort or perplexity in the learner” (p. 69). Does coming through crisis after a divorce measure the same as coming through crisis after years of drug abuse or after being diagnosed with a debilitating illness? Yes it does because it is, for that individual experiencing that “crisis,” something that has changed that person's life forever. And, in the case of these participants, it was their individual crisis that moved them from where

they were to the pursuit a better life through education. For Ariel, it was the death of her beloved father, the end of her marriage, and job loss that moved her to action. For Brandon, it was his expulsion from high school and the desire to be better than what he was displaying to his mother and his family that moved him to pursue his GED and eventually go as far as earning a master's degree. Christopher and Danielle's trigger was their new life as drug-free individuals. They gained the clarity to see the importance of education in their lives. They also understood that education was critical to their continued sobriety. Lastly, Estelle's trigger was the diagnosis of a debilitating disease. Not only was she determined to not let her health issues negatively impact her life; she actually saw this diagnosis as a call from God to help others through their own health issues.

Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan

From self-reflection comes self-knowledge. Self-knowledge leads to autonomous, self-directed thinkers (Brown, 2004). Overall, the participants in this study were able to recognize their own personal, spiritual, and emotional change as it has taken place. And, as they began to transform academically, the participants saw themselves differently in the world and became more empowered as learners by their transformation. They also had a better understanding of their current life situation and what it would take to move themselves into more productive directions. This increased understanding relates to Mezirow's (1991) seventh phase *acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan*. For instance, Christopher brought up an interesting analogy about his current educational experience. This analogy, which directly connects to his past life, shows his

progression from a former drug user to a reflective transformed individual

acknowledging the importance of his educational experiences. He described:

...In rehab and in the addictive world, there's a term called 'residue' where you smoke a crack pipe and then what's left is the residue and that's more potent than what you smoke. So, with the residue of learning, you learn something today, you absorb it, and then the next day what's left that you didn't absorb becomes more powerful. Later on, you go back and read it again; that's why they say read and reread. You read it today and you got a little meaning out of it and then, when you read it tomorrow and next week, it's like, damn, all this is in here. I didn't see it before. It's the residue effect. It's almost like a turbine or a turbo where you burn gas then some of the gas that didn't burn is sent back in to be re-burned and then you got more power. So if you look at it that way, it's [learning] a real benefit. It really benefits you because you can't absorb it all in one day. You know. You can't absorb it in one week or a year or two. I've got four years [of learning] under my belt.

This demonstrates how individuals define the experiences and circumstances in their lives, and how, through critical reflection, individuals are able to use what they have learned to create a positive "lifeworld" (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2002).

Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

How have the participants in this study changed or transformed? Three central results that connect to transformative learning theory emerged from this group: increase in self confidence, a new sense of self-empowerment, and the need to fulfill a purpose. These results demonstrate Mezirow's (1991) ninth phase, which is *building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships*. For participants Ariel and Estelle, this part of their transformation moved them from a place a fear to a belief in their own abilities and strengths. Personal transformation became an impetus of empowerment for

these female participants. Brandon's transformation, on the other hand, also demonstrates feelings of empowerment. He explained:

Then I realized also that education is a tool that people can see in you and they can see your intelligence based on the way you speak, based on the way you carry yourself, and it gives you a better understanding of life. It gives you a sense of fulfillment and an air. Education is an assurance of my abilities.

Christopher and Danielle talked about how they are now truly empowered, even cocky, about what they have been able to achieve and what they will continue to work towards. As Christopher described:

Well, one of the things that I'm thrilled with about being in college is it adds to my ego and my pride (laughter). It benefits my ego and my pride. I think, for me, it reaffirms some of the things that I thought I always knew and it reinforces that, to some degree, it gets back to the thing that I told you about my mother. My mother wanted her children to have sense, and I have sense. Being in college shows me I've got sense.

For Danielle, she was able to recognize how she saw herself in her previous life versus how she views herself now. As she stated:

In the past, I was a crackhead. Today, I am a recovering addict. Doctor. I'm a business owner. That's how I see myself. Today I am CEO and COO of recovery centers all over the world. That's how I see myself. Before I saw myself as a smaller scope of my existence within the four walls of this room. That was it. I would never, you know, get to see the world. I would never get off the corner. I would never get out this crack house. I would never get off the block.

Christopher's and Danielle's description of how they currently see themselves, versus how they saw themselves in the past as drug users, seemed to extend far beyond what the other participants experienced. Indeed, what connects Christopher and Danielle

together is a past history of drug addiction. It is clear that this common factor intensified the feelings of transformation that these two individuals experienced. As Christopher described:

You know, the learning process is really about how to deal with behaviors and more so of my own [behaviors] than other peoples. The distinction about being in college, for me, is learning a behavior that I can incorporate into my being that makes me better—not so much to make the world better or make racism go away ‘cuz that shit ain’t going to stop, but I do have a different concept of how to govern myself [staying healthy and drug free] irregardless of things going on around me.

The strongest aspect of personal transformation was not a change in feelings or emotions such as in the case of Ariel or Estelle. For Christopher and Danielle, it was a complete change of actions and behavior.

Finally, and most importantly, there were some significant transformative dimensions that were brought up in the participants’ narratives that moved beyond Mezirow’s theory—making connections to social and cultural constructs and spiritual meaning making.

Sociocultural Dimensions of the Learners’ Transformation

As I assert in Chapter II, current theories in adult transformative learning do not take into account the diverse transformative experiences that can take place within an individual’s transformation, specifically for learners of color. Sociocultural factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic level will have some impact on what transformation will look like for adult learners of color engaged in the higher education process. Thus, much more consideration of sociocultural factors is needed. My desire to

better understand the connection between transformative learning and sociocultural factors relates to my second question, which I address below.

Research Question #2: What are the sociocultural, spiritual, and empowerment dimensions of transformative learning within this population?

Critical race theory played an integral role in my analysis of sociocultural influences within transformative learning. By applying critical race theory, I moved transformative learning theory beyond its racial and cultural neutrality. As I discussed in Chapter II, critical race theory theorizes about race while also addressing the intersectionality of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). The narratives of African American adult learners in this study are counterstories—authentic ways to understand personal struggle and group oppression (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). The counterstories described in Chapter IV put a human face on the transformative journeys of adult learners of color while challenging educational theory practices for this student population.

The narratives of the participants in this study particularly demonstrated that race and gender did play important roles in the academic, personal, and spiritual transformation of adult African American learners. All of the participants were committed to overcoming their own pasts and not letting factors such as race, gender, and age be used as excuses not to achieve. In fact, several interrelated themes emerged when the interviews moved into discussions of race, gender, and age and the sociocultural connections to the learners' educational journey. First, with regard to race, the participants gained greater awareness of their "Blackness" and/or African American

selves. They also said they learned the importance of serving as cultural role models and representing what is good about being Black. Second, with regard to gender, the participants came to increasingly value representing positive Black males and females who are strong and able to do for themselves. Finally, the participants stressed that they felt more determined and ready to accomplish their educational goals because of their age and maturity. Their age and maturity also made them ready for change and transformation in their lives.

Race/ Cultural Consciousness

Cultural consciousness and definitions of racial identity are grounded in the social realities of our experiences and in our “communities of origin,” as asserted by critical race theory (Matsuda, 2001, as cited in Schneider, 2003, p. 88). Race and racism showed themselves within the participants’ educational journeys, and, in some cases, race factors became part of their struggle towards academic success and attainment. For instance, Brandon and Christopher were two individuals whose past lives could have put them in jail or on the streets. As an African American man, Brandon was aware of the fact that he faced even greater challenges in life without a formal college education to bring to the table. Brandon understood the significance of obtaining a college degree education as he moved through his educational journey. As Brandon stated in his narrative in Chapter IV, this understanding became much clearer to Brandon after he became a college educator teaching adults who were experiencing the same challenges he faced in his past.

You know, after being in college for so long and teaching in college for so long, I realize that being a Black man or African American in college, I’m part of the minority of Black men getting educated.

For Christopher, obtaining a college degree opened up a new sense of African identity and it exposed him to the historical importance of his very existence as an African American man in this society. “For many learners, knowledge of history, place, and culture helps to cultivate a sense of purpose and meaning in life” (Dei, 2002, p. 7). As a young man growing up in the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, education took a back seat to the struggles that Christopher and the others within his community faced as African Americans. He explained:

All the pain of racism, you know, that didn’t even make me say I want to study. When I was reading Marcus Garvey and reading about John Henry Clark and Stokely Carmichael in my Black studies class and—none of that made me want to study. I wanted to be black. I wanted to have a slogan. I wanted to be angry and fight back. Yeah, and I did all that, but that only took me but so far.

But, as a result of his higher education journey, he began to understand the significance of being an educated Black man and his role in modeling what *is* possible. As Christopher stated:

If I can take you back to some of the current situations of black males, black males are on a decline in America. They have been that way for the longest. Our jails and institutions are filled with black males. Women, white women, and other nationalities have a real and genuine fear of the black male. This is what I knew prior to college. Being in college helps me break down some of the stereotypes, to better espouse who we are, our condition, and how we got there. As a black man, I can tell the story better of why black men are in a decline.

Because Christopher was also just beginning to understand his own past history of self destruction and drug abuse, it took him a while to claim this new identity as an

educated Black man pursuing higher education. Moreover, for Christopher, his educational journey goes well beyond obtaining a college degree. As he explained:

I could say that first and foremost some things ain't even about education. It's about recognition of who you are. Now education, per se, can and does help in this case because you're learning. This school could very well help a student find his blackness or his soul, you know. So you don't negate it no matter what. I think one thing enhances and helps the other.

In essence, Christopher's learning transformation helped to not only raise his cultural consciousness, but it helped him shape and share his counterstory, which critical race theorists stress is very important (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Christopher links his counterstory to his "blackness," and also to his critical self awareness, understanding of racism, and overall empowerment. So now, as his comments reveal, Christopher wants to share his counterstory to motivate and raise the awareness of other African American adult learners.

The links between transformative learning and race and cultural consciousness were a bit different for other participants like Ariel and Estelle. These women were adult single mothers when they returned back to higher education to earn their college degrees. Ariel was raising two children and taking care of her family on her own as the sole source of financial support. While the children's father (her ex-husband) did see his children, Ariel was holding everything down on her own. Being a mother and daughter were her primary identities —being Black was a part of these identities. For Ariel, serving as model for her children was her number one priority. This was also Estelle's primary goal

as a mother of two teenage sons. In fact, Estelle was instrumental in getting her family in college. As mentioned in Chapter IV, Estelle stated:

My determination has pushed me to show my son that this [education] is necessary and possible. I want them to be able to say 'Mama did it so I better do it.' You are your own worst enemy and only you can stop your own path.

Estelle's comment shows she wanted her sons to understand that, as young Black males, getting an education meant survival. She, like many of the other participants in this study, believed that her positive educational experience at the community college changed her own perspective on education and her own ability to achieve. She hoped to relay her experiences to her sons so that they, too, would desire to work towards earning a college degree and educate themselves to the highest level. In line with critical race theory, both Arielle and Estelle linked educational attainment with gaining tools to combat racial oppression and prosper in society.

Gender

Emphasis on gender roles also emerged in the participants' descriptions of transformation. In fact, as indicated above, and in line with critical race theory, race and gender identity are intertwined for most of the participants (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Similarly, Tisdell (2003) states, "Trying to live out one's life purpose is obviously related to one's identity in all aspects, including one's gender, race, class, culture, national origin, and sexual orientation" (p. 117). Gender identity and perceptions of the role one plays as a Black male or female separated the male participants from the female participants in this study. For the male participants, one's gender put them in the role of

positively representing other African American males. With the decreasing presence of Black males on college campuses, Brandon and Christopher felt the obligation to make a difference for other Black males. They expressed cultural consciousness as more of a representation of how others saw them—serving as role models for other African American males. As Christopher stated:

So many of these young brothas in my classes don't understand that our people died for this education. They don't know WEB DuBois. They don't know Marcus Garvey—shit, they don't know Malcolm X. A black man without an education in this world is at the bottom of the pile. We don't choose to be there but we are. And, in some case, if we don't get an education, we will make the choice to be there. What we as black folks need to realize is that our kids are now only getting what white folks want them to know—minimal information about our own history. If we at least have the ability to think then we can question what is going on and do something about it.

For the women in the group, and for Danielle (who considers herself to be male), empowerment of self was the theme that showed in their narratives. Ariel, Estelle, and even Danielle, felt more comfortable claiming their own power and asserting themselves like never before. They were able to move beyond the gender and identity oppression they experienced as Black women (and, for Danielle, as a transgender individual) and use their experiences as a source of strength. This shift is an aspect of growth that critical race theorists associate with one's increased cultural consciousness (Delgado, 2001, Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008).

Estelle: I am now in control of my own situation. With my husband gone, I realize that I didn't need him in the first place. I am the one who is taking care the family, I am the one who is earning great grades – he couldn't, I am the one who will have my college degree...and this is all despite me having this disease [MS].

Danielle: Oh wow, gender—the female that I now am biologically or let’s say physically. The anatomy of a female has—that person has been timid, shy a little, —shy in a reverse way—overly standoffish, wanting to be loud, wanting to be heard, wanting to be best dressed or something or something in order to cover up being shy. You know, because I’m shy. I really am a shy person. The male me is the one who’s gonna be—the male is probably that perfectionist. Gotta be the best. That is *that* person.

Overall, it was the sense of empowerment they obtained through their educational journey that moved Estelle and Danielle from disregarded and silenced to fearless and strong individuals looking to make changes in their own lives so that they could help others in their roles as mother, daughter, lover, colleague, or friend.

Age

Next, I address the issue of age in this study because age is what primarily defines the adult learners. As discussed in Chapter II, community colleges have become the channel to higher education for adult students who have decided to return back to the classroom. Approximately 44 percent of community college students are 25 years of age and older (Kasworm, 2005, p. 4). Adult students come into higher education facing challenges that come with being “of age”—job commitments, family obligations, and even learning issues that come with being out of the classroom for many years. These challenges can have a direct impact on an adult student’s ability or inability to pursue his or her academic studies. As demonstrated in the participants’ narratives, age did play an integral role in their experience at the community college. It also played a part in their decision to return back to school and in their eventual realization of self-transformation. So, it is important to acknowledge that age is interconnected with gender, race and other

aspects of adult learners' sociocultural contexts and identities. For instance, "I was ready," "I was old enough to handle college," and "My age made me more determined—despite the fact I was the oldest person in the class," were all sentiments expressed by the group. Ariel said that:

I knew I couldn't go to college until my maturity level was ready. Going to college at 26, I believed then I was mature enough to handle the disappointment of not doing well if I didn't do well. I was mature enough to handle the successes too, and handle it with dignity and not be a show-off. I also, at my age, believe that I had a different outlook.

Age, for Brandon, also made the difference in what he was able to achieve at NC Community College. As he described:

I saw life a little bit differently; like I said I wanted to go for knowledge. I just wanted to be smart. I figured I was still under the mentality [of] get a factory job, get a job and stay there the rest of your life but be smart while you're there. Be the smartest one there. I didn't realize my age would tell me that, okay, now you're at a maturity level, so you need to be focusing on a career and not a job.

Christopher, the elder of the participants at age 58, saw the true benefits of being "the oldest in the room [classroom]:"

Like a good wine, things have to be aged sometime. Like I said, I done lived a few things. Donald Byrd made a tune called 'Places and Spaces I've Been,' and that's almost self explanatory. I've been places. Gary Barts made a tune called 'I've Known Rivers.' That's a poem by Langston Hughes that he made into a song: 'I've known rivers, ancient dusty rivers, old and ancient that the blood. I've known rivers, I've sailed some in seen the rest.' That's how it goes. 'I've known rivers.' So I have been through the pain. I have been through suffering. I've been through—when you been through stuff, you've got an experience...So I have been through that so whether I wanna harp on it, whether I wanna tell people sad stories—hell no! I want to tell people about success and things that I can achieve; the doors that have been opened. I used to tell people all the time, 'I

might play the blues but I don't want them,' you know. So it's simplicity like that. I've had the blues but I don't want them. I don't want you to have them.

Data from the adult learners' narratives suggest that as older adult learners, ages 35 and beyond, continue to return back to school in greater numbers, age and the dimensions that come with age will need to be addressed within the two-year institutions. Older students expect more from their educational process because they have made a conscious choice and personal investment to pursue higher education. Older students also face more challenges in terms of family commitment, financial obligations, and more. These challenges can complicate or even hinder their academic journey. But, more importantly, as Christopher demonstrated, older students bring with them wisdom, life experience and dedication that can be valuable to higher education communities and to younger students of color. It is critical that institutions such as community colleges foster campus and classroom environments where these qualities are recognized and respected as assets instead of being dismissed as hindrances and limitations.

Spiritual Dimensions of the Learners' Transformation

The attainment of higher education is not an easy process for adult learners. For many students of color, spirituality, religion, and faith in a higher power are the foundations that move them from point A to point B—from the front door of the academic institution to graduation. So exploring the role of spirituality in this study is also aspect of my second research question.

In doing this research on adult learners' transformations, I realized that before I could begin to analyze the impact of spirituality on the participants' self-defined

transformation, I needed to look at the meaning of spirituality for the participants. When the participants were asked, “Are you a spiritual person? If so, describe your spirituality,” the responses were strikingly similar:

Ariel: Yes—very. I have an undying believe in God. I believe that if you pray and ask honestly for what you want or need and you give honestly, things will come back to you. I believe that my spirituality has contributed to my determination and my faith. Fear is sin so I am not fearful.

Brandon: I believe God is almighty. I believe he is someone that can take you into the empth degree if you believe. My spiritual foundation I believe runs deep.

Danielle: My belief is that being—that entity whom I call God today. That entity might be the damn dog tomorrow. I don’t box it in. It’s not gender-oriented. It’s not he-God, and it’s not she-God. It’s It. It is what it is today. It might be just simply the sun rising today. That gives me the power and strength to get out of the bed and do that which I need to do for that day. That spiritual entity to me, I respect it. I revere it. I fear it with a healthy fear and not that it’s going to damn me and send me to this evil place especially for loving someone— for being that which I am, you know. I trust that spirit that created me. As I strive to be perfect, I know that I never will reach perfection as long as I’m on this side of whatever it is that I’m doing. I choose to believe that there is a heaven. I listen to this song that says, ‘If you believe that there’s a heaven, you have to believe that there’s a hell.’ I chose to believe that I’m going to go a place different from here.

Estelle: Of course, God is everything to me. I believe that Jesus Christ is my savior and that all things shall be through his will. I would not be where I am without my faith in God. I—I don’t—I know he has a plan for me. Even when I married someone not equally yoked, God showed me that I am his child and that I needed to remove myself from that ungodly situation.

What was it that keeps these participants strong? What was it that motivated them to continue to transform? The participant narratives suggest that spirituality and a sense of purpose play significant roles in this group’s determination to move beyond *what was*

into *what can be*—a better quality of life through the power of education. Many of the participants in this study were raised in the church and described themselves as spiritual. They also believed that they persevered through higher education because of their faith in God.

Martin Marty (2000) discusses some common characteristics of all religions and faiths and he considers the important roles that spirituality and faith fill in many people's lives. For Marty, religion and spirituality can offer: (1) a focus on matters of ultimate concern relating to the meaning and purpose of life; (2) a sense of community to gather, celebrate and mourn; (3) behavior injunctions (commands) of how to live; (4) myths and symbols that convey moral truths through allegory, story, metaphor, or art; and, (5) rituals and ceremonies that help communities celebrate some of life's most important transitions, such as birth, entry into adulthood, love or marriage, and death as the final transition (cited in Tisdell, 2003, p. 49). It was spirituality and its focus on matters of concern relating to the meaning and purpose of life, that moved the participants in this study towards what they described as their higher calling or sense of purpose in life—a change they felt as a result of their personal transformation.

In describing how spirituality has played a role in her pursuit of higher education, Ariel talked about how her faith moved her towards the completion of her studies: “Yes, it has been everything. Spirituality has gotten me through this pursuit.” Similar to Ariel, several of the participants described stories in which they relied on their faith to: get them through a personal or academic situation or crisis; give them strength to understand the situation; or, just get them from one point to the next point. As stated by Brandon:

Yeah, it [spirituality] plays a role in my everyday life. I'm working on a second master's degree so I prayed to God to say if this is the role that he wants me to be in. 'God if it's your will that I can do this then I know you're going to support me in class. I know you're going to anoint me with some understanding so that I can get through my schooling.'

Indeed, for the majority of the participants in this study, their educational experiences were defined by their spirituality. Two participants, however, described their spirituality in a different vein—one disconnected to the standard ideology of organized religion. For Brandon, the fact that he is now considered highly educated does not necessarily mean that he has evolved personally. He believes that his path towards higher education and his eventually achievement moved him away from his commitment to his faith — a connection he wishes to restore.

For Christopher, his story was distinctly different from the other participants studied in this group. Religion and faith were never discussed in our interviews beyond his description of what spirituality meant to him culturally and intellectually. Christopher talked about what he believes to be clear differences in how African Americans view spirituality as compared to White/European populations. He explained:

I say then this may be a bit controversial but I just told you that most African people are spiritual people. European people [were] not a spiritual people at their inception. They may be now. They take on Catholicism. They take on Buddhism. They take on all kinds of -isms, but the answers of their being and how they came into this world and what they had been nurtured on was not spirituality. It was practicality. It was getting that fire lit to keep warm. It was getting some food to eat 'cuz it wasn't in abundance like it was in the Nile Valley. In caves and in cold climates, you don't have trees and shrubs and grapes growing. You have got to go out and fend for your livelihood. That does not enhance spirituality. They didn't know how to pray and say, 'Lord, please, grow a tree.' They didn't have that knowledge of spirituality. So they just went and chopped down the tree.

For Christopher, spirituality is just one part of his educational experiences that he can choose to recognize. Spirituality is also something that Christopher, for reasons he explains below, was not a welcome part of the classroom experience. He stated:

I think my education involves more of a practicality and a necessity. There is room for spirituality in my education, but, . . .when a certain segment of society [dominant white society] is more prone to broadcast empirical evidence as something greater than [it is] in schooling, there's not much room for spirituality.

The basic foundations of education within today's public institutions keep faith and the classroom separate. Christopher recognized the intent behind this practice but he felt this practice actually kept learners from "seeing, feeling and touching" their educational experience. Learning, for Christopher, was an emotional process, but expressing emotions inside the classroom was discouraged. In fact, there were times during classroom discussions where he experienced animosity from younger students and even instructors for "hogging classroom time" or "talking too much." His narrative suggests that by only looking at what is practical for these academic institutions to regulate and manage classroom learning—measuring knowledge through grading systems, evaluating student interest through collected homework assignments, for example—educators and leaders within these institutions may dismiss the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the education process for these adult learners.

Overall, each of the participants expressed a belief in a higher power and they also believed that their higher power determined their life destiny. These adult learners also believed that it is their higher power that has "allowed" them opportunity to earn or complete their college education. For this study's participants, religion and/or spirituality

helped move them towards one common purpose in life—to educate themselves so that they can not only help themselves, but also motivate and help others. As Estelle stated, “You know the closer you get to your blessings, the more the devil tries to block them;” yet, faith is what empowered her and the other participants to continue on their educational journey.

Empowerment Dimensions of the Learners’ Transformation

My second research question prompted me to examine the empowerment dimensions of transformative learning. Data from the adult learners’ narratives show that, for them, becoming empowered is an integral part of succeeding in community college and in life. So, in the section below, I more explicitly link empowerment issues with my third research question, which relates to learners’ growth and success.

Research Question #3: What factors within this transformative experience contributed to what African American adult learners define as personal growth and achievement/success?

In connection to transformative learning, critical race theory, and spirituality, we look at the idea of education as a tool for empowerment. Critical race theory (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004) as well as Hilliard’s (2000) argument regarding spirituality and cultural pluralism addresses the issue of empowerment within the context of a collective community. Hilliard (2000) states: “African-centered paradigms maintain community and the collective as central, with spirituality as inseparable by its very nature” (p.450). The primary result of transformation for the participants in this study, however, was their newfound sense of personal (vs. collective) empowerment. The adult learners gained

command of their actions, behaviors, and ways of knowing. Still, transformation through education also recognizes that, transformed individuals can/will be in the position to eventually help others—the oppressed helping to free other oppressed individuals (Freire, 2000, Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003).

As demonstrated by Danielle’s narrative in Chapter IV, she felt a connection to the other students within her academic program (addiction counseling) because, like herself, many of them came into the program with a past history of addiction and abuse. Because of this connection and bond, she felt empowered. She was no longer an outsider or the “one who was different.” The students within the program chose to, as she put it, “lift each other up” so that they were able to empower each other. As Danielle stated:

Yeah, and it's neat. We push each other up because we do realize, okay, you've been where I am so you feel some of the things I feel. I'm gonna lift you up. So we lift each other up. We call each other ‘professor’ and things and things, you know. Not everybody gets those titles but everybody gets lifted in some way or another. I guess [we] understand that we've been called ‘crack heads’ and ‘sons of bitches’ and ‘nobodies’ and ‘you'll never amount to anything;’ we've all heard those things, so we lifted each other up.

Danielle’s comments indicate that as individuals become empowered, communities become empowered. Education through transformation empowered the students in this study to become autonomous thinkers. The hope is that this individual transformation can eventually lead to collective social action and change for greater society (Mezirow, 1991; Freire, 2000).

Empowerment and transformative theory also consider how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence how

learners construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meaning, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional (Mezirow, 1997, p. xii). Structures of meaning (or one's meaning perspective) consist of an individual's frame of reference, world view, personal paradigm, or standard. According to Mezirow (1991), these perspectives provide "criteria for judging or evaluating right and wrong, bad and good, beautiful and ugly, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate" (as quoted in Taylor, 1998. p.6). As Christopher stated, "I mean there's nothing greater than education. If it does nothing else—if you don't make the grade—if you don't make the A, you learn how to be a better person to yourself and other people." For participants such as Christopher, choosing actions that are good and right instead of harmful and bad transformed them into better individuals.

Summary of Participants' Transformative Learning

It is evident from the participants' narratives that they experienced what Mezirow (1991) describes as transformative learning, but their narratives also demonstrate that transformation is not a step-by-step rational process. Personal transformation is dynamic and continually changing. It also happens in different ways at different times for each individual. As the participants moved and continue to move through their educational journeys, they continue and will continue to experience change.

Overall, the process of educating themselves changed how the participants saw themselves, and, as stated by Brown (2004), it also helped them become aware of oppressive structures and practices in society. In addition, their education helped them

develop tactical awareness of how they might improve themselves and it helped them build the confidence and ability to work towards personal and collective change.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the narratives of African American adult learners in this study are counterstories—authentic ways to understand personal struggle and group oppression (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). We all learn from the counterstories shared by successful adult learners of color. Counterstories also put a human face on educational theory and practices and challenge current practices for minority students. We as readers are privy to their stories of struggle, perseverance, and personal triumph. Other students of color who are making this same journey can connect their own experiences to the participants' stories and see that obtaining a college education *is* possible. The value of adult learners of color is immeasurable—and the growing number of adult learners enrolled in colleges and universities is proof that they are a force to be reckoned with in higher education.

As this phenomenological narrative study demonstrated, when we as educational leaders and researchers look at how adult students of color experience learning through their own narrative lens, we begin to understand what it takes to successfully move learners towards academic achievement, personal victory, and self-empowerment. It is critical that higher education institutions, such as the community colleges, recognize that adult learners of color often enter education with distinct needs and challenges, but, they have distinct assets and resiliency as well.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“For many students, becoming a self-directed learner is a transformative experience in itself “(Grabove, 1997, p. 94)

Importance of African American Adult Learners

What do the narratives of minority adult learners at the community college level teach us about the journey through higher education and successful access to a college degree? The collection of these stories demonstrates a very real change in who these individuals are as people and as learners. It is, as the title of this study suggests, an evolution of the soul.

In my view, the primary result of transformative learning is that underrepresented student populations develop into academically, socially, and emotionally prepared individuals ready to face an unjust society. The participants in this study, and many like them, have basically been written off by our educational system as “at risk” or even, inadmissible, in terms of acceptance into academic institutions. But, if individuals are given the opportunity to learn, change, and grow—despite their challenging circumstances, the lives that they led and the mistakes that they have made in their past, there is no telling the promise that can come from their transformation.

Emancipatory education, as both Freire (2003) and Mezirow (1997) describe it, is education for the purpose of liberation and transformation. The participants in this study became empowered—realizing that entry into a community college was only the

beginning of their journey towards higher education. To add, increased cultural consciousness and spirituality identity were results of personal transformation and their community college experience. Cultural consciousness and identity were raised for the participants in this study as they experienced their own personal transformation. Moreover, as the participants acquired more knowledge, their view of the world and their community, and their understanding of their role in society began to change. As they knew more, they “saw” more. These individuals were able to recognize injustice and mistreatment at a higher level instead of accepting it. They were able to see their own role and purpose within the world instead of seeing themselves as insignificant. Moreover, they were able to move beyond their own issues of depression, drug addiction, self destruction, etc. and envision a healthier and more productive way to live. The transformation of “self” became a tool in which these students worked towards social action—helping to change the lives of others within their own community. Mezirow (1991) believes that social action can ultimately change society, but whether or not transformation of the self moves individuals to help empower and transform others depends upon factors such as access and equality within educational institutions that must be in place in order to foster collective transformation.

The narratives of the five adult learners in this study bring the stories of people of color to life and make their transformative experiences a reality. Educational leaders can take these stories and work to find ways to bring about transformative experiences for underserved students within their institutions. Lastly, with these narratives, educational leaders within community college settings can begin to understand how our established

educational system impacts students of color at a different level. As Larson and Ovando (2001) explain, “Deep cultural issues defy the simplistic problem-solving strategies typically used in bureaucratic systems, because cultural strategies are not amenable to processes of gathering facts and applying specific knowledge for achieving specific, attainable goals” (p. 201). Statistical measures of academic success, student retention, and degree attainment, do not tell the emotional, cultural, and social stories experienced by students of color within higher education— stories that can teach us a great deal about making community colleges more effective and culturally responsive learning institutions.

Transformative Learning within Community College Settings

The narratives of the adult learners indicate that transformation within education is a process of growth that allows the individual to become the great soul and spirit that he or she is destined to be. Once the student is properly nurtured and respected, higher level learning takes place on its own. In accordance with African tradition, the education of mind and body and spirit are interconnected (Hilliard, 1997). It is important that all students, not just students of color, understand the value of who they are within the greater community. The recognition and nurturing of cultural consciousness and spirituality are necessary entities within this learning process and they must be incorporated within the education process. Without such recognition and nurturing, transformation and change are meaningless for many learners.

I recommend that community college institutions consider the life experiences and cultural contexts that adult learners of color bring to the table in order to facilitate

continued academic success for these students. Hopefully, through the narratives of the five African American community college learners featured in this study, institutional leaders might be able to better understand some of the academic, social, and emotional needs of this undervalued and overlooked population so that academic and personal achievement (as defined by the individual) can continue to be a reality. Indeed, findings from the participants' narratives have implications for community colleges in all areas of student services: academic advising, recruitment and retention, diversity planning, minority faculty hiring, and student mentoring, which I discuss below.

What Can Be Done

Due to the increased influx of nontraditional diverse students, educational leaders within today's higher education institutions are aggressively looking for ways to manage and embrace this growing student population. The practice of educational leadership, whether it is at the public school level or at the higher education level, has become a scientific, almost mechanical process in which the school setting is viewed as controllable when the "right" prescribed steps are taken. But current frameworks in educational administration ignore the racial, social, economic and political factors—variables that are uncontrollable—that make up the characteristics of those who populate the academic institutions such as community colleges. There must be a concerted effort on behalf of educational leaders who see themselves as change agents to move away from what Shaw, Valadez, and Rhoads (1999) calls a "monocultural" community college and move towards a more "multicultural" institution. By trying to manage academic institutions homogeneously, educational leaders are denying the existence of differences

that make up society and the students that they lead. "...these proponents presuppose the 'untouchable' character of schools, as if schools were neutral instructional sites immune to the effects that class, race, and gender have on specific student populations"(Dantley, 1990, pg. 590).

Institutions with monocultural elements serve only the needs of a powerful white majority (Rendon, 1999). As Shaw, Valadez, and Rhoads (1999) describe, monocultural systems operate as if a single culture prevails reflecting mainstream values. Within the institutions, the administrators and faculty are predominately white and male and students are described in narrow terms ("at-risk", developmental, etc.). Transfer to four-year institutions and intellectualism are not given a high priority, particularly for students of color. The organizational structure of monocultural institutions perpetuates social stratification and precludes upward mobility. In many higher education institutions, students support services do not meet the needs of the nontraditional adult learner. Lastly, as asserted by Shaw, Valadez, and Rhoads (1999), low expectations are set for students within institutions that adopt this ideology. Monocultural institutions, as stated by Rendon (1999), "adhere to homogeneity and see cultural diversity as a threat to dominant conceptions of education and society" (p. 196).

A multicultural institution, what educational leaders should strive for, works to understand the commonalities and differences of its unrepresented student populations while embracing the idea of diversity (Rendon, 1999, p. 196). These institutions reflect multiple identities in society and diverse ways of knowing and operating. Administrators and faculty members represent different cultures, while the college culture affirms

cultural identities and embraces a wide range of cultural knowledge. Within multicultural institutions, students are also prepared to be responsible and active citizens of society—not just prospective employees. The college is guided by the philosophy of full access to all of higher education, especially for underrepresented students. College staff helps students develop their stock of cultural and emotional capital through student-centered services. Most importantly, multicultural institutions work to promote community.

Before higher education institutions such as community colleges can move towards a multicultural ideology and move away from their ridged and oppressive practices, Dumas-Hines, Cochran, and Williams (2001) suggest that educational leaders within these institutions first decide what they want their institutions to represent to the greater community. Dumas-Hines et al. (2000) stress that educational leaders must address several important questions before implementing a reform plan, such as: 1) is the academic community reflective of diversity existing in society at large?; 2) are populations of color and diversity represented at the faculty and student?; 3) is there a need to target recruitment/retention efforts to increase student and faculty diversity within the institution; and, 4) does data of the institution's student of color enrollment mirror the institution's mission statement on its commitment to cultural diversity and equity? Once these questions have been addressed, administrators and staff must work as a collective to develop a plan for diversity that addresses the needs of all students.

I also contend that community college leaders must begin to create culturally sensitive academic and support programs that “provide a sense of welcoming and belonging, motivate and empower, and make knowledge meaningful and accessible to

ethnically diverse students” (Orfield, 1988, p. 157). Doing this requires making changes within community college classrooms and across the colleges as a whole.

With regard to classroom contexts, Mezirow (1996) asserts that ideal conditions for rational discourse are essential to successful fostering of transformative learning within academic institutions such as the community college (Brown, 2004). The conditions include providing students with accurate and complete information related to academic and social contexts. Learners should be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments as objectively as possible within the classroom environment so they can engage in critical reflection. As well, educators and leaders within these institutions must be open to alternative perspectives. Discussion in and outside of the classroom should be free of imposed boundaries set by the facilitator, teacher, and/or institution. This includes being open to hearing what students have to say without judgment or repercussion. Students should be able to critically reflect upon their own presuppositions and current belief systems. This will allow them the opportunity to look at other ways of knowing and acting and, possibly, change their worldview. Lastly, and, in my view, most importantly, learners should have equal opportunity to challenge, question, refute, and reflect upon classroom discourse. As stated by Taylor (1998):

It is also important to note that [transformative] conditions operate under the supposition that the adult educator will make every effort to establish standards within the classroom that significantly reduce the influence of power, the deficit model associated with instrumental learning, and a win-lose discourse (p. 12).

In addition, Tisdell (2003) states that it is critical that we address the spiritual and cultural dimensions of transformative learning by emphasizing authenticity within classroom discourse. There must also be recognition that degree attainment and academic learning have their limitations. It is not enough to hold a college degree—no matter what level. Likewise, the narratives of the adult learners in this study suggest that enlightenment, clarity, direction, and action must also come with learning in order for a person to truly experience transformation.

With regard to greater institutional reforms, I agree with Dumas-Hines, Cochran & Williams' (2001) suggestions that community colleges create state incentive programs targeting additional funds for each minority faculty members hired at two-year colleges, which could help with minority recruitment programs. Community college leaders should also: create partnerships with secondary schools (i.e. sponsoring math, science, and technical fields fairs for students) to encourage minority students to become involved in these fields and eventually become future faculty members in these areas; recruit minority business and industry workers as mentors and part time teachers while they maintain their current employment; and, offer coordinated advising that takes into account student placement test scores, students' choice of academic major, and students' enrollment status (Dumas-Hines, Cochran & Williams, 2001).

Furthermore, it is critical that educational leaders work to reduce efforts by political leaders to dismantle minority recruitment and equitable access programs within higher education, if not, adult students of color and other underserved groups will lose out on what is rightfully theirs—equal access to a quality education.

Research Recommendations

It is clear that there needs to be more research on the process of transformative learning for adult learners of color. Just as the educational learning environment has evolved, the definition of transformative learning has evolved from ten narrowly defined phases into what Mezirow (2000) described as a “theory in process” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 113). Learning for children and adults is a continual fluid event. Theories that attempt to look at and define the learning process must constantly be studied, updated, and even discarded when they become irrelevant. Lastly, learning theories specific to adult education must *keep pace* with the changing demographic profile of adult learners and the learning institutions they attend.

The learning process and its sociocultural contexts also need further examination. As more and more minority adult students, as well as populations of the “other” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), continue to enroll in higher education at increasing rates, academic institutions are going to be faced with issues, such as race, class, and religion that fall outside of white dominated, monocultural ways of knowing (Rendon, 1999). By understanding what learning looks like for underrepresented populations such as adult students of color, we can begin to look at ways to incorporate these contexts into pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and institution administration policies.

There also needs to be more narrative research on the experiences of students of color from the students themselves as well as from minority faculty members and employees who interact with these community college students. By asking those inside

the system how they would make things better, we get a more realistic picture of what we as leaders need to do to serve this emerging student population.

Finally, there needs to be more statistical research on the experiences of adult students of color within community college institutions in order to address the issues of academic achievement, retention and program completion for this population. Mandatory qualitative and quantitative studies looking at retention, recruitment, and completion rates could be conducted every two years by community colleges serving large numbers of students of color. Continual monitoring will, in essence, hold these institutions accountable for what they are or are not doing. There might even need to be pressure put on institutions by the federal government. These studies would examine how community college institutions are progressing in terms of equity and access issues as compared to other two-year institutions: A rating system could then be developed to rate each institution accordingly. Studies could also look at two-year universities deemed successful by government or by a collective educational standard. Programs modeled after these “success stories” could then be developed and possibly marketed to other institutions, including four-year universities.

Final Thoughts: A Call for Transformative Leadership

Leadership is transformative phenomenon; that is, the ability of a leader to ‘reach the souls of others in a fashion which raises human consciousness, builds meaning, and inspires human intent that is the source of power.
(Bennis, 1986, as cited in Dantley, 1990, pg. 587).

What does it take to be a leader for change in today’s educational system? In my view, it is about empowering students so that they understand the necessity of education in their lives and demand nothing but the best. It is about leading educators and staff in a

way that each participant has a voice in the change process. It is about being able to implement a common vision that, in the end, services all students, but in particular, services those whom are being ignored. Critical race theory looks at morality and equality and the responsibility to properly educate all individuals but it specifically addresses these issues for populations of color. Furthermore, as Coble (2005) states, “To no one’s surprise, those in society who have the greatest needs are those who have the least power and influence. In a democracy, a good leader becomes the advocate for the needy, who have no clout” (p. 57).

Transformation and change within the community college system can only take place when we as educational leaders look inside ourselves. That means going through the process of self-reflection, empowerment, and transformation. It also means using education as a tool for this transformational process. What does it take to be a leader for change? In order for change to take place in our current educational system, we all must become transformational leaders. According to Marsh (2000), this type of leadership perspective involves four aspects—cultural leadership, moral leadership, covenant building, and followership (2000).

Cultural leadership, from a transformative perspective, looks at the world as dynamic and ever-changing. Leadership in this context seeks to connect education to the outside world (e.g. home, community, society). Moral leadership is built on passion. The point of moral leadership is to fight for what is truly just for our students. Our academic institutions and its educators have a moral obligation to emotionally, academically, and socially prepare students for a life outside of the school walls. Leaders must also find

ways to bring entire communities/factions together for one purpose, which is to provide a transformative educational experience for all learners; this constitutes building covenants. Covenant building means that individuals, community leaders, teachers, administrators, and students are all working together as a collective instead of individual entities serving its own purpose. With regard to followership, leaders must be able to persuade or bring together individuals to work towards a common goal or purpose. Transformative leaders must be able to incorporate all of these aspects—cultural leadership, moral leadership, covenant building, and followership—within his or her own leadership. This is a tough to balance if an individual has not gone through his or her own personal transformation. As an educator and new higher education administrator, I need to be able to define my own purpose and understand the importance of transformative education before I can attempt to bring others together as a collective voice for change.

My hope is that community college leaders will move away from a very rigid mode of operation and reexamine institutional practices and policies in order properly serve underserved adult students of color. It is necessary for these leaders to put in place policies, pedagogical practices, and support systems within higher education that foster transformation and change for this student population. Hopefully this study of successful African American adult learners will show administrators and educators that they must work as a collective to develop student-centered plans that address the needs of students of color within two-year college campuses.

Community colleges, through their open-access philosophy, provide higher education to underserved students who need a second, third, even tenth chance to bring

about change in their lives. My hope is that this study acknowledges both the value of these students and the value of two-year college institutions in order to keep transformation through education a reality.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project: Evolution of the Soul: The Transformative Connection between Cultural Consciousness, Spirituality and Self-Empowerment for African American Community College Adult Learners

Time of the Interview:

Date:

Location:

Session # (out of 3 sessions):

Consent Form Signed: Yes No

Interviewer:

Interviewee: Participant A Participant B Participant C Participant D

Length of Interview:

Position of the Interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to look at how African American adult learners describe their transformative learning experiences and look at how transformation helps move minority learners move towards their academic and personal goals. Data will be collected using one-on-one semi structured interviews that utilize both open-ended and structured questions and through journal writings. The identities of the participants will be confidential and all research material collected will be securely stored by the researcher.

Essential Research Questions:

How do adult African American students in community colleges define their own “transformation” within the context of transformative learning?

Sub-Questions:

- What are the spiritual, cultural/social, and self-reflective/empowerment dimensions of transformative learning within this particular student population?
- What factors within this “transformative experience” contribute to what the students define as personal growth and achievement/success?

Prompt Questions to Use:

1. What made you decide to pursue your college degree?

2. What has been your view on the role of education in your life in the past (high school, for example)? What is your current view on the role of education in your life?
3. Why did you choose to attend a community college versus a four year institution?
4. What has your experience been like at the community college?
5. What have been some of the positives about attending this 2-year institution? What are some of the negatives?
6. Why did you choose to attend Guilford Technical CC versus other 2 year institutions?
7. What single experience has given you the greatest joy in college? What experience(s) has been your biggest disappointment or most painful?
8. What does the word “transformation” mean to you?
9. How have you changed / transformed since you began your college career?
10. What factors, do you believe, contribute to your specific transformation?
11. Is the way you see yourself now significantly different than it was in the past? How is it different?
12. How has being an African American / Black individual impacted your experiences: at the community college / pursuing a college education, if at all?
13. How has your gender impacted your pursuit of higher education and /or your role at the community college, if at all?
14. How has your age impacted your pursuit of higher education and/or your role at the community college, if at all?
15. How has your own past life experiences impacted your pursuit of higher education and/or your role at the community college, if at all?
16. Are you satisfied with the life choices you have made since you have been in college? Why or why not?

17. Are you a spiritual person? Describe your spirituality / belief system?
18. How has your spirituality played a role in your pursuit of higher education, if at all?
19. Has your spirituality contributed to what you have described as your transformation?
20. How has pursuing your college degree / returning back to school impacted you emotionally?
21. What has pursuing / completing your college degree brought to your life?
22. How would you describe yourself at this point in your life?
23. How do you define achievement? How do you define success?
24. Do you believe that you are a success story? Why or why not?
25. Is there anything else you would like to add to your story?